APA STUDIES | The American Philosophical Association

Feminism and Philosophy

FALL 2025 VOLUME 25 | NUMBER 1

ISSN 2834-4413

APA STUDIES ON

Feminism and Philosophy

BARRETT EMERICK AND AMI HARBIN, CO-EDITORS

VOLUME 25 | NUMBER 1 | FALL 2025

FROM THE EDITORS

Barrett Emerick
ST. MARY'S COLLEGE OF MARYLAND

Ami Harbin
OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

APA Studies on Feminism and Philosophy issue 25.1 is dedicated to reflecting on and celebrating the work of Jennifer Saul in her 2024 book *Dogwhistles and Figleaves: How Manipulative Language Spreads Racism and Falsehood*. The issue showcases four peer-reviewed commentaries and two invited commentaries, followed by the author's response. It also includes an additional standalone, peer-reviewed article.

In the first peer-reviewed commentary, Alnica Visser focuses on what Saul calls "overt code dogwhistles," which can contribute to conspiracies and white supremacy, recruiting people to join the cause by co-opting the interests of potential recruits. Visser argues that only a narrow set of dogwhistles have that effect. Instead, Visser contends that overt code dogwhistles generally serve the role of helping members of a cause to recognize each other in public.

Jacob E. Smith explores the relationship between "covert dogwhistles" and "callouts." Saul grapples with why callouts seem to have declined in effectiveness in the last decade. Smith argues that they were never effective, and that shifting your own self-understanding in light of a callout is both epistemically and socially costly in a way that it is important for us to appreciate.

Taylor Koles argues that Saul's account is too broad, allowing some speech to count as a dogwhistle that shouldn't. Koles then offers a refinement to Saul's account and concludes with a methodological discussion about the value and purpose of the philosophy of language. In particular, he highlights the practical and ethical implications of understanding how language works, especially in light of unjust systems like racism or sexism.

Kelly Weirich argues that, unlike other types of dogwhistles that Saul explores, what Weirich calls "brazen dogwhistles" do not aim to obscure their meaning, but instead use deniability as a method of "stirring up opposition, testing boundaries, or asserting authority." She then argues that recognizing that fact gives us reason to pay careful attention to "active interpretation" and the role that it can play in resisting oppressive dogwhistles.

In the first invited commentary, Samia Hesni focuses on figleaves and the role of denial on the part of the hearer in enabling them to function. In particular, Hesni distinguishes denial from adjacent concepts: self-deception, pretense, and hope. They then explore some of the psychological benefits that denial might play for someone, and how it might then incentivize accepting a racist figleaf.

In the second invited commentary, Audrey Yap focuses on the figleaf of "just asking questions," which she argues can redirect attention away from the particular subject being discussed and towards general questions that could always be raised about the topic. Yap contends that some figleaves and some dogwhistles can produce such pernicious redirection of attention, which is an underlying phenomenon that warrants special attention.

The celebration of Saul's work concludes with Saul's response to the commentaries, in which she takes up the questions raised by Visser and Smith about what dogwhistles do, those raised by Koles and Weirich about how we should understand what dogwhistles are, by Hesni on the way that figleaves work, and by Yap who argues that we ought to focus on devices that shift attention in pernicious ways.

In the final peer-reviewed article in the issue, Gen Eickers explores possible points of connection between trans philosophy and philosophy of mind, exploring what they are and why they are important. Eickers first explains what they take both trans philosophy and philosophy of mind to be. They then make the case that philosophy of mind would benefit from engaging with and incorporating trans perspectives.

With this issue, we conclude our time as co-editors of *APA Studies on Feminism and Philosophy*. We have been honored to edit issues celebrating the career and scholarship of Bat-Ami Bar On, the twenty-year anniversary of Susan Brison's *Aftermath*, the work of Phyllis Rooney, Sara Protasi's *The Philosophy of Envy*, Kate Manne's *Unshrinking*, and now Jennifer Saul's *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*. We were delighted to welcome Imogen Sullivan and Rowan Bell as guest co-editors of their excellent special issue on *The Futures of Trans Philosophy*. It has been wonderful to work with the authors and guest editors for the last three years, and we look forward to seeing the journal continue to grow in years to come.

ABOUT *APA STUDIES ON FEMINISM AND PHILOSOPHY*

APA Studies on Feminism and Philosophy is sponsored by the APA Committee on the Status of Women and Gender. The newsletter is designed to provide an introduction to recent philosophical work that addresses issues of gender. None of the varied philosophical views presented by authors of *APA Studies* articles necessarily reflect the views of any or all of the members of the Committee on the Status of Women and Gender, including the editor(s) of the newsletter, nor does the committee advocate any particular type of feminist philosophy. We advocate only that serious philosophical attention be given to issues of gender and that claims of gender bias in philosophy receive full and fair consideration.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES AND INFORMATION

1. Purpose: The purpose of *APA Studies on Feminism and Philosophy* is to publish information about the status of women in philosophy and to make the resources of feminist philosophy more widely available. *APA Studies on Feminism and Philosophy* contains discussions of recent developments in feminist philosophy and related work in other disciplines, suggestions for eliminating gender bias in the traditional philosophy curriculum, and reflections on feminist pedagogy. It also informs the profession about the work of the APA Committee on the Status of Women and Gender. Articles submitted to the newsletter should be around ten double-spaced pages and must follow the APA guidelines for gender-neutral language. Please submit essays electronically to the editor. All manuscripts should be prepared for anonymous review. References should follow *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

2. Where to Send Submissions: Please send submissions and inquiries to the editor: Lav McKittrick-Sweitzer (they/them) at lmckittricksweit@butler.edu.

3. Submission Deadlines: Submissions for spring issues are due by the preceding November 1; submissions for fall issues are due by the preceding February 1.

ARTICLES

Recognition and Recruitment in Overt Code Dogwhistles

Alnica Visser
TEXAS CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

1. INTRODUCTION

In her most recent treatment of the topic, Jennifer Saul suggests that part of the danger of political dogwhistles is that they can be used to recruit new followers to wild conspiracism and blatant racism. Concluding a discussion of various QAnon codes, she claims,

> Coded dogwhistles have helped wilder and wilder conspiracy theories spread and *gain greater prominence* . . . they help the conspiracy theories to grow and *acquire more followers*.[1]

She also suggests that this process occurs through co-opting the pre-existing legitimate interests of potential recruits:

> The innocent appearance of the phrase "save the children" has . . . offered a wonderful recruitment tool. People who have a genuine concern with child welfare may click on posts or hashtags that pull them, gradually, into the QAnon conspiracy.[2]

I do not disagree. Overt code dogwhistles can recruit by co-opting legitimate interests. But, as I will argue here, it is not *all* overt codes that carry this capacity. Indeed, it is only a very particular subset of overt codes that have any hope of recruitment by co-option.[3] These are what I call the *polysemous codes*. All other overt codes can do little more than aid in the undercover *recognition* of fellow followers in public. To this extent, I believe that Saul runs together some key distinctions between different sorts of overt dogwhistles, which we would do well to keep apart.

I begin (in §2) by presenting Saul's distinction between covert and overt dogwhistles, along with some of her key examples of the latter. Next, (in §3) I employ some of these examples, along with a few especially interesting additional exemplars, to articulate an initial distinction between what I call *sense codes* and *nonsense codes*, showing that some overt dogwhistles carry no innocent significance, appearing instead to be meaningless. Then, (in §4) I show how such nonsense codes cannot recruit through co-option insofar as they lack any surface significance through which the co-option can proceed. I then show that many sense codes also lack the capacity for co-option insofar as their innocent surface significance bears no discernible relation to their secret significance. I conclude that it is only the *polysemous codes*, i.e., those that admit of interrelated surface and secret significances, that have any hope of recruiting new followers through the co-option of their legitimate interests. I close (in §5) by returning to Saul's distinction between overt and covert dogwhistles, noting an interesting affinity

between polysemous codes and covert effect dogwhistles, thus suggesting that the line that divides them may not be as sharp as Saul suggests after all.

2. OVERT CODE DOGWHISTLES

In previous work, Saul (2018) develops her initial distinction between overt and covert dogwhistles by appeal to several important paradigm cases.[4] Of the former, examples include "wonder-working power" and "Dred Scott," and of the latter, examples include "inner city" and the (so-called) Willie Horton ad. In each case, the dogwhistle carries some significance unknown to a general audience. In the overt case, there is a group of "insiders" to which the secret significance is directed, and for who the message is obvious. Those in the know, know full well that "wonder-working power" is about Christian fundamentalist power and that "Dred Scott" is about (opposition to) abortion rights. In the covert case, by contrast, the secret significance is directed at people who aren't supposed to notice it; its effects are in this sense "subliminal." Thus both "inner city" and the Willie Horton ad have been shown by psychological study to trigger underlying racial resentments unknown or unacknowledged by targets of the message, but which nevertheless demonstrably influence their judgments about matters of policy (in the direction of racism). Indeed, it appears that covert dogwhistles work *only if* they go undetected by those who are meant to be influenced by their "subliminal" significance. Hence the updated terminology in *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*: *overt codes* versus *covert effects*.

Saul also provides a slew of new examples to illustrate the distinction. Among the racist codes, she identifies "state's rights," Thor's hammer, triple-K names (e.g., "Kwik Kustom Kleaners"), triple parentheses (a.k.a. the echo), "Skittles," "Skype," "Soros," Hawaiian shirts, egg dumplings with green salad, "88," and messages composed of fourteen words and/or eighty-eight characters, all of which carry racist, often white supremacist, significance for insiders. And among the conspiracist codes, she identifies the QAnon "WWG1WGA" and "save the children," as well as the case of anti-vax emojis (e.g., "🥕" [carrot] and "🍕" [pizza slice]).

In each of these cases, Saul holds that a "select group knows the code, and happily receives the message, while the broader audience does not realize what is happening, and takes the message to have a more innocent meaning."[5] Thus, "Skype" for many is just the name of a messaging platform. But for anti-Semites, it's an anti-Semitic slur. And for most of us, the pizza emoji is just about pizza, but for anti-vaxxers, each slice is a booster shot. In each case then, the term's innocent surface significance runs cover for its not-so-innocent secret significance. Thus, overt codes "are *overt* because they are meant to be explicitly understood by those at whom they are directed, but they function like a *code* in that they are not meant to be understood by others."[6] The code thus allows insiders to communicate with one another under the radar, remaining undetectable to those who might see or hear their seemingly innocent exchanges concerning Skype, pizza, and other apparently unremarkable topics. And so, most importantly, insofar as one might very well be a member of either group, it is always open to plead innocence if accused of using a dogwhistle to express some secret significance, for one might always claim (with some plausibility) that the secret significance is unintended, because unknown.

3. SENSE AND NONSENSE

Across her discussion of overt dogwhistles, Saul clearly has in mind those dogwhistles that have some *identifiable* innocent significance for a general audience. "Skittles," "88," and "🥕" [carrot] all have perfectly innocent uses easily identifiable by a general audience. Indeed, in her new official definition of overt code dogwhistles, she explicitly requires that they carry "(at least) *two* plausible interpretations, such that . . . *one appears innocent*."[7] And yet, she discusses several overt codes that seem to violate this condition.

There is absolutely no established use of triple parentheses, known to a general audience, beyond its use as an anti-Semitic dogwhistle. The same goes for "WWG1WGA," which may as well be a randomly generated string of characters for all a general audience know. Consider also the transphobic "YWNBAW" ("you will never be a woman"), the white supremacist "RWDS" ("right wing death squads"), the anti-Semitic "6MWE" ("six million wasn't enough"). None of these have innocent significances.

Consider also such neologisms as "loxism" and "dindu."[8] The first is a portmanteau of "lox" and "racism," which refers to the anti-Semitic trope of Jewish "reverse racism," i.e., of Jewish discrimination against non-Jews. The second is a racist term for Black people, arising from the shortening of another racist dogwhistle, "dindu nuffin," which is a contraction of "didn't do nothing," used as a sarcastic retort on behalf of victims of police brutality, implying both that the victim is insincerely professing innocence (and thus really deserving of the police's violent attention) and that they have poor diction. In this it is similar to "gibsmedat," another racist term for Black people, one which arises from the contraction of "give me that," implying that Black people have an inflated sense of entitlement, improperly relying on government benefits (sometimes referred to as "gibs"), and/or being especially inclined to theft, along with another implication of poor diction.

In none of these cases does the dogwhistle have some plausible interpretation available to a general audience that is innocent, i.e., a significance that provides (some) plausible deniability. Instead, what runs cover is the appearance of *nonsense*. Nonsense codes can appear innocent with (some) plausibility to a general audience precisely because the fact that they have any significance is unknown. An outsider who first encounters "YKW" or "loxism" might be able to infer from context that the words have something to do with Jewish people, but even then, there is ample room for doubt. And as Saul so convincingly shows, just a seed of doubt is enough. If I don't know the significance of some newfangled slang, there is little reason to "jump to conclusions" and assume the worst. More to the point, there always remains the possibility of an innocent mistake. A string of characters might just be a typo, and an apparent neologism could just be an unintended autocorrect. Just like "covfefe," even when

used by a racist, the term might just not mean anything at all.

Now, one might think that the *absence* of a significance constitutes an innocent interpretation (of a sort): perhaps insignificance is its own kind of significance. If this is right, then nonsense codes can be made compatible with Saul's definition, which just requires that an overt code have some innocent significance that runs cover for its secret significance. Even so, the nonsense cases show that there is a distinction to be drawn between overt codes that have some innocent significance and overt codes that appear to be innocently insignificant. And this is no tiny technicality: the distinction has important consequences for how the different sorts of overt codes operate.

In both cases, an overt code's secret significance is obscured by something that offers (some) plausible deniability. In *sense codes*, the obscuring work is done by a generally available innocent significance. But in *nonsense codes*, the obscuring work is done by the general *unavailability* of any significance. Both offer plausible deniability, insofar as an intentional use can be excused by an appeal to ignorance, but they do so by subtly different routes. With sense codes, an intentional user may plead ignorance of the secret significance by claiming that only the innocent significance was meant. But with nonsense codes, an intentional user may plead ignorance of the secret significance by claiming that *nothing* was meant. And this relatively small difference makes for a much bigger difference in the roles sense codes and nonsense codes can play, as I will argue in the next section.

Before I turn to these different roles, we should consider the case of *non-linguistic* codes. There is a sense in which Hawaiian shirts and egg dumplings with green salad also lack any plausible innocent significance, insofar as they lack any plausible *linguistic* significance.[9] These are not pieces of language, so of course they cannot *mean* anything. But that doesn't mean I consider them to be nonsense codes. Hawaiian shirts can be an utterly innocent fashion choice, and egg dumplings with green salad can be a thoroughly apolitical culinary choice. These are perfectly good *interpretations* of a person's behavior. The fact that they are non-linguistic is not important. These innocent non-linguistic significances can run cover just as much as innocent linguistic significances. I thus count them among the sense codes. Nonsense codes, by contrast, have *no* generally known significance, linguistic or otherwise.[10]

4. RECOGNITION AND RECRUITMENT

In her very first example of an overt dogwhistle, Saul identifies two roles it can play. Of Bush's use of "wonder-working power" in his political speeches, she observes:

> There are two messages a [Christian] fundamentalist might take from this. The first is a kind of translation into their idiolect, to yield an explicitly Christian message that would alienate many. . . . The second is simply the fact that Bush does speak their idiolect—indicating that he is one of them.
>
> The first message is very clearly an overt intentional dogwhistle: it is a coded, concealed message, intended for just a subgroup of the general audience. In fact, it functions rather like the exploitation of a little-known ambiguity. The second is a little messier. It is somewhat like speaking in a regional accent that gives a feeling of kinship to a particular audience.[11]

Saul briefly suggests a similar idea in her discussion of "WWG1WGA." Of its (sometimes unintentional) use as a hashtag, she claims,

> the QAnon followers are watching use of the hashtag spread, and identifying (apparent) fellow travelers. All of this contributes to the spread of the wildly false and implausible conspiracy theory.[12]

Code dogwhistles are thus said to play two different roles at once. First, they are used to *identify fellow travelers*. Observing the use of "wonder-working power," Christian fundamentalists recognize one of their own. And the use of "WWG1WGA" indicates a fellow fan of the mysterious Q and their wild theories. And second, code dogwhistles are said to *spread a message*. "Wonder-working power" is said to spread a Christian fundamentalist message. And "WWG1WGA" is said to spread the QAnon conspiracy theory.

Now, insofar as one is already a follower of QAnon, or a Christian fundamentalist, the message being "spread" here is not exactly *news*. Fellow followers are fellow precisely because they have already heard, understood, and accepted the secret significance being transmitted under the cover of an apparently innocent utterance. If the secret significance was not known to them, they would not be insiders (with respect to this code) in the first place. In this sense then, both such "spreading" and identifying work as a form of *recognition*. Code dogwhistles allow fellow followers to recognize one another as fellows in public, without a general audience noticing.

But if this is all that code dogwhistles did, they wouldn't be that much of a concern. Insofar as their secret significances truly are secret, available only to insiders, they can play no role in *expanding* the reach of their harmful ideology. They are little more than a knowing wink among co-conspirators. But such an expanding sense of "spread" is exactly what Saul is most concerned about. She clearly sees code dogwhistles working to *recruit* new members, drawing more people in, helping blatant racism and wild conspiracism *grow*.[13] Code dogwhistles must then have some ability to "leak" their secret significances out in order to draw new members in.

I think the clue to how code dogwhistles can serve this role of *recruitment*, i.e., over and above mere *recognition*, comes out most clearly in Saul's discussion of "save the children." Here we have another QAnon dogwhistle, this one referencing the core conspiratorial claim that political elites are pedophiles running a secret child sex trafficking ring. But, as Saul observes,

> The innocent appearance of the phrase "save the children" has . . . offered a wonderful recruitment tool. People who have genuine concern with child welfare might click on posts or follow hashtags that pull them, gradually, into the QAnon conspiracy.[14]

Much the same can be said of the transphobic dogwhistle "save women's sports." One might take a legitimate interest in promoting women's sports, insofar as women and girls have long faced misogynistic discrimination in clubs and industries that actively center and promote the games and careers of men and boys. Nevertheless, such legitimate interest can be co-opted into a moral panic over the inclusion of trans girls and women in women's sports. One may start with a legitimate interest in promoting women's teams and games, and yet end up concerned (sometimes exclusively) with banning or otherwise gatekeeping the inclusion of trans women and girls from participating in their chosen leisure or profession. Here then, we find examples of how dogwhistles can truly be said to *spread* their harmful messages and thus serve to *grow* the influence of harmful ideology.

Key here is the extent to which the innocent and secret significances of a code are *interrelated*. They do mean different things to different groups of people, but those significances are close enough that outsiders can be transformed into insiders. Recall Saul's brief mention of the fact that dogwhistles operate by an "exploitation of a little-known ambiguity."[15] Quite right, except it would be more correct to say that dogwhistles recruit new members by exploiting a little-known *polysemy*, i.e., *related* significances. Unrelated significances, by contrast, have little hope of recruiting new members to the insider group.

To see this, let's return to the case of "🍕" [pizza slice]. To the anti-vaxxer, the emoji refers to a booster shot. To the rest of us, it's just a pizza slice. Here we have a true homonymy, a term with at least two plausible significances, but which have nothing discernible to do with one another. Or consider the case of "Skittles," its significance as a racist slur seemingly having little to do with its use for a brand of candy. I could talk about Skittles and pizza all day long, and you would be at absolutely no risk of sliding into blatant racism or wild conspiracism as a result. And that's because the two significances are totally unrelated to one another, at least to the untrained eye of an outsider.

Now, in both cases, one can actually trace a path from the one significance to the other. In the case of the pizza slice, there is an iconic resemblance between the pizza slice and a syringe. The same, you'll notice, goes for "🥕" [carrot]. Both taper to a point, just like syringes. Moreover, pizza slices typically come in multiples—you could have more than one, just like booster shots. The same goes for other anti-vax emojis that also refer to booster shots, like "🍰" [cake slice]. The path from Islamophobia to "Skittles" treads a more complicated path, but a key step is Donald Trump Jr.'s tweet of an image that said, "If I had a bowl of skittles and I told you just three would kill you, would you take a handful? That's our Syrian refugee problem."[16] The same goes for Hawaiian shirts, which call for race war insofar as they are worn by the Boogaloo Boys, the self-professed soldiers of that war, and "Boogaloo" sounds a little like "big luau," i.e., exactly the sort of place one might wear a Hawaiian shirt. And egg dumplings with green salad have a neo-Nazi significance via the fact that the dish was (apparently) Hitler's favorite.

These paths can be traced, but only by insiders, or those wise to their tactics. In this sense they are quite literally code. You can decipher the message, but only if you have access to the cypher. Not so with polysemous codes. Insofar as the messages have *related* significances, outsiders can tread the path themselves.

It's worth noting that such paths cannot always be traced. In some cases, the different significances of a code dogwhistle are so utterly unrelated that their resemblance is one of true homonymy, merely coincidental identity of form. Consider the transphobic slur "troon," which also happens to be a Scottish place name. Or return to "gibs," which (quite coincidentally) in its singular form of "gib" refers to a host of different things in different English dialects, including a metal or wooden bolt, wedge, or pin used to hold pieces of machinery in place, a horse's lower lip, a castrated cat, plasterboard, a piece of a fragged video game character, and more.[17] In these cases, the code dogwhistles operate for all intents and purposes much more like nonsense codes, insofar as the innocent significance could quite easily be utterly unknown to those who employ it intentionally and to those who see it being used in its intended sense. And they certainly have no hope of recruiting new members via their innocent significances. A Troon travel guide offers little promise of drawing a reader into transphobic panics. And a manual describing how to make mechanical use of gibs is hardly the sort of thing to get one into a racist frame of mind.

Let us then return to the nonsense code "WWG1WGA" and Saul's claim that it "contributes to the spread of the wildly false and implausible conspiracy theory."[18] I disagree, at least with respect to its power to literally *spread* the QAnon conspiracy, i.e., its power to *recruit* new members. To the uninitiated, this string of characters is just that. It carries *no* significance. There is no message to spread. Even its secret significance, i.e., the rallying cry "where we go one, we go all," has little to do with the conspiracy theory itself. It expresses little more than solidarity among fellows. Nothing about this code risks drawing people into the idea that political elites are pedophiles. The only role it can play is that of *recognition*, helping fellow travelers identify one another in public.[19]

The point generalizes across nonsense codes, along with non-polysemous sense codes. The former carry no significance for outsiders, and thus cannot draw them into anything. The latter do carry significances, but these are so unrelated to the secret messages for which they run cover that they can do little more than preach their secret significances to the already converted choir.

Polysemous codes, by contrast, are *much* more dangerous. For they are the codes that actually can recruit new members, drawing new followers in. Insofar as their significances are interrelated, they can be used to co-opt

an innocent interest into something rather more insidious. The point is well illustrated with "save the children" and "save women's sports," but I think much the same goes for such dogwhistles as the racist "states' rights," "election integrity," "law and order," and "school choice," the transphobic "sex-based rights" and "erasing women," the homophobic "family values" and "religious freedom," the anti-vax "parents' right to choose" and "vaccine safety," and the like. Each of these terms, on the surface, concerns an issue that one can take a legitimate interest in. But such an interest can very quickly turn into something much darker, insofar as there are large groups working very hard at promoting deeply unjust projects under the guise of such legitimate interest.

5. RECRUITING CODES AND COVERT EFFECTS

I have argued for a distinction between *nonsense codes* and *sense codes*, showing that an apparently minor difference in surface significance can have a major impact in the role each type of overt dogwhistle can play. In particular, I showed that only sense codes can *recruit* new members to harmful ideology insofar as nonsense codes lack a significance that can be co-opted. Indeed, I argued that it is only *polysemous* codes that can do anything more than facilitate *recognition* among fellows. I close the discussion by returning to the distinction between overt codes and covert effects.

As Saul makes vivid, covert effect dogwhistles are quite unlike overt code dogwhistles. Most importantly, they have a different target. Their message is intended for a general audience. It's just that a general audience should ideally not notice that they're receiving the message. The paradigm case is "inner city," which triggers underlying racial resentments, but Saul briefly speculates about including "superpredator," "heritage," "law and order," "radicalization," "terrorist," and "taxpayer."[20] As she stresses, we cannot be sure about any of these cases until they have been subjected to psychological study, for subliminal messaging is hardly the sort of thing we can discern through careful introspection or sincere reporting. If I'm right, however, about the power of polysemous codes to recruit new members via the possibility of co-opting nearby innocent significances for more nefarious aims, then at least some of these phrases should be thought of as overt codes (too).

Consider the case of "heritage." One can certainly care about the history of one's ancestors in legitimate ways, but for many white people the path to racism and colonialism is devastatingly short. An innocent interest in great-grandpa's life history can far too quickly turn into support for the colonial conquest he participated in as a young man. And a nostalgic love for the family farm can too easily transform into a rabid hostility to the demonstrable fact that its sits on stolen land.

If this is right, then the distinction between overt code and covert effect dogwhistles is not quite as stark as Saul suggests. In both cases, the target audience can include outsiders who might nevertheless be recruited to contribute (perhaps unknowingly) to furthering the insiders' cause. And in both cases, this recruitment will occur via the associations that can be brought to salience between the apparently innocent surface significance and the more insidious secret significance for which the former runs cover. To this extent then, despite their key differences, there may yet be important parallels in how both overt and covert dogwhistles work to further the aims of harmful ideology, and the distinction that plays such a central role in Saul's analysis might not be so sharp after all. Indeed, the case of polysemous codes might best be seen as one of *overlap*: overt codes with covert effects.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Taylor Koles who first alerted me to the idea of considering the *polysemy* of dogwhistles, rather than their mere *ambiguity*. My thanks also to an anonymous reviewer for *APA Studies on Feminism and Philosophy* and to my audiences at Australian National University, Texas Christian University, and East Texas A&M University for their most helpful questions, criticisms, and recommendations.

NOTES

1. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 161; my emphases.
2. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 158–59.
3. As I will elaborate on again below, there may well be many different mechanisms of recruitment in which dogwhistles can play a central part. My focus in this paper is only on the mechanism that involves the *co-option of legitimate interests*, since this is the mode of recruitment that Saul (*Dogwhistles and Figleaves*) most directly identifies.
4. Saul, "Dogwhistles, Political Manipulation, and Philosophy of Language."
5. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 38.
6. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 42.
7. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 51; my emphases.
8. I rely here, and throughout the paper, on the excellent glossary compiled by Mendelssohn et al. ("From Dogwhistles to Bullhorns") available at https://dogwhistles.allen.ai/glossary (accessed June 6, 2024) along with the extremely informative RationalWiki glossaries available at https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Alt-right_glossary (accessed June 6, 2024) and https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/TERF_glossary (accessed June 6, 2024).
9. Some might also think of emojis as non-linguistic, but I don't find this idea plausible. Despite their iconicity, they seem to combine and interact with text in several standardly linguistic ways. See, for example, Herring and Ge-Stadnyk ("Emoji and Illocutionarity") who conclude on the basis of a detailed analysis of emoji use across a variety of textual data that they are "linguistic acts in their own right." In any case, insofar as I'm interested in discussing both linguistic and non-linguistic codes, my commitment to the linguistic nature of emojis is of no consequence here.
10. It is also for this reason that I prefer the more general "significance" to the more linguistic "meaning" when discussing the plausible interpretations of different sorts of dogwhistles.
11. Saul, "Dogwhistles, Political Manipulation, and Philosophy of Language," 362–63.
12. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 156–57.
13. Recall her claim that "Coded dogwhistles have helped wilder and wilder conspiracy theories to spread and *gain greater prominence . . . they help the conspiracy theories to grow and acquire more followers*." (*Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 161; my emphases).
14. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 158–59.
15. Saul, "Dogwhistles, Political Manipulation, and Philosophy of Language," 363.
16. Revesz, "How Donald Trump Jr's 'Skittles' Comment Has a History as a Racist Dogwhistle that Goes Back to the Nazis."
17. See, for example, the list of meanings at https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/gib (accessed June 6, 2024).

18. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 157.

19. As I noted above, my interest here is in the mode of recruitment that involves the co-option of legitimate interests. This leaves open the possibility of recruitment by other modes, some of which might be possible for merely homonymous codes, as well as for nonsense codes.

    Consider, for example, the power of social isolation or exclusion. Here, nonsense codes might have some power. Nonsense codes appear insignificant, seemingly meaning nothing at all. And yet, if an outsider notices the repeated use of an apparently insignificant term by a group of which they are not a part, bare curiosity paired with a desire for social acceptance might be enough to draw them in, motivating them to find a way into the group of apparent nonsense-speakers. Notice, however, that this would only be a first step towards adopting the harmful ideologies endorsed by the group, since the ideology itself is not part of what draws the recruit in. Indeed, someone might initially be quite tempted by being part of a group that uses secret acronyms, and be especially encouraged once they learn that one of the main acronyms actually expresses strong in-group solidarity, but then be immediately turned off once they realize that "WWG1WGA" also expresses a wild conspiracy about child-trafficking elites. Not so for "save the children", where one is well on the way to endorsing the conspiracy itself once the interest in child welfare is redirected into a concern over supposed pedophiles in power.

20. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 66–67.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Herring, S., and J. Ge-Stadnyk. "Emoji and Illocutionarity: Acting On, and Acting As, Language." In *Structures in Discourse: Studies in Interaction, Adaptability, and Pragmatic Functions in Honour of Tuija Virtanen*, edited by M. Gill, A. Malmivirta, and B. Warwik. John Benjamins, 2024.

Mendelsohn, J., R. Le Bras, Y. Choi, and M. Sap. "From Dogwhistles to Bullhorns: Unveiling Coded Rhetoric with Language Models." *ArXiv* abs/2305.17174 (2023).

Revesz, R. "How Donald Trump Jr's 'Skittles' Comment Has a History as a Racist Dogwhistle that Goes Back to the Nazis." *Independent*, September 20, 2016. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/donald-trump-jr-skittles-racism-dark-history-syrian-refugees-trayvon-martin-a7318496.html.

Saul, J. "Dogwhistles, Political Manipulation, and Philosophy of Language." In *New Work on Speech Acts*, edited by D. Fogal, D. Harris, and M. Moss. Oxford University Press, 2018.

Saul, J. *Dogwhistles and Figleaves: How Manipulative Language Spreads Racism and Falsehood*. Oxford University Press, 2024.

Covert Dogwhistles, In-Grouping, and Attentional Resiliency: Why Don't Callouts Work?

Jacob E. Smith
UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

1. INTRODUCTION

If the last decade or so is a good indication, callouts do not seem to be an effective way for combating coded racist language. This creates a puzzle for Jennifer Saul's theory of covert dogwhistles. Saul believes there once was reason for optimism about the effectiveness of callouts. Citing historical examples of successful callouts from decades past, she previously argued that explicitly raising the issue of race (e.g., by saying "that's racist") in response to covert racial dogwhistles could reliably negate the harms they cause.[1] As she notes more recently, though, this no longer seems to be the case as the public use of racist language is becoming more frequent and examples of successful public callouts in politics are slim to none. Supposing that there once was a time in which callouts were more effective, why don't they seem to be effective now?

Saul addresses this issue toward the end of *Dogwhistles and Figleaves: How Manipulative Language Spreads Racism and Falsehood*. She thinks there are various reasons, particular to the present era of political discourse, that explain why callouts stopped being effective. For example, she speculates that Barack Obama's election as the first black American president may have left some with the impression that racism is not a real problem in America anymore, leading them to take less seriously the charge that certain phrases circulating within public discourse are implicitly racist.[2]

Saul's work continues to elucidate undertheorized aspects of language and facilitate cross-disciplinary dialogue. In what follows, though, I will put forward an alternative diagnosis for why callouts don't work. Callouts have always faced significant obstacles that tend to impede their success. We have always had good reason for skepticism about the effectiveness of callouts. I will argue the point in a couple of ways. According to Saul, callouts are successful when they can trigger an attentional shift for the addressee. When addressees "self-monitor" their uptake of a covert dogwhistle, that covert dogwhistle can no longer work in the same way. I will argue that this attentional shift is more socially and epistemically burdensome for addressees than Saul considers. First, dogwhistles are often used to express belonging to a certain political in-group. Therefore, self-monitoring one's uptake of a covert dogwhistle disrupts a potentially important in-grouping practice and can complicate one's ability to express one's political identity. Second, I argue that the attentional dispositions that govern the uptake of covert dogwhistles are more resilient and resistant to change than Saul's initial optimism gave them credit for. For both of these reasons, the ineffectiveness of callouts is likely not a recent phenomenon.[3]

Some terminology is necessary for this paper. Dogwhistles are speech acts that are coded so as to have a particular uptake within only a subset of a speaker's audience. According to Saul, dogwhistles can be either overt or covert. For overt dogwhistles, members of the intended audience register and are aware of the coded message communicated to them. Covert dogwhistles are different in that the intended audience is generally unaware of the code. When used by politicians, they are often designed to appeal to an audience's implicit prejudices in order to mobilize a voter base around implicit biases. Examples of covert dogwhistles include "law and order," "state's rights," "welfare queens," and "America first." There is strong evidence that these terms are implicit racial appeals, so I will take it as granted in this paper that they are.[4]

2. CALLING OUT COVERT DOGWHISTLES

2.1: THE JESSE JACKSON CASE AND OPTIMISM ABOUT CALLOUTS

Racist codes, such as covert dogwhistles, pose a public threat.[5] In previous work, though, Saul argued that we can combat covert dogwhistles relatively easily. She claimed that the harmful effects of covert dogwhistles usually can be undone—or "defused"—by simply calling out the coded message. Explicitly raising the issue of race, Saul thought, was sufficient for reducing the harms of covert dogwhistles.[6] She argued that terms like the above only have their desired effect when their intended audience is unconscious of their implicit racist meanings. Addressees "self-monitor" their uptake of the speech act in question after a callout, in a way they did not prior to it. For Saul, this meant that the implicit code could no longer operate at an unconscious level after a callout.

Her argument was informed by Tali Mendelberg, a political psychologist studying coded language. Mendelberg argued that most white Americans hold a "Norm of Racial Equality." By and large, most people would agree that racism is wrong and that we shouldn't be racist. This is true even for those who have strong implicit racial biases.[7] The widespread adherence to this norm is the reason why, according to Mendelberg and subsequently Saul, it is relatively easy to resist covert dogwhistles.

Mendelberg's argued the point by studying the infamous "Willie Horton" attack ad and Jesse Jackson's callout of it. Now more widely recognized as a racist dogwhistle, the ad was used by George H. W. Bush's campaign against Michael Dukakis. It detailed William Horton's use of a program pioneered by Dukakis as governor of Massachusetts that allowed inmates to leave prison for short periods of time on furlough. After detailing Horton's rape of a woman and assault of her fiancé while using this program, the ad presents Horton's mugshot and closes with "Weekend prison passes: Dukakis on crime." The ad was massively successful for the Bush campaign. Many, including Mendelberg, believe it was instrumental in Bush's eventual victory over Dukakis. Eventually, Jesse Jackson called out the ad as racist on national television late in the campaign. His claims were met with fairly widespread skepticism and resistance.

Mendelberg conducted a series of studies measuring the ad's effects on white Americans with "racial resentments," or negative attitudes associated with others on the basis of race.[8] These studies found that there was a correlation between the likelihood that racially resentful participants would vote for Bush after watching the ad. This correlation began to decrease, though, after Jackson's callout.[9] This was the case despite the fact that many popular media outlets and much of the public more broadly were skeptical of Jackson's claims.

Saul attempted to explain this phenomenon in more epistemological terms. Covert dogwhistles work just as long as they can appeal to implicit prejudices without appearing overtly racist. They only have the desired uptake if the intended audience remains unaware of the possibility that the phrase in question is racist. Once this possibility is made explicit the implicit message cannot, Saul thought, have the same effect. For Saul, this was supposed to be a sufficient defense against covert dogwhistles as long as the Norm of Racial Equality was in place. Holding the Norm means that the possibility that one's speech is racist is relevant to the Norm-holder. Avoiding racism is a salient concern to someone who holds the Norm. This triggers the Norm-holder to "self-monitor" her uptake of the speech act after the callout in a way that she didn't before.[10]

In other words, Saul thought callouts were effective because they could easily trigger an attentional shift for the addressee. She argued that callouts direct an addressee's attention to a salient feature of a speech act, which was previously not taken as salient: the possibility that a speech act is racist. Holding the Norm, Saul thought, would be enough to make this possibility salient. As long as the addressee treats this as a salient possibility, the covert dogwhistle cannot work in the designed way. For them to work, the intended audience must remain unaware of this possibility. Someone who self-monitors makes this possibility explicit, even if she ultimately believes the speech act in question is not racist. This is enough to prevent the code from working, Saul thought. Thus, while covert dogwhistles pose a serious public threat, Saul once believed they were easy to combat: "As soon as the issue of race is raised—even if raising it is thought to be a mistake, and met with anger—the speech act we are trying to fight stops working. It is both very hard to fight and very easy to win."[11]

2.2: CALLOUTS POST-OBAMA: A PUZZLE FOR SAUL

Supposing that the Jesse Jackson case was once a reason for optimism about callouts, more recent history appears much more pessimistic. Hence, in *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, Saul revisits her position on callouts: "Once upon a time, it looked like there was a fairly simple solution for Covert Effect racist dogwhistles: call attention to what is really going on. . . . This solution, however, is not as promising as it once seemed."[12] Saul admits that the current character of political discourse does not warrant the same kind of optimism about callouts she once had. Racist language seems to circulate widely, especially associated with Trump's political rise. There have been many high-profile callouts similar to Jackson's during Donald Trump's campaigns and after, which have not achieved the same effect as Jackson's supposedly did.[13]

Believing that callouts once were but are no longer effective creates a puzzle for Saul. If responding to covert dogwhistles was once easy, why has it recently become abundantly difficult? Why is it only now the case that "calling attention to the racism of a politician's rhetoric no longer has quite the effects that it once did"?[14]

One might think the answer is that adherence to norms against racism are deteriorating. While Saul thinks this could be a contributing factor, she argues it does not approach a full explanation. On the contrary, she believes

the Norm is still decently alive and well. To argue the point, she notes that many candidates who use overtly racist language suffer as a result. Rick Tyler, who unsuccessfully campaigned in Tennessee with the slogan "make America white again," is a prime example for Saul. It also appears from political polls that most Trump supporters manage to avoid perceiving Trump as a racist.[15]

If the Norm of Racial Equality is still intact, how does Saul attempt to solve the puzzle about callouts? Saul speculates that Obama's presidency may have left many white Americans with the impression that racism is not as prevalent as it once was.[16] If one takes the fact that a person of color can become president as evidence that racism is not a widespread problem in America anymore, then one might worry less that one's speech has coded racial appeals. She also cites Valentino and colleagues who have conducted psychological studies similar to Mendelberg's over the years. They theorize that Obama's presidency—and the ensuing discussions about race—may have also caused some white conservatives to believe that we have in general become too sensitive about race. They additionally speculate that "Obama's election may have ironically provided at least some whites with the perceived moral license to express more critical attitudes about minorities."[17] While most hold the Norm of Racial Equality, Obama's presidency may have emboldened those who do not. Hence, there could be more racism in public discourse and simultaneously less interest in auditing public discourse for racist expressions. For Saul, these historically recent factors coalesce in a way that makes it more difficult for callouts to have the same effectiveness she believes they once did.

3. THE IN-GROUPING FUNCTION OF DOGWHISTLES

Saul's philosophical treatment of dogwhistles is elucidating and remains prescient. I think, though, her diagnosis concerning dogwhistles falls short. As I see things, the ineffectiveness of callouts is not a new phenomenon or associated with recent trends in politics. There are, and have been, good reasons for skepticism about the effectiveness of callouts. Even if the addressee of a callout holds something like the Norm of Racial Equality, we should not in general expect that a callout will cause the addressee to self-monitor their uptake of the covert dogwhistle in question. In this section and the following, I will attempt to articulate two reasons why. Here I will focus on how covert and overt dogwhistles perform an *in-grouping function*. They are used to mark the speaker's status within an in-group, which means they are tools for expressing political identity. In addition, in-groups are typically formed in reference to an out-group, which is perceived in some way as less favorable. Due to this, covert dogwhistles also make salient how a shared political identity is importantly antithetical to others. Monitoring one's uptake of these phrases complicates one's ability to express in-group identity in these ways. This proves to be a formidable obstacle to a callout's success.

We form in-groups based on perceived common identities, such as shared interests, desires, preferences, and background experiences.[18] Importantly, in-grouped identities are typically formed in light of sets of people who are out-grouped. One is out-grouped when one is perceived not to share this common identity. In-group identities are formed over and against out-groups, which are perceived in some way as antithetical to the in-group. Examples of this include Democrats and Republicans, Catholics and Protestants, Continental and Analytic philosophers, and so on. Because in-grouped persons perceive their common identity with reference to those who do not share it, in-grouped individuals often have a sense of solidity and trust with each other, which is not extended in the same way to out-grouped individuals.

Covert dogwhistles achieve the effect of signaling one's status within a political in-group. Using phrases like "welfare queens," "America first," and "state's rights" call attention to one's status within a particular political in-group when uttered to the right audience: a group of people who repeatedly use and hear these terms when talking about relevant political issues. As such, they are tools for communicating political identities. This is to say that covert dogwhistles perform an *in-grouping function*.

Why should we think this? Phrases such as the above are what Cassie Herbert and Quill Kukla call "community-specific" forms of speech. According to them, a term or phrase is community-specific when it is circulated uniquely within a given in-group, becoming endemic to that community.[19] These terms and phrases have semantic meanings but, because they are endemic to a specific community, they also have the practical function of signaling one's membership within that community. If specific terms are not spoken in the same way in any other community, using them indicates membership to the community that uses them.

For Herbert and Kukla, community-specific speaking is an ordinary function of language. As members of shared communities, we are all engaged in it. Though, it is particularly noticeable in politics. To illustrate, they use George W. Bush's utterance of the phrase "Wonder-working power," which Saul considers a paradigm example of an overt dogwhistle.[20] While campaigning for re-election in 2003, Bush needed support from Evangelicals and Christian fundamentalists. But his support from these groups was uncertain and at the time explicitly appealing to this demographic was politically risky. So he dogwhistled, using a Christian fundamentalist community-specific phrase typically associated with the power of God as a description of America:

> Yet there's power, *wonder-working power*, in the goodness and idealism and faith of the American people.[21]

This is an overt dogwhistle. Bush was speaking in a code that fundamentalists could understand without the broader audience's awareness.[22] But because the phrase is community-specific, it does something more than communicate Bush's conviction that the power of God is at work in American governance, though he likely believed this. As Herbert and Kukla put it, he was attempting "to signal to some listeners that *he was one of them* and at the same time to call upon them to recognize themselves

as part of a shared community."[23] Bush's use of the term, in this way, performs an *in-grouping function*. The speech act calls a particular audience's attention to an in-group identity and signals the speaker's membership in that in-group.

If overt dogwhistles work this way, then we should expect covert dogwhistles do as well. Covert dogwhistles are not merely uttered by someone behind a podium at a rally or an attack ad. Once they gain traction in a conversational space, they quickly become ordinary ways of speaking within the relevant in-groups. Phrases like "welfare queens," "soft on crime," and "America first" circulate in a special way among conservative communities as ways of talking about political issues. These are community-specific ways of speaking and, hence, they signal a speaker's belonging to an in-group. Moreover, the relevant communities typically see these terms as genuine ways of discussing these issues. When politicians deploy these words, just as when their constituents do the same in casual conversation, they call upon their listeners to see the speaker as "one of them."

Notice, too, that use of these terms tends to entail a negative appraisal of an out-group, or at least an out-group's political beliefs.[24] They express a political sentiment that belongs to a particular political in-group over and against an out-group. Saying that a political candidate is "soft on crime," for example, implies that there are other (better) candidates who are not. For some covert dogwhistles, the relevant referent *is* a member of a political out-group. This is the case for terms like "welfare queens," the referent of which is someone who is perceived to rely wastefully on government assistance. This puts the referent of the phrase in a different political grouping, one that (supposedly) does not have the same political values concerning self-reliance and tax policy. In negatively appraising an out-group, it seems clear that these terms function to draw attention to an in-group identity over and against an out-group.

If I am right that covert dogwhistles perform an in-grouping function, then it is clear that entertaining the possibility that one's speech is problematic (e.g., racist) can come with considerable social costs. Self-monitoring one's own uptake of a covert dogwhistle in the way Saul outlines will complicate one's ability to express in-group identity. To the extent that community-specific speech performs an in-grouping function, monitoring it impedes one's ability to signal in-group membership and to communicate one's political identity. This is the case even if the address holds the Norm of Racial Equality. Holding such a norm does not prevent self-monitoring from being costly to the addressee of the callout in the above way. The costs exist regardless. The costs associated with self-monitoring are good reason to think that addressees will resist taking it up.

To be clear, Saul does discuss in-grouping in *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*. She does so primarily to explain dogwhistle codes are possible in the first place. One can only speak in codes with plausible deniability on the assumption that the intended audience constitutes some kind of in-group. This is especially relevant to her discussion of overt dogwhistles.[25] While she notes that group dynamics help explain how messages are coded in dogwhistles, she does not emphasize as I do here that the very utterance of a dogwhistle signals in-group membership and is possibly important as an expression of political identity. This turns out to be important for understanding the obstacles that callouts face.

4. SELF-MONITORING AND ATTENTIONAL RESILIENCY

The in-grouping function of dogwhistles suggests that callouts have always faced significant obstacles. Self-monitoring one's uptake of community-specific speech will come with a social cost and will complicate one's expression of an in-group identity. But the problem may be worse. In this section, I will draw on advancements in the psychology of in-group bias and recent work in epistemology to argue that using covert dogwhistles in a community-specific way makes one vulnerable to developing resilient attentional dispositions toward them. If those who use covert dogwhistles attend to them in a way that is resilient or resistant to change, triggering self-monitoring through a callout was never an easy task.

Implicit biases influence how we attend to reality and what we find salient in a given context. Advancements in psychology over the last few decades demonstrate that modes of attention informed by implicit bias are difficult to change, even for those who do not avow them.[26] Attentional patterns appear to be especially strong when motivated by in-group/out-group biases. Some studies examine facial recognition around in-group/out-group dynamics, measuring what kind of information test subjects can remember about the faces of in-grouped individuals as opposed to out-grouped individuals. Such studies consistently find that, when prompted by the image of an out-grouped individual, attention is immediately drawn to features that indicate the individual's out-grouped status (e.g., for a white participant, that a particular individual was black).[27]

This indicates that when an in-group/out-group dynamic is made salient, it is somewhat epistemically burdensome to attend to features of out-grouped individuals that do not merely categorize them as out-grouped. The same burdens do not appear to exist for the in-group. Moreover, this trend appears to persist for those who hold norms against these modes of attention. As Tamar Gendler elaborates, "even people whose normative commitments are anti-racist may find themselves differentially encoding information about same-race and other-race faces."[28]

The attentional patterns informed by implicit bias and in-grouping appear to be uniquely resilient. They do not appear to change easily, even when we want them to and hold norms against them. This is enough to worry that the odds were always against callouts. Callouts must make something salient to the addressee: that a particular speech act violates the Norm of Racial Equality. But addressees already attend to the dogwhistle in a particular way, one that is informed by in-grouping practices. Altering attentional patterns of this sort already appears to be tricky business.

Recent work in epistemology also seeks to explain how attentional dispositions can grow resistant to change. Looking at this work can help us understand what is going on more specifically. Zachary Irving has argued that the ordinary mental functions that guide our attention can lead us to ignore evidence that our attention is misguided under the right circumstances. By attending to reality as it is most salient to us, we can acquire a standing disposition to ignore evidence that would otherwise suggest we ought to alter our attentional outlook. This leads us to attend primarily to features of our environment that affirm the assumption that our attention is rightly guided. Irving calls this phenomenon *circular attention*.

I suspect that circular attention is a relevant problem that undermines the effectiveness of callouts. Using covert dogwhistles in a community-specific way makes one vulnerable to developing a kind of circular attention toward them. If so, the attentional dispositions in need of change imply the existence of a disposition to ignore evidence that they ought to. This would make an addressee's attention toward a covert dogwhistle significantly entrenched. First, take Irving's case of Little Trey to illustrate the phenomenon more generally:

> Little Trey . . . is afraid of his giant neighbor Boban. Because Trey is afraid, he attends to Boban's menacing features (his deep voice, thick hands, and massive stature) and ignores Boban's comforting features (his warm smile, silly jokes, and generosity). . . . Boban's menacing features are (emotionally) salient, so Trey has reasons to attend to them. . . . Trey's attention is self-reinforcing. Trey grows more afraid because he attends to Boban's menacing features, so he takes those features to be more relevant, so he attends to those features more, and so on. . . . Trey's attention seems viciously circular.[29]

Little Trey's attention is circular because it is self-reenforcing. Yet, it became problematically self-reenforcing through the ordinary function of his attention.[30] His circumstances make it the case that attending to what is salient to him constitutes a disposition to ignore evidence that his attention is misguided. Circular attention becomes a threat whenever attending to reality as it is salient to us makes significantly less accessible information that otherwise would suggest an alternative (better) mode of attention. For Irving, these traps are relatively easy to fall into if we are not careful. For Little Trey, it happens because his preexisting attitude presents a relatively inflexible salience structure around Boban that highlights what about him seems menacing.

The in-grouping function of dogwhistles allows us to speculate about what features are brought to salience when they are uttered in a communal context (e.g., a shared identity and shared concerns about a political issue). Recall, too, that in-group identities are typically leveraged against an out-group. *We, unlike the other guys, are not soft on crime. We, unlike the other guys, believe America comes first. We, unlike the other guys, won't let our taxes support the welfare queens*. If ultimately a callout challenges an in-group practice, the one who performs the callout plausibly marks herself as out-grouped. This makes a host of things salient about her, as well (e.g., she does *not* share an identity and she does not see the issue as my community does). Indeed, the studies cited above indicate that attention toward out-grouped individuals often intransigently centers on features that mark them as out-grouped. These dispositions seem difficult to change whenever they are active.

Treating the above features as salient runs contrary to what the callout attempts to make salient—that a way of speaking endemic to an in-group is racist. If attention is inflexibly drawn toward the contextual features that in-grouping makes salient (as the research indicates it typically is), it could undercut a callout's power to make salient a possible norm violation from the outset. An agent's attending to them can amount to a disposition to ignore evidence that her attention is misguided—*the very thing a successful callout must make salient*. Therefore, we can say something similar about addressees as Irving says of Little Trey. Attending to what is most salient undercuts the ability to access evidence that attention is misguided. This constitutes a disposition to ignore such evidence and makes attention self-reenforcing.

The conditions are right for a circular attention problem. If so, the situation is worse than Saul initially thought. Saul initially argued that callouts can work despite the strong skepticism they usually face, such as in Jesse Jackson's case. The possibility that a speech act is racist could still be relevant to someone who is ultimately skeptical that it is. If the attentional disposition to a particular speech act is already circular, though, addressees are in an epistemically worse place than mere skepticism. They would also have a disposition to ignore evidence that their attention is misguided.

This is crucial for understanding the obstacles that callouts face. Doubting that a claim is true is perfectly consistent with taking up on some level the possibility (however slight) that it is true. In Jackson's case, one could doubt his claim that the Willie Horton ad was racist and still monitor the ad for potentially racist content. This is less likely to happen, though, if the addressee's attention is circular. Shifting one's attention to investigate whether a callout is true is much less consistent with the standing disposition to ignore it or treat it as irrelevant. In the latter case, the attentional disposition in need of change is much more resilient and entrenched than in the former.

5. CONCLUSION

I have argued that callouts have always faced significant obstacles. Covert dogwhistles perform an in-grouping function, which makes self-monitoring socially costly for those to do it. The in-grouping function also suggests the attentional patterns that callouts attempt to change (i.e., by making salient the possibility of racism) are likely more resilient than Saul initially conceived. While my argument seeks to articulate the obstacles that callouts face, the obstacles could be overcome in the right circumstances. Specifically, my view would predict that callouts stand a better chance when the in-grouping dynamics discussed

above are somehow mitigated. This, though, would be a topic for further research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper benefited from the insights of many people. For enormously helpful feedback at various stages of development, I'd like to thank Jordan Baker, Donnie Barnett, Gabi Dumet, Michael Ebling, Georgi Gardiner, Paige Greene, Isabelle Farineau, Zac Irving, Anna Kietzerow, Linh Mac, Anna Morse, Ditte Marie Munch-Jurisic, C. J. Oswald, Walter Ott, and Robert Ziegler. I am indebted especially to Isabelle Farineau and Linh Mac, whose ongoing interest in this project was instrumental in completing it.

NOTES

1. Saul, "Dogwhistles, Political Manipulation, and Philosophy of Language."
2. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 183.
3. My argument primarily concerns callouts made across political boundaries, where the addressee does not belong to the same political group as the caller. For hesitations about callouts when made between politically like-minded people (e.g., when the caller and addressee are both liberal), see Munch-Jurisic, "The Right to Feel Comfortable."
4. See Valenzuela and Reny, "The Evolution of Experiments on Racial Priming," for a comprehensive survey of empirical studies indicating this. This empirical evidence on the matter is in addition to the fact that some Republican strategists have explicitly admitted as much (Perlstein, "Exclusive: Lee Atwater's Infamous 1981 Interview on the Southern Strategy").
5. Saul, "Racial Figleaves"; "Dogwhistles, Political Manipulation, and Philosophy of Language"; *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*; Haney Lopéz, *Dog Whistle Politics*; Stanley, *How Propaganda Works*.
6. Saul was not alone in holding this view. For example, Justin Khoo expressed general agreement with Saul with respect to callouts, offering a slight caveat. According to Khoo, callouts will work best when they make clear they accuse a particular speech act of prejudice and not the individuals who say it (Khoo, "Code Words in Political Discourse," 22–23).
7. For both Saul and Mendelberg, this is a very minimal norm. It does not entail robust anti-racist commitments and could be expressed with a statement such as "don't be racist," (Saul, "Racial Figleaves," 100).
8. Racial resentment is measured by assessing participants' agreement with statements such as "Irish, Italian, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors" (Tesler and Sears, *Obama's Race*, 19). See Saul, "Racial Figleaves," 99; "Dogwhistles, Political Manipulation, and Philosophy of Language," 364, for further elaboration.
9. Mendelberg "Executing Hortons"; *The Race Card*.
10. Saul, "Racial Figleaves"; "Dogwhistles, Political Manipulation, and Philosophy of Language"; "What Is Happening to Our Norms Against Racist Speech?"
11. Saul, "Dogwhistles, Political Manipulation, and Philosophy of Language," 381.
12. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 182.
13. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 183.
14. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 183.
15. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 187; Haney López, *Merge Left*.
16. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 183. Saul elsewhere refers to this as the "Obama Effect" (Saul, "What Is Happening to Our Norms Against Racist Speech?" 8).
17. Valentino et al., "The Changing Norms of Racial Political Rhetoric," 769.
18. These are paradigm examples. But available evidence suggests humans can form in-group identities easily and over arbitrary differences in the right circumstances. Early social psychological studies found that preferring a Klee painting to a Kandinsky painting can be sufficient for developing shared in-group identities over and against those who do not share them (Tajfel, "Experiments in Intergroup Discrimination"; "Social Identity and Intergroup Behaviour"). See also Brewer, "The Psychology of Prejudice," and Diehl, "The Minimal Group Paradigm," for further psychological work on in-grouping.
19. Herbert and Kukla, "Ingrouping, Outgrouping, and the Pragmatics of Peripheral Speech."
20. Saul, "Dogwhistles, Political Manipulation, and Philosophy of Language," 362–63.
21. Saul, "Dogwhistles, Political Manipulation, and Philosophy of Language," 362–63.
22. There is good empirical evidence that different demographics heard this phrase differently. Bethany Albertson conducted a study to test the degree to which community membership could predict one's ability to recognize this phrase. Her study records that only 9 percent of Princeton students were familiar with the phrase compared to 84 percent of students from a small Pentecostal Bible college (Albertson, "Dog Whistle Politics").
23. Herbert and Kukla, "Ingrouping, Outgrouping, and the Pragmatics of Peripheral Speech," 6.
24. My thanks to C. J. Oswald for helping me make this point.
25. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 42.
26. For example, see studies that examine tendencies to stereotype females as followers and not leaders (e.g., Porter and Geis, "Women and Nonverbal Leadership Cues"). For helpful discussion on this and related studies, see Madva, "Virtue, Social Knowledge, and Implicit Bias."
27. Conversely, participants are typically able to remember much more fine-grained images of in-grouped individuals (e.g., hair color, eye color, etc.). For examples of these studies see Hugenberg et al., "Categorization and Individuation in the Cross-Race Recognition Deficit"; Bernstein et al., "The Cross-Category Effect"; Meissner and Brigham, "Thirty Years." Many of these studies focus on racial out-grouping effects on facial recognition, but not all. See Shriver et al., "Class, Race, and the Face," for a study measuring the same effect in the context of class instead of race. For discussions of the epistemological implications of these and the above studies, see Madva, "Virtue, Social Knowledge, and Implicit Bias," and Gendler, "On the Epistemic Costs of Implicit Bias."
28. Gendler, "On the Epistemic Costs of Implicit Bias," 48.
29. Irving, forthcoming, 6–7. A manuscript of this paper is available on Irving's website: https://www.zacharycirving.com/attention-and-mental-action-copy-1-1-2.
30. Susanna Siegel discusses a similar problem for epistemic agency under the name "perceptual hijacking" (Siegel, *The Rationality of Perception*). For Irving's discussion of perceptual hijacking as an example of circular attention, see Irving, "Attention Norms."

REFERENCES

Albertson, B. "Dog Whistle Politics: Multivocal Communications and Religious Appeals." *Political Behavior* 37 (2015): 3–26. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-013-9265-x.

Bernstein, M. J., S. G. Young, and K. Hugenberg. "The Cross-Category Effect: Mere Social Categorization Is Sufficient to Elicit an Own-Group Bias in Face Recognition." *Psychological Science* 18, no. 8 (2007): 706–12. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2007.01964.x.

Brewer, M. B. "The Psychology of Prejudice: Ingroup Love and Outgroup Hate?" *Journal of Social Issues* 55, no. 3 (1999): 429–44. https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-4537.00126.

Diehl, M. "The Minimal Group Paradigm: Theoretical Explanations and Empirical Findings." *European Review of Social Psychology* 1, no. 1 (1990): 263292. https://doi.org/10.1080/14792779108401864.

Gendler, T. S. "On the Epistemic Costs of Implicit Bias." *Philosophical Studies* 156, no. 1 (2011): 33–63. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-011-9801-7.

Haney López, I. *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class*. Oxford University Press, 2015.

———. *Merge Left: Fusing Race and Class, Winning Elections, and Saving America*. The New Press, 2019.

Herbert, C., and R. Kukla. "Ingrouping, Outgrouping, and the Pragmatics of Peripheral Speech." *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 2, no. 4 (2016): 576–96. doi: 10.1017/apa.2016.31.

Hugenberg, K., J. Miller, and H. M. Claypool. "Categorization and Individuation in the Cross-Race Recognition Deficit: Toward a Solution to an Insidious Problem." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 43, no. 2 (2007): 334–40. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2006.02.010.

Irving, Z. C. "Attention Norms in Siegel's *The Rationality of Perception*." *Ratio* 32, no. 1 (2019): 84–91. https://doi.org/10.1111/rati.12213.

Irving, Z. C. "Attention Norms in the Balance: Exploring Beyond Relevance." Forthcoming. Manuscript available at https://www.zacharycirving.com/attention-and-mental-action-copy-1-1-2. Last accessed April 4, 2025.

Khoo, J. "Code Words in Political Discourse." *Philosophical Topics* 45, no. 2 (2017): 33–64. https://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics201745213.

Madva, A. "Virtue, Social Knowledge, and Implicit Bias." In *Implicit Bias and Philosophy, Volume 1*, edited by M. Brownstein and J. Saul, 191–215. Oxford University Press, 2016. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198713241.003.0008.

Meissner, C. A., and J. C. Brigham. "Thirty Years of Investigating the Own-Race Bias in Memory for Faces: A Meta-analytic Review. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law* 7, no. 1 (2001): 3–35. https://doi.org/10.1037/1076-8971.7.1.3.

Mendelberg, T. "Executing Hortons: Racial Crime in the 1988 Presidential Campaign." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (1997): 134. https://doi.org/10.1086/297790.

Mendelberg, T. *The Race Card: Campaign Strategy, Implicit Messages, and the Norm of Equality*. Princeton University Press, 2001.

Munch-Jurisic, D. M. "The Right to Feel Comfortable: Implicit Bias and the Moral Potential of Discomfort." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 23, no. 1 (2020): 237–50. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-020-10064-5.

Perlstein, R. "Exclusive: Lee Atwater's Infamous 1981 Interview on the Southern Strategy." *The Nation*. November 13, 2012. https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/exclusive-lee-atwaters-infamous-1981-interview-southern-strategy/.

Porter, N., and F. L. Geis. "Women and Nonverbal Leadership Cues: When Seeing Is Not Believing." In *Gender, Androgyny, and Nonverbal Behavior* , edited by C. Mayo and N. Henley. Springer, 1981.

Saul, J. "Racial Figleaves, the Shifting Boundaries of the Permissible, and the Rise of Donald Trump." *Philosophical Topics* 45, no. 2 (2017): 97–116. https://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics201745215.

Saul, J. "Dogwhistles, Political Manipulation, and Philosophy of Language." In *New Work on Speech Acts*, edited by D. Fogal, D. W. Harris, and M. Moss. Oxford University Press, 2018. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198738831.003.0013.

Saul, J. "What Is Happening to Our Norms Against Racist Speech?" *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 93, no. 1 (2019): 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1093/arisup/akz001.

Saul, J. *Dogwhistles and Figleaves: How Manipulative Language Spreads Racism and Falsehood*. Oxford University Press, 2024.

Shriver, E. R., S. G. Young, K. Hugenberg, M. J. Bernstein, and J. R. Lanter. "Class, Race, and the Face: Social Context Modulates the Cross-Race Effect in Face Recognition." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 34, no. 2 (2008): 260–74. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167207310455.

Siegel, S. *The Rationality of Perception*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

Stanley, J. *How Propaganda Works*. Princeton University Press, 2015.

Tajfel, H. "Experiments in Intergroup Discrimination." *Scientific American* 223, no. 5 (1970): 96–102. https://doi.org/10.1038/scientificamerican1170-96.

Tajfel, H. "Social Identity and Intergroup Behaviour." *Social Science Information* 13, no. 2 (1974): 65–93. https://doi.org/10.1177/053901847401300204.

Tesler, M., and D. O. Sears. *Obama's Race: The 2008 Election and the Dream of a Post-Racial America*. University of Chicago Press, 2010.

Valentino, N. A., F. G. Neuner, and L. M. Vandenbroek. "The Changing Norms of Racial Political Rhetoric and the End of Racial Priming." *The Journal of Politics* 80, no. 3 (2018), 757–71. https://doi.org/10.1086/694845.

Valenzuela, A. A., and T. Reny. "The Evolution of Experiments on Racial Priming." In *Advances in Experimental Political Science*, edited by J. Druckman and D. P. Green. Cambridge University Press, 2021. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108777919.031.

Covert, Not Innocent—Narrowing the Reach of Saul's Account

Taylor Koles
UNIVERSITY OF SURREY

Saul's *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*[1] gives an account of dogwhistles, which, as Saul's wide range of examples shows, is easy to apply to a great deal of problematic speech that philosophers of language have been interested in. This paper raises the worry that this account applies too easily to speech received by bigoted audience members.

While Saul is quite right to be interested in the ways that speakers can unwittingly dogwhistle, her definition also applies to speech that primes problematic attitudes because of idiosyncrasies in the audience and not because there is something wrong with what the speaker said. In particular, Saul's account will frequently treat anodyne speech acts by discriminated-against individuals as dogwhistles simply because they will make problematic attitudes more salient for bigoted audience members. Section one presents this problem for Saul's account of dogwhistles, and section two proposes a solution. Section three gives a methodological defense of narrowing the account in this way.

1. DOGWHISTLES, COVERT AND INNOCENT

Saul's account provides a bipartite definition of dogwhistles, splitting them into "Overt Code" dogwhistles and "Covert Effect" dogwhistles. While my objection will apply to the definition of Covert Effect dogwhistles, it will be helpful to have both definitions on the table:

Overt Code dogwhistles:

- Intentional: a term or speech act with (at least) two plausible interpretations, such that one of these violates some widespread norm, and is meant to be understood primarily by those who are comfortable with this norm violation; and one appears innocent, and is meant to be understood primarily by those who would not want to see the norm being violated.

- Unintentional: a term or speech act with (at least) two plausible interpretations, one of which violates some widespread norm, and one of which doesn't violate that norm, which is used by someone unaware of the norm-violating interpretation.

Covert Effect dogwhistles:

- Intentional: a communicative act meant to raise particular attitudes to salience without the audience's awareness, where the attitudes being raised to salience violate some widespread norm.

- Unintentional: a communicative act of unintentionally raising to salience attitudes that violate some widespread norm. Often this will be through unwitting use of a term that has these effects.[2]

My worry is that quite a lot of speech that really doesn't seem to be a dogwhistle will count as an unintentional Covert Effect dogwhistle. It seems like the definition of this category is something like the following: An agent *A*'s act ϕ is an unintentional Covert Effect dogwhistle *iff*

1. ϕ is a communicative act,[3]
2. ϕ raises to salience attitudes that violate some widespread norm, AND
3. *A*'s ϕing was not intended to raise those attitudes to salience.[4]

First, we should note the examples Saul wants to capture with this prong. Phrases like "inner-city," "government spending," and "urban crime" are plausible candidates of unintentional Covert Effect dogwhistles.[5] Each of these phrases has a demonstrated relationship with certain problematic attitudes or stereotypes, but any increase in the salience of bad attitudes subsequent to their use could certainly be unintentional. Saul also gives the non-linguistic examples of artificially darkening a politician's skin in critical campaign materials, which seems to activate negative stereotypes about Black people, and having a rally in Waco on a date that calls to mind the Branch Davidian siege there.[6]

Saul's point about these cases is an important one—the fact that speakers can unintentionally cause covert attitudinal effects through their speech is central to understanding how problematic attitudes spread and how speakers can maintain deniability for spreading them.[7] Someone who wants to use the phrase "government spending" in order to get listeners to associate a certain proposal with social service spending for racial minorities can profit from the fact that this is a term that can very often be used without that intention or in ignorance of that effect. And the assumption, often made by academic commentators, that "dogwhistling" is something one does intentionally can shift the conversation from what some speaker's act has *done* to what they *meant to do*, ignoring the possibility that an unintentional dogwhistler may have caused the same sort of damage as an intentional one.

These are good insights, and one of the achievements of Saul's book is moving away from the focus of prior work on the intentional. But the definition of unintentional Covert Effect dogwhistles extends beyond these cases. One initial point concerns a distinction among different kinds of salience.[8] One way that an attitude can become more salient to me is by making that attitude more prominent in my belief system or as a premise in my practical reasoning. This is what is happening in the cases Saul is using. "Government spending" increases the salience of problematic attitudes in the sense that it reinforces attitudes like "welfare recipients are undeserving" and makes corresponding behavior (like advocating cuts to social services) seem more viable.[9] In cases like these, the attitude is becoming more salient in the sense that the attitude is becoming a more prominent candidate to being one of *my* attitudes. Call this kind of salience "operative salience."

There's also an equally valid sense of "salience" in which an attitude becomes more salient simply when I become aware of it *as an attitude* rather than as one of *my* attitudes. For a silly example, when I hear someone say "Sophie believes that the moon is made of green cheese," it would be hard to say that "the moon is made of green cheese" doesn't become an attitude that is more salient to me. That's not a norm-violative attitude (or is it?), but it's certainly not an attitude that I have been made somehow more likely to accept—its salience is raised in a different way. More seriously, we could imagine a group of anti-racist activists deliberating about how they can advocate for their communities and talking about policy priorities and "government spending." Because they are aware of the insights in work like Saul's the fact that other people use the term "government spending" to dogwhistle racist attitudes, it seems likely that those racist attitudes will become more salient *in an indirect way*, via a critical awareness of the fact that different audiences might be more likely to accept these attitudes if they had heard the speech. Call this kind of salience "critical salience."

I think that Saul's target is really acts that increase operative salience, rather than critical salience. We're interested in how people might be primed to accept norm-violative attitudes, not how people might be reminded of other people's acceptance of those attitudes. Accordingly, when the anti-racist activists are talking among themselves about government spending, this shouldn't count as dogwhistling just because their awareness of other people's dogwhistling makes the attitudes they are critical of more salient. We can avoid this problem by specifying that dogwhistles apply to increases in operative salience.

But we're not out of the woods yet—there are still innocent, non-dogwhistling ways of unintentionally increasing the *operative* salience of norm-violative attitudes.[10] Consider the following situation:

> Sam is going to introduce his friend Pat to a group of old friends. Pat is wearing a nice watch. Sam says, "Hey everyone, this is my friend Pat," which causes Sam's old friends to turn their attention to Pat and Pat's nice watch. Unbeknownst to Sam, Sam's old friend Van has a penchant for robbery. Having had his attention drawn to Pat and Pat's nice watch, the attitude *Pat would be good to rob* becomes more salient for Van.

It seems like Sam's communicative act ("Hey everyone, this is my friend Pat") has raised to operative salience an attitude (*Pat would be good to rob*) that violates some widespread norm (it's wrong to commit robbery). So despite the fact that Sam didn't intend to raise those attitudes to salience, it would seem that Saul's account says that Sam has dogwhistled by introducing Pat to Van.

This is a striking result, both because Sam's act doesn't intuitively seem like a dogwhistle and because this exchange seems dissimilar from the target cases Saul highlighted. Salience, even operative salience, is a low bar, and all kinds of completely innocuous communication can raise norm-violative attitudes to salience simply because of idiosyncrasies in the attitude patterns of the audience. I play Huey Lewis and the News for you and your desire to imitate Christian Bale's character in *American Psycho* becomes more salient. I offer someone a banana at breakfast and their bigoted association between bananas, non-human primates, and racial minorities makes racist attitudes more salient. You wave at a stranger and their unseemly hand fetish rears its head.

If Sam is dogwhistling here, then we're all probably dogwhistling all over the place. But not only that, it seems like perhaps the majority of communicative acts that are *by* members of discriminated-against groups will count as unintentional Covert Effect dogwhistles on this definition. Among certain audiences, bigoted attitudes become more salient whenever a discriminated-against person makes *themselves* more salient. In the parallel of the Sam case where Sam introduces a Black friend or where a Black person introduces themselves, this will also make anti-Black attitudes more salient. A woman announcing that she will assume a leadership position in the workplace will prime norm-violative attitudes among misogynists in the audience. A person coming out as trans will *by itself* increase the incidence of anti-trans attitudes in the audience. None of these acts seem appropriate to describe as a "dogwhistle."

This effect will also apply in cases where the vicious logic of stereotype is at work. A man wearing a kippah explaining that he's a banker will count as dogwhistling in an audience where antisemitic attitudes associating jewishness with money management are latent. A Black person describing their fondness for playing basketball will increase the salience of problematic attitudes that associate Blackness with some kind of inherent talent in basketball. Yet it would be implausible to say that a person was dogwhistling by truthfully describing their profession or their hobby.

These cases are not only innocent in the sense that any problematic effects are unintentional—they are innocent in the sense that there is simply *nothing wrong* with the content of what they communicate. It's the bigotry of the audience that's at fault, not some covert part of what the speakers are communicating. And this is a class of cases I think we should be interested in removing from the definition of "dogwhistle." Otherwise, as I expand on in section three, the concept's theoretical utility as an explanation of how problematic messages and ideas are transmitted, as well as its practical utility as an account of the kind of speech pattern that we should be wary of participating in, are in jeopardy.

2. THE FIX

This problem is one reason to pursue a definition of dogwhistles that is more fine-grained in assessing the linguistic mechanisms at work in dogwhistling and generating deniability, a project I pursue in other work. But I think there's also a revision of the definition that's closer to Saul's project that could help. To my mind, Sam's introduction is representative of a class of cases where a communicative act does *cause* some problematic attitude to become more salient, but this is because of an idiosyncrasy of the audience and the communicative situation, rather than the fact that the act itself contains some problematic content. So we can solve the problem if Saul's view can be modified to exclude these idiosyncrasies and focus on speech for which an increased salience of problematic attitudes is a regular effect of use.

The distinction between an act that regularly produces problematic attitudes and an act that doesn't is different from the distinction between an intentional and unintentional act. This is easy to see in Saul's discussion of Overt Code dogwhistles—an Overt Code dogwhistle involves a speech act with an interpretation that violates a widespread norm, and you can use this term or speech act *with the intention* that some part of your audience picks up the norm violation or *unintentionally*. So if we add a requirement that the effect be regularly available into the definition of Covert Effect dogwhistles, we can exclude idiosyncratic causal effects from the definition without missing the insight that one can dogwhistle unintentionally. A rough pass might look something like this:

An agent *A*'s act ϕ is a (revised) Covert Effect dogwhistle *iff*

1. ϕ is a communicative act, AND
2. ϕ raises to operative salience attitudes that violate some widespread norm, and would have done so across variations in *speaker* and *audience*.[11]

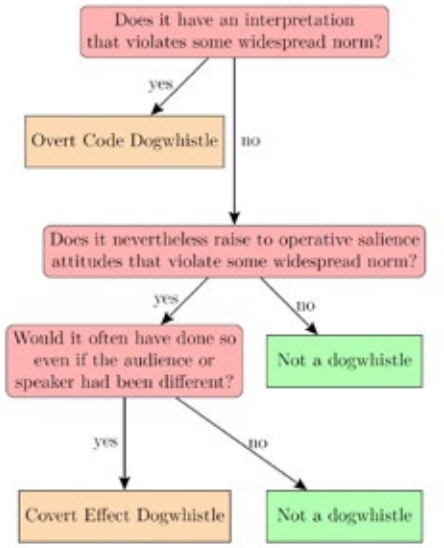
We would then hold that unintentional (revised) Covert Effect dogwhistles are those where *A*'s ϕing was not intended to raise those attitudes to salience, whereas intentional (revised) Covert Effect dogwhistles are those where this introduction is intended.

In our example of Sam's introduction, Sam saying "Hey everyone, this is my friend Pat" increases the salience of a norm-violative attitude, but it won't count as a Covert Effect dogwhistle because Sam saying "Hey everyone, this is my friend Pat" to most any other audience (even in otherwise similar circumstances) won't have that effect. The idiosyncrasy of the audience's reaction is weeded out and we only get dogwhistles for speech acts that have predictable, widely spread effects. Or similarly, while a woman's announcing that she will assume a leadership position at work will have predictable problematic effects, the same act from a speaker who happens to be a man won't.[12]

My thought here is this: Saul is right that the problem with thinking that all dogwhistles are Overt Code dogwhistles is that problematic ideas, images, and so on can be introduced to an audience without being part of the interpretation of a speech act. The code picture suggests that dogwhistles involve hidden messages that are like complete thoughts that just need to be "decoded." But that kind of content is not the only information that communicative acts convey,

and some dogwhistles work by more subtly changing the salience of audience attitudes. However, we want to restrict the concept of dogwhistle to cases where the problematic consequence of a speech act is a *regular* part of its occurrence—to many people's ears and from many speakers. On this revised definition, a speaker dogwhistles covertly when they use language that has the general effect of priming audiences for problematic attitudes, not when idiosyncrasies of the audience cause generally innocent language to prime these attitudes.

The resulting picture makes the two categories of dogwhistles complementary. If the problematic content in a communicative act comes from an available *interpretation* of that act, then you have an Overt Code dogwhistle. If it doesn't, but nevertheless covertly raises problematic attitudes to salience—and does so *regularly*, rather than idiosyncratically—you have a Covert Effect dogwhistle. So the revised view produces the following kind of reasoning:



One question is how it's possible for a speech act to have this kind of regular effect without being a part of an act's conventional interpretation. Fortunately, the philosophical and linguistic literature is filled with different accounts of information that doesn't neatly fit into the truth-conditional interpretation of a speech act. Extant proposals (which needn't compete) include the idea that terms and phrases might have different kinds of resonance,[13] evoke perspectives or framing effects,[14] bear conventional implicatures,[15] hide presuppositions,[16] make changes to the expressive setting,[17] communicate tones,[18] and otherwise carry ideological baggage.[19]

These approaches have been deployed in other contexts to account for other well-known regular features of language. For example, one might explain what metaphorical or poetic uses of the term "winter" typically communicate by suggesting that the use of this term carries with it an experiential resonance (e.g., a feeling of being cold) in addition to its truth-conditional content.[20] Or, to use a textbook example, one might appeal to a conventional implicature to explain the difference (apparently non-truth-conditional) between "Elizabeth is English *and* brave" and "Elizabeth is English *but* brave." In both cases, the communicative effect is a perfectly general one that depends on shared conceptual mastery rather than idiosyncratic psychology. Of course, any one of these tools or their applications may be controversial, and it remains for further work to establish which particular linguistic mechanisms could be associated with which dogwhistles. But if we want to understand why terms like "urban crime" and "government spending" have the lurking potential to communicate problematic content in a wide range of uses, these proposals seem like a good place to start.

For a quick example in the topic of the paper, take "urban crime" and Camp's work on framing effects and the ability of language users to get their audience to take a certain perspective on a subject.[21] Our shared concepts surrounding crime involve all kinds of images and stereotypes that can take more or less prominence in our understanding whenever someone describes some event or phenomenon as "crime." And although we can sometimes use the phrase "urban crime" without bringing any problematic stereotypes to bear, as when it's used as a technical term in sociology, the phrase can easily be part of a speech act that brings to prominence racist images of crime and stereotypes about its nature and causes. I can talk about "urban crime" in such a way that makes you think of crime that is particularly or prominently *urban*, thereby taking on a certain problematic perspective.

Importantly, this perspectival effect depends on widely shared elements of our shared culture and conceptual understanding, not some quirk of any individual's psychology. It is these shared stereotypes and concepts that make it possible to bring to mind the same sort of images and get one's point across to a wide and diverse audience. And the effect of framing things in a certain perspective can be quite significant. As Camp says, in this kind of perspective-laden speech act, "the same property may be assigned different structural roles within the same overall set of elements, imbuing that property with distinct emotional, evaluative, and even conceptual significances."[22] This effect could be used to explain the difference between seemingly innocent and dogwhistling uses of "urban crime."

Whether this particular story is right at the end of the day isn't important. My thought is just that some kind of story like this, which describes the regular tendency of phrases like "urban crime" and "government spending" to bring forward certain attitudes, can distinguish these cases from the innocent cases like Sam's introduction. My revised view denies that the innocent cases count as dogwhistles at all, and holds that Covert Effect dogwhistles work by communicating along this non-interpretive dimension of content or conceptual association, whatever it happens to be.

When we consider Sam's introduction, or the more important cases of speech by discriminated-against groups, we see an increase in problematic attitudes that depends crucially on *who* is saying something and *to whom* they are saying it, rather than *what* is being said. The intuitive idea of a

dogwhistle is that there are some bits of speech that are dangerous because they can be used to draw out bad attitudes from a sometimes-unwitting audience. When our definition includes speech that primes problematic attitudes just because of issues with the audience, not some covert problematic aspect of the speech itself, we lose that intuitive idea.

By focusing on speech that has reliable effects across different audiences and speakers, the revised definition I propose here gives us a way to avoid the implication that a woman announcing a promotion or a trans person's coming out count as dogwhistling. These are speech acts without problematic associated content like a concept with unsavory resonances or an underlying ideological frame, and the fact that these speech acts would not have any problematic effects for different audiences or speakers goes to show that they don't involve speech that's a general tool for eliciting bad attitudes. Any problematic attitudes that arise because of these acts arise solely due to the bigotry of the audience, not anything troublesome about the speech acts themselves. In contrast, speech like "urban crime" that reliably calls up shared stereotypes or images could be expected to have a similar effect across a wider range of audiences. So, at least on my accounting, the revised view can likely account for the cases Saul wants to target with the idea of a Covert Effect dogwhistle while also being narrow enough to avoid the counterexamples discussed in section one.

3. WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

A fair question is why it is important that the definition of dogwhistle be narrowed in this way. Sure, it's a bit counterintuitive to say that Sam is dogwhistling, but Saul's definition might be a helpful gloss on a technical term nonetheless. It might be true, after all, that communicative acts that don't have any problematic content have an important part to play in our descriptive understanding of our current speech predicament and the bad outcomes it results in.

The answer, to my mind, has to do with the point of doing philosophy of language and the importance of focusing on dogwhistles as a kind of communicative act. In the broader project of understanding how bigoted attitudes, unjust policies, and inequitable outcomes come to be, some, but only some, of the causes will be about how we communicate to and about one another.

As Saul rightly emphasizes, many problematic communications may be *unintentional* in one sense or another. But plenty of the things that cause bad things won't be communicative at all. Your Uncle So-and-So might be more likely to transmit racist messages because he went to an all-white school as a kid. We all might be less susceptible to distraction from racist behavior if they hadn't put lead in the paint. These types of causes may be genuinely important for broader organizing and thought in the pursuit of a just society. But it would be surprising if philosophy of language's conceptual repertoire will be helpful for understanding them. Our ballpark is a smaller one dedicated to the contentful messages we communicate with one another.

To the extent that dogwhistles are supposed to be a distinctive kind of communication, something that the tools of philosophy of language can give us a unique perspective on, it's fair to expect our definition of the concept to focus on what is communicatively distinct about this kind of speech. And while it's possible to unintentionally communicate problematic content, the counterexamples I've presented in this paper are cases where the problematic effect has nothing to do with what's communicated, even *sub rosa*.

It's also worth noting that a narrower notion of dogwhistling is also more helpful for giving practical, ethical guidance. If part of the ambition of this literature is to guide speakers by suggesting that they be careful about using speech that may have hidden messages or problematic connotations, we should want a definition of dogwhistle that homes in on the speech that speakers should be careful of. A woman can't be held accountable for the fact that her introduction to a workplace will prime misogynistic attitudes in some of the audience. Similarly, when a Black person introduces themselves or a trans person comes out, there's nothing about the bigoted reaction for which they are responsible.

Even if, because of the iniquity of others, these kinds of speech acts do *cause* bigoted attitudes to become more salient, it would be wrong to suggest that this is somehow the fault of the speakers. So if we want to enjoin speakers "don't dogwhistle," a narrower definition that doesn't include this kind of innocent speech would be much preferable. But with respect to the use of "urban crime" or "inner-city," it's sensible to ask speakers to take responsibility for using these terms well and not be negligent about the lurking connotations or ideological frames they may carry with them. And this is work that the concept of a "dogwhistle," and Saul's broader project, can be helpful with.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper argues that Saul's definition of Covert Effect dogwhistles is too broad because it defines speech that raises problematic attitudes to salience as dogwhistling even when this speech is itself innocuous and only raises problematic attitudes to salience because of idiosyncrasies in the audience. This broad definition is less useful as a theoretical tool for understanding problematic communication and as a practical tool for guiding speakers ethically.

Just as Saul aims to make the definition of dogwhistles more precise by revising previous definitions by Haney López and Henderson and McCready,[23] I propose a friendly amendment to Saul's account to remedy this problem by suggesting that only speech that regularly produces problematic effects across variations in speaker and audience should qualify as a dogwhistle. This allows the concept of a "dogwhistle" to serve the practical and theoretical roles Saul rightly asks of it without including, e.g., the innocuous speech of discriminated-against individuals.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank the anonymous reviewer, as well as all the participants of Mengyuan Qi's *Dogwhistles and Figleaves* reading group. Special thanks go to Kelly Weirich and Nikki Ernst, who read an early draft. Their comments were invaluable.

ENDNOTES

1. Jennifer Mather Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves: How Manipulative Language Spreads Racism and Falsehood* (Oxford University Press, 2024).
2. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 51.
3. It's unclear why the definition of Covert Effect dogwhistles uses this formulation rather than the "speech act or term" phrasing used for Overt Code dogwhistles. Saul does seem to be interested in capturing the behavior of non-linguistic communication as Overt Code dogwhistles (Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 52–54), which would suggest that both kinds of dogwhistles should be defined in terms of communicative acts rather than in terms of a "speech act or term." In any case, I'll use the broader term for the purposes of this paper.
4. That is, the attitudes mentioned in (2) that violate the norm. It's possible that, by parallel to the definition of intentional Covert Effect dogwhistles, Saul also meant to include the idea that this raise to salience occurs without the audience's awareness. This shouldn't affect the analysis that follows, so I omit this amendment here.
5. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 49; 58; 59–62
6. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 54–56. I set to the side non-linguistic dogwhistles here for reasons of space.
7. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 57–59
8. I want to thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this very helpful distinction. I borrow the terms "operative salience" and "critical salience" from their suggestion.
9. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 57–58.
10. In what follows, I will use "salience" to mean "operative salience" unless otherwise specified.
11. One of the ways in which this definition is rough is that plausibly *A*'s ϕing has identity conditions that include the speaker and audience. In other words, there may be some sense in which Sam's saying "Hey everyone, this is my friend Pat" to this group is a *different act* from my saying "Hey everyone, this is my friend Pat" to a different group rather than a "variation" of the same act. So a more technically precise definition would have to revise Saul's proposal using a type-token distinction to capture the sense in which two speech acts can be similar through these variations. I take it that this precision isn't necessary to make the point for current purposes.
12. A fair question is *how much* variation along either dimension is required. While it might not be possible to give a precise cutoff, it seems fair to say that there's a spectrum of cases. The more a problematic effect depends on having particular audience members or particular speakers, the more this effect seems fair to attribute to idiosyncrasies of the speech situation rather than the speech itself. The examples considered here can be seen as standing on opposite ends of this spectrum.
13. Hanks, "Three Kinds of Semantic Resonance"; Beaver and Stanley, *The Politics of Language*.
14. Camp, "Why Metaphors Make Good Insults."
15. For the traditional statement, see Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words*.
16. For an example applying this thought to offensive speech, see Schlenker, "Expressive Presuppositions," 237–45.
17. Potts, "The Expressive Dimension."
18. Picardi, "On Sense, Tone and Accompanying Thoughts."
19. Stanley, *How Propaganda Works*, Ch. 4.
20. Hanks, "Three Kinds of Semantic Resonance," 47. There is, I take it, nothing *contradictory* in saying "a scorching hot winter," and yet I can surely expect that even idiomatic phrases like "the winter of our discontent" will create certain expectations and feelings in the audience that prime them for cold-related images.
21. Helpfully summarized in §2 of Camp, "Why Metaphors Make Good Insults."
22. Camp, "Why Metaphors Make Good Insults," 51.
23. Henderson and McCready, *How Dogwhistles Work*; Haney López, *Dog Whistle Politics*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Beaver, David, and Jason Stanley. *The Politics of Language*. Princeton University Press, 2023.

Camp, Elisabeth. "Why Metaphors Make Good Insults: Perspectives, Presupposition, and Pragmatics." *Philosophical Studies* 174 (2017): 47–64.

Grice, Herbert Paul. *Studies in the Way of Words*. Harvard University Press, 1989.

Haney López, Ian. *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

Hanks, Patrick. "Three Kinds of Semantic Resonance." In *Proceedings of the XVII EURALEX International Congress: Lexicography and Linguistic Diversity*. Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi University Press, 2016.

Henderson, R., and E. McCready. *How Dogwhistles Work*. Springer International Publishing, 2018.

Picardi, Eva. "On Sense, Tone and Accompanying Thoughts." In *The Philosophy of Michael Dummett*, edited by R. E. Auxier and L. E. Hahn. Open Court, 2007.

Potts, Christopher. "The Expressive Dimension." *Theoretical Linguistics* 33, no. 2 (2007): 165–98.

Saul, Jennifer Mather. *Dogwhistles and Figleaves: How Manipulative Language Spreads Racism and Falsehood*. Oxford University Press, 2024.

Schlenker, Philippe. "Expressive Presuppositions." *Theoretical Linguistics* 33 (2007): 237–45.

Stanley, Jason. *How Propaganda Works*. Princeton University Press, 2015.

Brazen Dogwhistles

Kelly Weirich

PIERCE COLLEGE

A dogwhistle, in its most centrally discussed sense, seeks to obscure part of its meaning from part of its audience. Like the instrument after which they are named, dogwhistles carry a message or cause an effect that can be detected only by some. Yet as Jennifer Saul's *Dogwhistles and Figleaves* demonstrates, dogwhistles that are "broken"—that is, detectable by or even flaunted at an opposing group—play a prominent role in political speech.[1] I call these speech acts *brazen dogwhistles*. Though similar in many ways to standard dogwhistles, a brazen dogwhistle does not seek to obscure its meaning from opposing groups. Rather, it uses deniability as a weapon for stirring up opposition, testing boundaries, or asserting authority. While these flaunted dogwhistles play a role in Saul's account, they stray beyond the margins of her definitions. I contend that brazen dogwhistles warrant closer examination and inclusion as proper dogwhistles, not only to fill a conceptual space but also to further Saul's political project of undermining dogwhistles' pernicious effects. I offer initial steps toward such an examination here.

The first half of the paper takes up theoretical concerns. After situating brazen dogwhistles in relation to standard dogwhistles (§1), I explore the prospects for adding brazen dogwhistles to Saul's framework, arguing that this addition helps us better understand which features are essential to dogwhistles (§2). The second half addresses issues more closely tied to Saul's political project. I argue that brazen dogwhistles reveal the continuity between mass-audience uses of dogwhistles and more local assertions of dominance (§3.1). In so doing, brazen dogwhistles demonstrate the active nature of audience interpretation, suggesting that a successful campaign against oppressive dogwhistles would emphasize active interpretation as a locus of resistance (§3.2).

1. STANDARD AND BRAZEN DOGWHISTLES

1.1 A FAULT IN THE STANDARD ACCOUNT

Saul defines dogwhistles thus:

> Saul's Intentional Overt Code Dogwhistle: a term or speech act with (at least) two plausible interpretations, such that one of these violates some widespread norm, and is meant to be understood primarily by those who are comfortable with this norm violation; and one appears innocent, and is meant to be understood primarily by those who would not want to see the norm being violated.[2]

Let's call dogwhistles that meet Saul's account—and others relevantly like it—standard dogwhistles. Saul's definition fits happily in the company of other accounts, though Saul is more comprehensive and perspicuous in separating out the different varieties of dogwhistle.[3] What in Saul's account is a norm violation is sometimes thought of as a dogwhistle's hidden message or non-transparent content. For example, Anne Quaranto introduces dogwhistles as "speech that seems ordinary but sends a hidden, often derogatory message to a subset of the audience."[4] Though Saul's account focuses chiefly on audience relativity, even Saul describes dogwhistles in terms of concealment—e.g., "Dogwhistles work by concealing their controversial content, either from all of the audience or from part of it."[5] All this is to say that Saul's account, as numerous others, defines dogwhistles as having a secondary message or effect not (intended to be) noticed by an unsympathetic outgroup.[6]

Yet Saul acknowledges that containment of the secondary message cannot hold in a savvy political climate: "we live in a complicated and messy world, and . . . these sorts of concealment are harder to contain than they used to be."[7] Saul notes that what she calls "broken" dogwhistles can be useful, even offering a degree of deniability. Drawing on Ian Haney López's analysis of increasingly detectable dogwhistles during the Trump era, Saul describes how speakers can use such dogwhistles to manipulate an electorate by pitting audiences against each other. As Haney López notes, "part of dog whistling today involves a *purposeful effort* to outrage engaged critics in order to stimulate charges of bigotry that the Right can then harness to present itself as a victim."[8] Carlos Santana likewise acknowledges dogwhistles whose secondary content is more widely understood, presenting evidence that the secondary meanings of some canonical dogwhistles (such as "inner city" and "illegal immigrant") are widely recognized by outgroups.[9] In order to account for the breakdown of concealment and manipulative uses of brazen dogwhistles, we need to rethink our conception of what a dogwhistle can be. Next, I'll briefly detail brazen dogwhistles' features, with the aim of better understanding their uses.

1.2 BRAZEN DOGWHISTLES

The audience of a dogwhistle can be divided into three groups: an *ingroup* likely to agree or be persuaded, an *outgroup* likely to disagree or be offended, and a *middle audience* not belonging to either of those groups.[10] In contrast with standard dogwhistles, brazen dogwhistles do not have a sympathetic ingroup as the primary audience for their norm violations. They are offered without an attempt at (or perhaps without regard for) concealment from the outgroup, and may be specifically targeted for understanding among the outgroup.

The possible targets for a brazen dogwhistle are numerous. A brazen dogwhistle can be aimed *primarily at the outgroup* as a kind of taunt or private joke.[11] One well-documented example is the OK hand gesture (achieved by touching one's thumb and index finger at the tips).[12] In 2017, an anonymous poster on 4chan suggested that readers "flood Twitter and other social media websites . . . claiming that the OK hand sign is a symbol of white supremacy."[13] The aim of the hoax was to convince those on the left that this otherwise innocuous gesture was a symbol of white power, and the gesture caught on, even being displayed by some marching toward the U.S. Capitol in the insurrection of January 6, 2021.[14] This dogwhistle is antagonistic not only—and perhaps not even primarily—towards the people about whom it encodes pejorative meaning, but rather towards the political outgroup meant to be angered by it. Its primary aim is to troll the outgroup, to get them worked up about something false and unserious, to exploit their commitment to calling out hate in order to expose its absurdity. It is a dogwhistle that was brazen from the start.

An understanding of a dogwhistle's secondary content can also be aimed *at two opposed groups*. In this vein, Saul notes that Trump's unconcealed dogwhistles were well understood by both his critics and the enthusiastically racist portions of his base.[15] More tepidly, a brazen dogwhistle can be aimed *primarily at the ingroup* as in a standard dogwhistle, but without regard for concealment from the outgroup. Saul's main example of "broken" dogwhistles seems to be of this kind.[16] The targets can also be much messier, or even absent altogether. Someone who knows that "illegal immigrants" is considered to be a racist dogwhistle may not entirely agree, nor care that some will take their use of the term as racist. There's something brazen and intentional in such usage, and it's a dogwhistle in the sense that matters to Saul,[17] but the secondary meaning *doesn't really seem targeted at anyone*. So much for a brazen dogwhistle's targets. Why might speakers take aim in this way?

The aims of brazen dogwhistles vary. A brazen dogwhistle can be a challenge to the outgroup: *just try to defy my*

statement. It can be a display of authority: *look what I can get away with*. It can be a test of authority: *let's see how far I can push before meaningfully being pushed back*. It can be an attempt to frustrate, to harm, or to "own" the outgroup for the enjoyment of the ingroup. A brazen dogwhistle thus can be used in what Tim Kenyon and Jennifer Saul call a *power move*. Kenyon and Saul describe one of Trump's power moves thus: "It displays the attitude: not only do I not need to tell you the truth; I don't even need to bother deceiving you."[18] With minimal changes, we find the same sort of move in a brazen dogwhistle: not only do I not need to adhere to this norm; I don't really even need to pretend to. As noted in §1.1, brazen dogwhistles can be used to manipulative effect by playing different audiences against each other. Speakers who use brazen dogwhistles to draw out accusations of racism from their opponents "seek out this dynamic" to unite the ingroup under the guise of victimhood.[19]

2. RETHINKING DOGWHISTLES

Brazen dogwhistles are something of an open secret, both excluded from standard accounts and also increasingly acknowledged. In this section, I'll begin my case for expanding the notion of dogwhistles to include brazen ones and describe how we might make room for them in Saul's account.

2.1 MOTIVATIONS FOR EXPANDING THE DEFINITION

Whether we want to consider brazen dogwhistles to be a kind of dogwhistle or a wholly separate speech act is an open question. The main reason for thinking of brazen dogwhistles as a species of dogwhistle is that brazen and standard dogwhistles do much the same thing in much the same way: both use nonexplicit speech to exploit differences in commitments among the audience. Here are some brief additional points in favor of including them.[20] First, brazen dogwhistles help make sense of the fair, if pedantic, question how we can openly discuss real-world dogwhistles while they remain dogwhistles. If concealment from the outgroup is deeply important to dogwhistling, then it is puzzling how dogwhistle terms can be known to us who oppose them. The incorporation of brazen dogwhistles dissolves this tension; the secondary elements of dogwhistles can be widely known. This categorization thus, second, makes the best sense of observations that dogwhistles' secondary meaning often *is* widely known. As Santana points out, the largely successful campaigns to make the public aware of the racism in terms like "illegal immigrant" are evidence that outgroup awareness of the dogwhistle's norm violation need not be a barrier to its continued use as a dogwhistle.[21] Third, there initially seems to be no determinate line between a standard and a brazen dogwhistle. It's unclear how widespread knowledge of the dogwhistle's secondary content must be for a dogwhistle no longer to count as standard. The lack of a clear threshold presents no real problem if standard and brazen dogwhistles are of a kind. Fourth, brazen dogwhistles vary from standard dogwhistles primarily in the number of special audiences their secondary message is aimed at. That difference may be small enough. Finally, in excluding brazen dogwhistles in our focus on standard dogwhistles, we not only miss the commonalities in their features; we do a disservice to the continuity of their political uses. Brazen dogwhistles can be used to pernicious political effect, shifting prevailing norms towards bigotry just as standard dogwhistles often do.

But how, an anonymous reviewer might ask, do we distinguish brazen dogwhistles from similar phenomena such as slurs and other epithets that likewise divide audiences? My answer is that some of these phenomena might indeed serve as dogwhistles in certain circumstances.[22] For example, I was a teenager before learning that shortening of "Japanese" to only its first syllable was a slur, and so any prior use of this term in my presence could have served as a dogwhistle. I would have understood only the reference to someone Japanese and not its negative valence. Generally speaking, it is the use of nonexplicit speech and the emphasis on different audiences that sets dogwhistles apart from similar phenomena; when these similar phenomena display those features in a certain context, they are aptly classified as dogwhistles in that context. When the use of racial epithets, etc., lacks these features, they are not being used as dogwhistles.

Despite all the reasons in favor of a unified account, I acknowledge that for different aims brazen dogwhistles may be more helpfully categorized differently. It is a benefit, not a drawback, that we can turn our attention to commonalities in our social practices in various ways, aptly treating the same speech acts as unified or disparate depending on our aims. Just as different maps can display the same area according to elevation, geological features, or government territories, so can we view the landscape of social practices with differing emphasis. Perhaps, at the outset, curiosity is enough. *Why are many of these brazen examples found in work on dogwhistles? What are the prospects for a unified account?* I propose that we find out.

2.2 AMENDING SAUL'S ACCOUNT

In order to accommodate brazen dogwhistles within a broadly Saul-type account, we need a definition that includes both illocutions. The main challenge is that Saul's primary audience approach doesn't neatly work for brazen dogwhistles. In her brief discussion on "broken" dogwhistles, Saul acknowledges that a dogwhistle can be used to manipulative effect even in the absence of a group who doesn't understand it.[23] Implausible deniability of the Elisabeth Camp variety—consisting not in a failure of mutual understanding but in a hesitation to publicly acknowledge what we may mutually understand—can accrue to brazen dogwhistles, enabling their manipulative effects.[24] If that's true, we cannot insist on there being any group whose lack of understanding is intended. So how do we retain the spirit of Saul's definition while recognizing that not all dogwhistles have a primary audience? I propose the following:

> DOGWHISTLE: a term or speech act with (at least) two plausible interpretations, such that one of these violates some widespread norm and one appears innocent, where the nonexplicit communication of the norm violation is meant to exploit different

> understandings or sympathies among the audience.[25]

I take this amendment to be congenial to Saul's account, given that Saul talks at length about how dogwhistles exploit divisions among the audience—for example, through hiding the norm violation from some while revealing it to others, or through pitting groups against each other in a way that allows the norm violator to be painted as a victim.[26] With this overarching definition, Saul's list can be relabeled as standard dogwhistles,[27] and brazen dogwhistles can be defined thus:

> Brazen Dogwhistle: a dogwhistle whose speaker either has no regard for concealing the nonexplicit norm violation from the outgroup or intends that outgroup members detect the nonexplicit norm violation

I have defined dogwhistles in terms of nonexplicit communication rather than deniability because, in contrast to figleaves in Saul's taxonomy, "dogwhistle" is not a success term: a speech act may be a dogwhistle and yet not achieve deniability in its context of use. (Perhaps the audience is savvier than the speaker calculated, etc.) Deniability is a kind of distance between what the speaker communicates and what the audience can confidently take them to communicate. I lack the space to articulate a full theory of deniability here, though see note 19 for a survey of extant accounts. Perhaps it is enough at the outset to say that brazen dogwhistles or their speakers have deniability with respect to an audience when the nonexplicitness of the communicative act plays a sufficient role in undermining the reasons that audience has for providing either private or public sanctions.[28,29] As we'll see in §3, I take deniability to be more of a social fact co-constructed between speaker and audience than an independently settled fact about what features a speech act has in a context. The audience can actively grant or withhold deniability, so deniability is not guaranteed.

A communicative act can be nonexplicit in at least two ways. First, it may be indirect speech—for example, when someone uses "urban" to smuggle in racial resentment to an otherwise innocuous speech.[30] Second, the act, though direct, may nonetheless be nonexplicit out of a kind of unclarity, such as when the context gives the speaker (or audience) cover for asserting that it never happened at all. For example, at the second inauguration of U.S. President Donald Trump, billionaire tech mogul Elon Musk gave a speech that ended in two Nazi salutes. There's nothing indirect about performing two Nazi salutes in the course of praising a fascist president, but people found a way to doubt, or pretend to doubt, that his gestures *were* Nazi salutes.[31] Where there was not indirect speech there was nonetheless nonexplicit, deniable speech.

With our new unified definition, a dogwhistle can be used to frustrate, assert power, and play groups against one another even when everyone can detect its norm violation—provided that the violation is not directly asserted, leaving room for deniability. We can still use the primary audience as a heuristic for understanding standard cases, but we have given up the idea that a primary target of understanding is essential to overt code dogwhistles. Thus, accommodating brazen dogwhistles not only accounts for the empirical evidence of their occurrence. It also helps us understand what's essential to dogwhistles more generally: the nonexplicit communication that often lends deniability, as well as the attention to group differences, are more theoretically central than who is targeted for understanding.

3. ASSERTIONS OF POWER AND AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION

With our concept of dogwhistles thus enlarged, we not only gain theoretical insights as to their central features. We also gain insights into the breadth of how dogwhistles can be used to assert power. This section explores two such lessons: how brazen dogwhistles can operate in more private settings (§3.1) and the crucial role of audience interpretation (§3.2). Both insights illuminate opportunities beyond Saul's proposals to undermine the use of dogwhistles for oppressive ends.

3.1 PRIVATE DOGWHISTLES AND POWER PLAYS

Dogwhistles are often examined as mass audience phenomena, but they needn't occur in the arena to be wielded to oppressive ends. Brazen dogwhistles can be used in more localized assertions of dominance—far from the power plays of national politics in scope, but not in spirit. To draw out these uses of brazen dogwhistles, consider an example of a visual dogwhistle.[32]

> Confederate Flag: A senator's office displays a small painting of a battle from the American Civil War, fought in that senator's home state. The scene depicts soldiers in a field, one of whom is flying the Confederate flag. A staffer notices the flag; she privately objects but fears to be seen as too sensitive. After some deliberation, she mentions her objections among colleagues, only to be met with some who mock her sensitivity and others who are not sure it's really racist and encourage her not to make a big deal about it.

In this case, the display of the Confederate flag has divided the staff much the way mass audience dogwhistles do. It has also caused discomfort for the staffer, making her feel powerless and unsure, quieting her, making her feel unwelcome—all without giving her the certainty of a more obvious act of racism.[33]

This dogwhistle exploits the speech act's *attributional ambiguity* as a power play. Often discussed in the context of microaggressions, an event has attributional ambiguity when it is unclear whether it was motivated by prejudice. Importantly, the awareness that an event might have been an act of prejudice is a burden in itself—and one with different effects from a more blatant act of bigotry.[34] Even if an outgroup audience member knows what the dogwhistle means, they cannot always be sure its meaning was intended, and they can't expect support in calling it out. The ambiguous nature of experiences like these can contribute to what Sandra Lee Bartky calls *mystification*: the

sense that one's troubles are internal to oneself rather than the result of systemic oppression.[35] These local assertions of power can thus aim dogwhistles just so. They're metaphorically loud enough to hear but muffled enough to need elucidation. They're free for all to observe but may be costly to acknowledge. Dogwhistles that are more or less standard (where concealment has weakened somewhat) can have these effects as well, but we learn from brazen dogwhistles that these effects can be weaponized, narrowly targeted, and purposely perpetrated. A brazen dogwhistle can be used to subordinate, to quiet, to divide a person even within themselves as they grapple with the import of the coded message and the prudence of exposing it.

It's important to note this more private use of dogwhistles, because when someone exerts power over those in our local environment, we may be in a distinctive position to resist.[36] Even if not to resist outwardly, with greater understanding we are in a better position quell our internal uncertainty, diffusing the sense that we might be overreacting or overly sensitive. When these illocutions are acknowledged, those affected by them are to some extent vindicated, and they can be better supported in their attempts to "steady the mind" in the wake of their encounter with this kind of conversational manipulation.[37] I will argue next that the audience at large plays an active role in offering or withholding this kind of support.

3.2 THE AUDIENCE AS ACTIVE INTERPRETER

In this section, I discuss how brazen dogwhistles illuminate the active role of the audience in strengthening or diminishing a dogwhistle's power. The staffer's colleagues in Confederate Flag play an important role in determining the effects of the dogwhistle. They are in a unique position to downplay the importance of the flag, deny its racism, dismiss the worries about what it communicates, or to respond more supportively and proactively.

In standard cases, the broad aim of a mass audience dogwhistle obscures the active role of audience interpretation. The aim of a dogwhistle often lies somewhere between targeted and stochastic, making it appear either that the speaker aims at being fully understood by a well-defined demographic or else that their hidden message falls only on the ears of a sympathetic ingroup. Yet, as brazen dogwhistles show, the audience are not passive observers. A speaker may aim at an audience, but to an extent the audience also self-selects—not only by antecedently being ill- or favorably disposed to identify, accept, or reject the norm violation, but also by determining in the moment the extent to which they acknowledge it. As Erving Goffman notes, "Communications belong to a less punitive scheme than do facts, for communications can be by-passed, withdrawn from, disbelieved, conveniently misunderstood, and tactfully conveyed."[38] In a sense, a dogwhistle can be a kind of invitation to decide which audience one is in.[39] *He didn't mean it like that* (even in thought) can be as much an extension of grace or a face-saving offer as it is an assessment of the speaker's intent.

The stakes of the interpretations are in some cases bound up with the fact that deniability, or something quite like it, extends to the audience as well, covering not only the speaker for having issued the message but also the audience for having accepted it—or having accepted the speaker in spite of it. Thus the audience is not only active in their interpretation; there's no pretense of their being a neutral party. I'm not suggesting that the audience is always aware of their interpretation as a decision, but rather that accepting deniability is in some sense the easy way out. It requires no confrontation with the possibility that one may be allied with racist causes or politicians. It allows one to keep one's options open.

Brazen dogwhistles such as Confederate Flag expose the extent to which an audience member's interpretation is not a matter of passively detecting or not detecting the secret code. In cases where the norm violation is more widely apparent, it's more apparent that the audience has a choice in how to respond. As deniability weakens with lack of concealment, accepting it becomes more noticeably an action that members of the audience participate in and bear responsibility for. In some cases this action may be a conscious choice to give a speaker the benefit of the doubt, or it may occur behind some self-deception or negligence, or as a result of habit. This active role plausibly occurs in standard dogwhistles as well. *What will I do with the hint of racism? With whom will I ally myself? What am I willing to overlook, and at what cost?* These questions are not entirely downstream of the hearer's interpretation of the speech act; they are bound up in which interpretation the audience lands on in the first place.[40]

This lesson suggests that in order to fight the pernicious influence of dogwhistles we need not only Saul's proposed inoculation, pre-educating people about dogwhistles' meanings.[41] We also need to interrogate the part of us that's willing to accept—even on another's behalf—the convenient cover of deniability. This point is not primarily about outward resistance.[42] Rather, it is an inward act: having the integrity not to overlook the possibility of wrongdoing, even within yourself.

Here we run afoul of what we might call the *principle of the benefit of the doubt*. Similar to its rational cousin (the principle of charity), this principle says to interpret another's behavior in the best light, not attributing malice (e.g., racism) where a less damning interpretation is possible. If the principle of the benefit of the doubt is liberally applied, we give a pass to those who use deniability to stir up bigotry.[43] I contend that when the intent to dogwhistle is saliently plausible, we should not offer the benefit of the doubt but attend to the possibility of a hateful interpretation. The responsibility of the audience for their interpretation consists partly in the responsibility to pay just attention. With apologies to Iris Murdoch, "As moral agents we have to try to see justly, to overcome prejudice, to avoid temptation, to control and curb imagination, to direct reflection."[44] By relinquishing the benefit of the doubt—that is, by attending to the presence of a secondary meaning, the possibility that it was intended, and its oppressive effects—we help stem the progression of increasingly brazen hate speech in the public sphere. If we are to counter extremism, our own minds must be sites of active resistance, even in acts such as interpretation that we may not always experience as deliberate. Thus, we

need not only to educate people about the dogwhistles they may encounter, but also to embolden them to take a stand within themselves—to consider not only the benefit of the doubt but also its cost.

4. CONCLUSION: THE SHAPE SORTER IS A LIE

I have argued (I think, congenially to Saul) that brazen dogwhistles deserve to be categorized as dogwhistles. This argument calls to mind a toy called the shape sorter. The shape sorter is a container with exterior holes—a triangle hole for the triangle block, a square hole for the square block. The child is meant to fit each block through the corresponding hole. But any parent will tell you: the shape sorter is a lie. Open the lid, and you'll find that all the carefully distinguished blocks are touching, intermixed, not sorted in the least. We would do well to accept that our linguistic sorting—all the concepts we carve out to fit our practices—may end us in a similar place. At the end of the day, we want to be able to call out the world for what it is and to change it when we must. From such a perspective, we needn't confine our conception of dogwhistles to those speech acts that preserve the metaphor or fit tidily in standard definitions, aiming at a purist neutrality. As Nikki Ernst says,

> Wherever we recognize neutrality as an ideal that inhibits our just response to certain discursive phenomena, our job as non-ideal philosophers of language must include inviting others to see those phenomena aright—to put us in touch with their political significance.[45]

Not only can we not expect the neat separation of linguistic phenomena; our choices to include or to exclude must be sensitive to the oppressive uses of language. It would be no virtue to exclude brazen dogwhistles on purist grounds when by grouping them together we can better illuminate their oppressive uses and therefore the sites apt for resistance.[46]

Thus the political significance of dogwhistles that is central to Saul's work leads us beyond Saul's tidy definition. Brazen dogwhistles are well categorized as dogwhistles not because they neatly preserve our initial distinctions but because they tell us something important about the shape of our practices. The politician's half-veiled speech and the pundit's enthusiastic parroting are of a kind with smaller acts of racism. The same linguistic practice that exploits divisions in an electorate can be used to exploit divisions within smaller groups and even individuals. We should not allow the fact that some of these instances work out on a public stage, and some private—some veiled, some revealed—to obscure their common thread. And we should not overlook the role our interpretation plays in hindering or abetting their use.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to Nikki Ernst, Audrey Yap, Simon Evnine, Kyle Adams, A.G. Holdier, Devin Morse, Sally McConnell-Ginnet, Scott Weirich, and an anonymous reviewer for their thoughtful feedback on various versions of this paper.

NOTES

1. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 67. Except where otherwise specified, all mentions of Saul refer to *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*.
2. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 51. Saul's account distinguishes four kinds of dogwhistles. For simplicity, I confine my discussion to the one best suited for adapting in light of "broken" dogwhistles: intentional overt code dogwhistles.
3. Justin Khoo, "Code Words in Political Discourse," and Carlos Santana, "What's Wrong with Dogwhistles," likewise focus on dogwhistles as norm-violating. (Khoo uses the term "code-words" with scare quotes, since he challenges the idea that these expressions encode a message.) Nor is Saul distinctive in conceiving of overt code dogwhistles as primarily aimed at a sympathetic audience. Robert Henderson and Elin McCready likewise describe dogwhistles as "terms that send one message to an outgroup while at the same time sending a second (often taboo, controversial, or inflammatory) message to an ingroup" (Henderson and McCready, "How Dogwhistles Work," 231). I fear that the inclusion of a norm violation as definitive of a dogwhistle is too restrictive. Dogwhistles can be used to signal group membership in a way that isn't obviously norm-violating—e.g., Saul's own example of George W. Bush's "wonder-working power" as a nod to fundamentalist Christians. (Saul, "Dogwhistles, Political Manipulation, and Philosophy of Language," 362.) In what follows, I suppress this qualm.
4. Quaranto, "Dog Whistles, Covertly Coded Speech, and the Practices that Enable Them," 329.
5. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 180.
6. Even after specifying that deniability covers for a norm violation, there is some difficulty referring to the deniable element without specifying how dogwhistles work. Is what is encoded a message—say, a proposition added surreptitiously to the common ground, as in Jason Stanley, *How Propaganda Works*? Is it a conversational exercitive imploring the audience to take on some cognitive or affective attitude, as Saul suggests in "Dogwhistles, Political Manipulation, and Philosophy of Language"? Perhaps dogwhistles license an inference as in Khoo, "Code Words in Political Discourse," or help the audience recover the speaker's persona as in Henderson and McCready, "Dogwhistles and the At-Issue/Non-at-Issue Distinction." In order to remain as broad as possible, I don't take a stand on the semantics and pragmatics of dogwhistles here. I will write in terms of the *secondary* or *deniable message*, *content*, or *effect* (broadly, what the dogwhistle says or does to or for special audiences) or of the *norm violation*, knowing that different accounts may necessitate different terms. For a helpful overview of options, see Henderson and McCready, "How Dogwhistles Work."
7. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 67. See Saul's "inner city" example, which was initially a covert effect dogwhistle, 67–69.
8. Haney Lopez, *Merge Left: Fusing Race and Class, Winning Elections, and Saving America*, 20, italics mine.
9. Santana, "What's Wrong with Dogwhistles."
10. We will find later that the picture is more complicated. See §3.2.
11. For example, Haney López, *Merge Left*, 31, alleges that "Trump especially innovated by shifting racial appeals decisively into the audible range—but for his critics, not for his base."
12. For further discussion, see Ray Drainville and Jennifer Saul, "Visual and Linguistic Dogwhistles," and Nikki Ernst, "A Meme for Excuses."
13. Anti-Defamation League, "How the 'OK' Symbol Became a Popular Trolling Gesture."
14. Khavin et al., "Day of Rage: How Trump Supporters Took the U.S. Capitol." Ironically but not unpredictably, the gesture did come to have this secondary meaning as people posted OK symbols widely on social media. The Anti-Defamation League added the OK symbol to its list of hate symbols. After all, jokingly using a symbol one expects to be received as a symbol of white supremacy is still an act of white supremacy—no less for being a rather stupid one.
15. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 185.

16. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves,* 68–69.

17. See Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 193, for the emphasis on a dogwhistle's effects rather than the intention of the speaker.

18. Kenyon and Saul, "Bald-Faced Bullshit and Authoritarian Political Speech: Making Sense of Johnson and Trump," 186. This example is a bald-faced lie, which is a form of bald-faced bullshit. See Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves,* 118.

19. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 185. Note that on some accounts of deniability, the speaker of a brazen dogwhistle lacks deniability proper. For example, brazen dogwhistles are incompatible with the notion of deniability found in Emanuel Viebahn, "Lying with Presuppositions," because any denials they result in are not sincere denials. Neither do they meet the requirements for Alexander Dinges and Julia Zakkou's account in "On Deniability," fitting instead with their alternative notion of untouchability. In standard cases, the hiddenness or indirectness of the secondary meaning provides the necessary cover, which is lacking in a brazen dogwhistle; but there may be other sources of deniability. For example, Santana treats deniability as lack of sanctions (Santana, "What's Wrong with Dogwhistles"). Brazen dogwhistles also meet Andrew Peet's standards as long as there is some small chance that the secondary meaning was unintended in this particular instance (Peet, "The Puzzle of Plausible Deniability").

20. A fuller treatment of that question would involve considering alternatives in detail, which I lack the space to do here, but note that the case for their importance will continue into §3.

21. Santana, "What's Wrong with Dogwhistles."

22. In fact, Santana, "What's Wrong with Dogwhistles," claims that at least some dogwhistles are slurs.

23. Now we are really putting the 'overt' in 'overt code'. See Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 67 and 184.

24. Camp notes that "deniability is possible even when communication succeeds, so that all parties involved know that the speaker did mean what they deny having meant." Camp, "Just Saying, Just Kidding: Liability for Accountability-Avoiding Speech in Ordinary Conversation, Politics and Law," 228.

25. This proposal echoes Santana's approach in "What's Wrong with Dogwhistles." In order to accommodate dogwhistles that lack concealment, Santana focuses on deniability rather than primary audience. He does, however, seem to think that a dogwhistle that is flaunted is for that reason less dogwhistly. See page 397.

26. Recall that this definition is aimed at Saul's overt code category of dogwhistles. The emphasis on exploiting differences in audience understandings/commitments may not work well for covert dogwhistles, which rather exploit differences *within* each member of the audience—e.g., consciously communicating an innocuous meaning to someone while covertly calling up that same person's resentful attitudes.

27. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves,* 51.

28. By private sanctions, I have in mind mental attitudes (such as resentment) or beliefs (such as the belief that the speaker is racist). By public sanctions, I have in mind counterspeech, shunning, withholding one's vote, and the like.

29. Sometimes deniability is enacted through a kind of theater, where pundits on one side call out a statement as racist and those on the other side deny it. The denials and the attempts to sanction are both simply a part of the show. Perhaps everyone knows the statement was actually racist, but equally well everyone knows how the show ends: nothing is agreed on, no one is moved from their initial position, the two sides remain entrenched. Brazen dogwhistles are well-suited to such an environment, because their secondary meaning is neither hidden nor, by the ingroup, publicly acknowledged.

30. For a lengthy discussion of indirect speech, and especially the variety known as insinuation, see Camp, "Insinuation, Common Ground, and the Conversational Record."

31. See, e.g., Condon, "Musk's Straight-Arm Gesture Embraced by Right-Wing Extremists Regardless of What He Meant."

32. For more on visual dogwhistles, see Drainville and Saul, "Visual and Linguistic Dogwhistles."

33. The Confederate flag's status as a racist symbol is, for many of us, quite clear. Recall, however, that a brazen dogwhistle needn't have its secondary content concealed from the outgroup; rather, the dogwhistle exploits the outgroup's awareness of the secondary content while maintaining some degree of deniability, owing to the distance between what is said and what is communicated. Deniability in a visual case can also occur when it is unclear to the audience whether or not the image is endorsed. In contrast to an ad, where communication of a perspective is intentional, it may be less clear whether hanging a painting in one's office constitutes a speech act of assertion at all. The re-presentation of a meaningful utterance or symbol does not automatically carry through the same force as its ancestor. See Quill Kukla's discussion of the semantics and pragmatics of retweeting in "The Pragmatics of Technologically Mediated Online Speech: 'Don't @ Me!'" and Nikki Ernst's discussion of the deniability that accrues to meme sharing in "A Meme for Excuses." Note also that Santana mentions the Confederate flag offhand as an example of a visual dogwhistle (Santana, "What's Wrong with Dogwhistles," 400n9).

34. See Jennifer Wang, et al., "When the Seemingly Innocuous 'Stings': Racial Microaggressions and Their Emotional Consequences," for a study on microaggressions and attributional ambiguity.

35. Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*. Another wrongful effect could consist in the epistemic labor required to understand and explain why the norm violation has occurred. Thus Audre Lorde: "Whenever the need for some pretense of communication arises, those who profit from our oppression call upon us to share our knowledge with them. In other words, it is the responsibility of the oppressed to teach the oppressors their mistakes." Lorde, *Sister Outsider,* 114.

36. The moral imperative to resist oppression is always affected by a multiplicity of factors. I am not suggesting that risks to oneself or others are irrelevant.

37. Here I reference Miranda Fricker's discussion of this phrase from Bernard Williams. Fricker contends that without the ability to participate in mutually trustful conversations, we cannot form our beliefs—and therefore our identity—in a stable ("steady") way. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing,* chapter 2.

38. Goffman, "On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction," 12.

39. Thanks to A.G. Holdier for this point.

40. Even silence as a response to a racist dogwhistle can be a kind of action. For more on how silence amounts to accommodation of speech, see Mary Kate McGowan, "Oppressive Speech" and *Just Words: On Speech and Hidden Harm"*; Ishani Maitra, "Subordinating Speech"; and Rae Langton, "Blocking as Counter-Speech." For opposing considerations, see Cousens, "Solving the Authority Problem: Why We Won't Debate You, Bro." For a more dogwhistle-specific injunction, consider how the claim that at least some dogwhistles are slurs (Santana, "What's Wrong with Dogwhistles") intersects with the claim that one's silence in the wake of a slur can itself constitute a slur (A.G. Holdier, "Slurring Silences").

41. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 190–91.

42. Saul explains how ardent resistance against dogwhistles is likely to backfire. See Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves,* 184–86.

43. Returning to Musk's Nazi salutes from 2.2, we can observe this phenomenon play out in a statement by the Anti-Defense League, ostensibly a civil rights organization. Referring to Musk's actions (in the singular) as "an awkward gesture," the ADL said, "In this moment, all sides should give one another a bit of grace, perhaps even the benefit of the doubt" (@ADL 2025).

44. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 39. I apologize because Murdoch's just and loving attention decidedly *extends* the benefit of the doubt. Pace Murdoch, I am arguing that an account of moral attention that considers issues of justice may need to restrict this benefit; and, though I lack the space here to argue for this conclusion, may I submit that doing so is not in fact contrary to acting in love. See Barrett Emerick, "Love and Resistance."

45. Ernst, "The Availability of the Non-Ideal," 100.

46. To be clear, I do not take Saul to be ruling out the possibility of brazen dogwhistles intentionally, much less on purist grounds—

nor does Saul need reminding of dogwhistles' political significance! This reminder is aimed at a style of philosophy of language that, unlike Saul, prioritizes what appears to be the neutral application of categories over the realities of our unjust world.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anti-Defamation League. "How the 'OK' Symbol Became a Popular Trolling Gesture." May 1, 2017. https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/how-ok-symbol-became-popular-trolling-gesture.

Anti-Defamation League (@ADL). "This is a delicate moment. It's a new day and yet so many are on edge." X. January 20, 2025. https://x.com/ADL/status/1881474892022919403.

Bartky, Sandra Lee. *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*. Routledge, 1990.

Camp, Elisabeth. "Insinuation, Common Ground, and the Conversational Record." In *New Work on Speech Acts*, edited by Daniel Fogal, Daniel W. Harris, and Matt Moss. Oxford University Press, 2018.

———. "Just Saying, Just Kidding: Liability for Accountability-Avoiding Speech in Ordinary Conversation, Politics and Law." In *From Lying to Perjury: Linguistic and Legal Perspectives on Lies and Other Falsehoods*, edited by Laurence R. Horn. De Gruyter Mouton, 2022.

Condon, Bernard. "Musk's Straight-Arm Gesture Embraced by Right-wing Extremists Regardless of What He Meant." Associated Press. January 21, 2025. https://apnews.com/article/musk-gesture-salute-antisemitism-0070dae53c7a73397b104ae645877535.

Cousens, Chris. "Solving the Authority Problem: Why We Won't Debate You, Bro." *Topoi* 42 (2023): 469–80.

Dinges, Alexander, and Julia Zakkou. "On Deniability." *Mind* 132, no. 526 (2023): 372–401.

Drainville, Ray, and Jennifer Saul. "Visual and Linguistic Dogwhistles." In *Oxford Handbook of Applied Philosophy of Language*, edited by Luvell Anderson and Ernie Lepore. Oxford University Press, 2024.

Emerick, Barrett. "Love and Resistance: Moral Solidarity in the Face of Perceptual Failure." *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (2016): 1–21.

Ernst, Nikki. "The Availability of the Non-Ideal." *Wittgenstein-Studien* 15, no. 1 (2024): 87–105.

———. "A Meme for Excuses." In *Conversations Online*, edited by Patrick Connolly, Sandy Goldberg, and Jennifer Saul. Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

Fricker, Miranda. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford University Press, 2007.

Goffman, Erving. "On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction." *Reflections* 4, no. 3 (1967): 7–13.

Haney López, Ian. *Merge Left: Fusing Race and Class, Winning Elections, and Saving America*. The New Press, 2019.

Henderson, Robin, and Elin McCready. "How Dogwhistles Work." In *New Frontiers in Artificial Intelligence: Lecture Notes in Computer Science, Revised Selected Papers 9*, edited by Sachiyo Arai, Kazuhiro Kojima, Koji Mineshima, Daisuke Bekki, Ken Satoh, and Yuiko Ohta. Springer International Publishing, 2018.

———. "Dogwhistles and the At-Issue/Non-at-Issue Distinction." In *Secondary Content: The Linguistics of Side Issues*, edited by Gutzmann, Daniel, and Katharina Turgay. Brill, 2019.

Holdier, A.G. "Slurring Silences." *Phenomenology and Philosophical Research* (2024). https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.13114.

Kenyon, Tim, and Jennifer Saul. "Bald-Faced Bullshit and Authoritarian Political Speech: Making Sense of Johnson and Trump." In *From Lying to Perjury: Linguistic and Legal Perspectives on Lies and Other Falsehoods*, edited by Laurence R. Horn. De Gruyter Mouton, 2022.

Khavin, Dmitrity, Haley Willis, et al. "Day of Rage: How Trump Supporters Took the U.S. Capitol." *New York Times*. June 30, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/politics/100000007606996/capitol-riot-trump-supporters.html.

Khoo, Justin. "Code Words in Political Discourse." *Philosophical Topics* 45, no. 2 (2017): 33–64.

Kukla, Quill. "The Pragmatics of Technologically Mediated Online Speech: 'Don't @ Me!'" In *Oxford Handbook of Applied Philosophy of Language*, edited by Luvell Anderson and Ernie Lepore. Oxford University Press, 2024.

Langton, Rae. "Blocking as Counter-Speech." In *New Work on Speech Acts*, edited by Daniel Fogal, Daniel W. Harris, and Matt Moss. Oxford University Press, 2018.

Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press, 2012 (original work 1984).

Maitra, Ishani. "Subordinating Speech." In *Speech and Harm: Controversies Over Free Speech*, edited by Ishani Maitra and Mary Kate McGowan. Oxford University Press, 2012.

McGowan, Mary Kate. "Oppressive Speech." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 87, no. 3 (2009): 389–407.

McGowan, Mary Kate. *Just Words: On Speech and Hidden Harm*. Oxford University Press, 2019.

Murdoch, Iris. *The Sovereignty of Good*. Routledge, 1971.

Peet, Andrew. "The Puzzle of Plausible Deniability." *Synthese* 203, no. 5 (2024): 156.

Quaranto, Anne. "Dog Whistles, Covertly Coded Speech, and the Practices that Enable Them." *Synthese* 200, no. 4 (2022): 1–34.

Santana, Carlos. "What's Wrong with Dogwhistles." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 53 (2022): 387–403.

Saul, Jennifer Mather. "Dogwhistles, Political Manipulation, and Philosophy of Language." In *New Work on Speech Acts*, edited by Daniel Fogal, Daniel W. Harris, and Matt Moss. Oxford University Press, 2018.

———. *Dogwhistles and Figleaves: How Manipulative Language Spreads Racism and Falsehood*. Oxford University Press, 2024.

Stanley, Jason. *How Propaganda Works*. Princeton University Press, 2015.

Viebahn, Emanuel. "Lying with Presuppositions." *Noûs* 54, no. 3 (2020): 731–751.

Wang, Jennifer, Janxin Leu, and Yuichi Shoda. "When the Seemingly Innocuous 'Stings': Racial Microaggressions and Their Emotional Consequences." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 37, no. 12 (2011): 1666–78.

On Denial and Deniability in Jennifer Saul's Dogwhistles and Figleaves

Samia Hesni

DARTMOUTH COLLEGE

1. INTRODUCTION

In her important new book, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves: How Manipulative Language Spreads Racism and Falsehood*, Jennifer Saul gives theories of racist speech in politics in the English-speaking countries (focusing on the United States and the United Kingdom), with emphases on how manipulative speech covers up lies in political discourse. A dogwhistle is a term that communicates something racist (in theory, a dogwhistle could be about something else, but Saul focuses specifically on racist discourse in this book) under the guise of another term. A figleaf covers up racist speech by pairing it with something—usually a disavowal or an excuse—so as to convince or reassure the hearer that the bit of speech was not racist. Dogwhistles and figleaves are different, although they usually work in tandem. And they both involve *deniability*: they allow the speaker to deny that they communicated something racist, and they allow the speaker to deny that they intended to communicate something racist, in a number of ways. Some of these include pointing to the literal meaning of what was said in the dogwhistle case, and by emphasizing the figleaf

(it was a joke, or a second-person report). Deniability is speaker-side: the speaker can say they didn't mean it; the figleaf or dogwhistle gives the speaker a kind of plausible (or sometimes implausible) deniability. As I was reading the book, I kept finding myself thinking about the role of denial on the *audience* or hearer side. So in this piece, I will suggest that there's an additional feature at work in what makes audiences accept or come to be convinced by figleaves: denial, understood as a psychological phenomenon that involves ignoring, dismissing, or avoiding the truth of what one is confronted with. To avoid ambiguity and confusion, for the rest of this paper, when I say *denial*, I mean the psychological, audience-side phenomenon as described in the previous sentence (and not the linguistic practice of deniability, which I will call deniability).

This essay will go as follows. I will give a very brief overview of Saul's argument, focusing specifically on figleaves. This is because I think denial plays a larger role in a hearer accepting figleaves than dogwhistles. In section 2, I will briefly motivate how denial might fit into Saul's view, and draw on some psychological and philosophical accounts of denial to get into the specifics of how denial works in general, and how it could work particularly in the case of racist figleaves. I will also distinguish denial from three neighboring concepts which also play roles in the acceptance of figleaves: self-deception, pretense, and hope. I will consider how denial might play a role in the acceptance of figleaves, by way of various psychological and emotional strategies or motivations: (1) person x is not that bad, (2) comfort, reassurance, or wanting not to be implicated or blameless, and (3) emotional resolution. (1) is the hearer wanting to think well of the speaker, (2) is the hearer wanting to feel better about herself, and (3) is the hearer wanting to feel better in general. I will end by arguing that incorporating denial into a theory of figleaves might better allow us to account for the data that actually quite a large swathe of the population is vulnerable to being convinced by a figleaf, and that, as a result, figleaves might be even more politically dangerous than Saul says they are.

I hope that all these points are friendly explorations that accept and build from the fundamental observations in Saul's view: that racist figleaves can and do convince many well-meaning, self-aware hearers. Saul's important work draws our attention to figleaves, an underexplored and deeply important phenomenon, and in this piece I want to suggest that they are even more ubiquitous, manipulative, and effective than we might think. One question I leave open is whether figleaves also enable and encourage psychological *denial*, or whether being in denial leaves one more open to being convinced by a figleaf. My suspicion is that it's a bit of both, and that they play into each other.

A racial figleaf, for Saul, is "an utterance that provides cover for another utterance that—without the figleaf—would be recognized as racist."[1] Two important mental concepts or commitments come into play for Saul when it comes to the workings of figleaves (these are relevant for dogwhistles too, but I will focus on their role in accepting figleaves): first, the hearer holds some thin norm of racial equality, and, second, is committed to a flawed or naive view of racism such as the White Folk Theory of Racism. The norm of racial equality, very simply put, says something like "don't be racist."[2] The White Folk Theory of Racism holds, following Hill (2008) and Bonilla-Silva (2002), that race is a matter of biology, and to be racist is to believe in the biological inferiority of one race with respect to another (in Hill's case and for Saul's purposes, the inferiority of people of color to white people).[3] Many people who accept figleaves—that is, people who accept the cover of the figleaf and do not recognize the covered-up racist utterance as a racist utterance—fall into the category of people who (a) accept the norm of racial equality and (b) accept the White Folk Theory of Racism. These are the people Saul is most interested in. She writes: "the intended audience is people who are moveable and persuaded by this sort of utterance. And because the White Folk Theory of Racism is widely held, there will be many such people."[4] In discussing who is reassured by racial figleaves, she writes: "some see the racism very clearly and are extremely happy with it. Others see the racism very clearly and are horrified. But there is a group in the middle, who can be persuaded either that there is no racism here or that it's not such a bad instance of racism that they need to worry about it. This middle group is the group that the figleaves are for."[5] This is not an analysis of everyone who accepts a figleaf—Saul gives some other categories, such as people who reject the norm of racial equality—but is meant to capture those who are in the middle: who in principle would not tolerate racist speech from a politician, but are still, interestingly, swayable by figleaves. So I will work within those confines too.

In the next section, I want to suggest that, among people who are in this middle group that Saul identifies—who can be persuaded that the racism is either not present or not so bad—only (a) the norm of racial equality is necessary. That is, a hearer need not also subscribe to (b) a flawed theory of racism—one of two conditions that Saul lists as necessary for figleaf acceptance—to be convinced by a figleaf. A hearer can have a fully functional, nuanced, appropriate theory of racism, and be convinced by a figleaf, by being in denial. Or so I will argue. And I think the bar for being in denial is not much lower than the bar for accepting a flawed theory of racism, which could help us understand why figleaves are more pervasive than we might think if they are only dependent on accepting (a) and (b). And I hope that this is in keeping with Saul's point. To clarify: I think that Saul is right that (a) and (b) together facilitate one's being convinced by a figleaf. I just want to expand and suggest that there are cases where (a) alone suffices, pared with a healthy and achievable dose of denial (by this I mean that: it's very easy, understandable, and arguably consistent with rationality to be in denial). So let me explain what I mean by this.

2. FIGLEAVES AND DENIAL

One way to accept a figleaf, as Saul says, is just to believe that only *people* are racist: and not their utterances. Another way, I will argue here, is to reject the flawed White Folk Theory of Racism—for example, by believing that utterances can be racist too—but to nevertheless be convinced by often implausible figleaves because of being in the psychological state of denial.

Recall that on Saul's account of figleaves, a hearer needs to accept (a) the norm of racial equality and (b) something like the White Folk Theory of Racism in order to accept a figleaf. What this leaves open is that anyone who does not accept (a) and (b) won't be easily convinced by a figleaf (at least, not in a way that is uniquely different from someone who falls for a bad joke, or is gullible, or simply fails to understand or grasp something). What I want to motivate here is that there is a neighboring but distinct phenomenon that also helps people become convinced by figleaves: that of denial. Here, cursorily, is how I'm thinking denial could work in an audience: H hears a politician utter S: where S contains blatantly racist claims. H thinks something like: *I don't want to be in a world where S is being uttered sincerely*. Or, *those things are too heinous, horrific*, etc., to be believed. Perhaps H thinks that the politician had something else in mind, or meant to communicate some nearby proposition, or misspoke, or was joking.[6] The hearer has some motivated reason to disbelieve *that* the utterance was racist. This is what I mean by denial.

In more detail: I think that one can not hold the White Folk Theory of Racism (WFT) and *still* be susceptible to figleaves, in the way that Saul is interested in. To put it in stronger terms: one can have a perfectly acceptable, coherent, complex view of what racism is and still be the kind of person who can be convinced by a figleaf. The upshot of this is that many more people will fall into the category of people who are basically unwilling to accept racism (people who hold the norm of racial equality), but susceptible to a figleaf anyway. This makes the "danger of figleaves"[7] even more dangerous because, as I will argue, it means that many of us are susceptible to them. Let me see if I can make this plausible. One consequence of the WFT is that only people are racist, not utterances. So let's suppose someone rejects the WFT but maintains the norm of racial equality, and believes that utterances can be racist. I think that in cases of denial—where someone *really does not want to believe* that a given utterance is racist—a figleaf can cover up the racist utterance. If I'm right, this leaves open the possibility that a figleaf can target someone who just holds the norm of racial equality, without also holding WFT. So, instead of two necessary conditions—one about ideological/political commitments, and one about mental states or beliefs about racism—a person only needs to hold one in order to accept a figleaf. This opens up the door for many more people to be convinced by figleaves than we might have thought, given Saul's view.

Before going deeper into the philosophy of the psychological phenomenon of denial, I will say a few words about what denial is not. It will be especially important to disambiguate denial from the linguistic phenomenon of deniability, since the latter is often also couched in terms of denial. Denial is not deniability, although both involve denial. The psychological phenomenon of denial is distinct from the linguistic practice of deniability. Denying a statement—in the linguistic sense of deniability—is to communicate somehow that one did not say what one said. Denial as a linguistic phenomena is similar to other speech acts, like annulment, retraction, and amendment.[8] "Racism denial," in Saul's sense, is also linguistic: "I'm not a racist" is the linguistic denial of the statement that the speaker is a racist.[9]

Denial is also not a delusion. Delusions, according to Lisa Bortolotti (2014), are irrational beliefs that are implausible, unresponsive to evidence, do not accurately represent reality, and are not always consistently reflected in behavior. Denial often involves irrational beliefs that are also quite plausible. And the plausibility of some beliefs involved in denial, I will argue, is only reinforced and encouraged by the use of figleaves.

I follow Hannah Pickard in characterizing denial as "a failure to believe the truth of a proposition because doing so would cause psychological pain and distress, and despite evidence in its favor that would ordinarily suffice for its acceptance."[10] Pickard gives this characterization in the context of a discussion of denial in addiction, where "ordinarily" invokes a partial observer test: what someone who wouldn't experience pain and distress at *p* or prefer *p* to be false, would accept as true, or what the agent in denial would accept if they weren't in denial (or what they would accept if the proposition would not cause them pain and distress). Pickard's analysis works nicely for figleaves and political beliefs (including beliefs about political figures) too. Take a proposition of the sort that Saul argues can be covered up by a figleaf: *the political figure I support is racist*. Denial, in the sense of failure to believe this proposition, could be a matter of degree (for example, believing that the political figure is a little bit racist but not *that* racist), outright conflict (believing that the political figure is *not* racist), or skepticism (suspending belief about whether or not the political figure is racist).

I'm inclined to believe that most cases of denial-induced figleaves work by way of skepticism. They allow the hearer to suspend their belief (or disbelief), because the hearer is entertaining two things at once, both in conflict with each other: the racist utterance and the figleaf.[11] I also think that the skepticism version of denial is the most consistent with what Saul says about being convinced by a figleaf in the context of hearing a racist utterance by a politician: "the figleaf gives them just enough of an excuse to think that they can't be quite sure what that racist comment was really about. With this in hand, they can vote for the politician."[12]

Pickard also discusses whether or not individuals must be self-aware or self-conscious about being in denial, and whether the failure to believe is a conscious psychological process or not. I think that when it comes to figleaves, the central cases are those where the hearer is *not* aware of being in denial, is aware of their rejection of the proposition that is being covered up by the figleaf. That is, the failure to believe the proposition that is being covered up by the figleaf is self-conscious.

Denial does involve two other features that Bortolotti attributes to delusion: a failure to accurately represent reality, and an unresponsiveness to evidence. But the second part is complicated. Because figleaves can be a kind of misleading evidence, if we think misleading evidence is evidence, then people in denial who accept figleaves are, in some sense, responding to evidence. So I will say that denial

often involves an unresponsiveness to non-misleading evidence. Denial, then, combining insights from both Pickard and Bortolotti, involves a failure to accept the truth or reality of what one is confronted with, and would otherwise accept were it not to cause psychological pain and distress.

3. DENIAL AND NEARBY PHENOMENA

Denial often contains elements of self-deception, pretense, and hope, but is a phenomenon distinct from those three elements.[13] Still, it will be helpful to see how those elements contribute to different kinds of denial when it comes to being convinced by figleaves. Pickard (2016) describes denial as "a form of motivated belief or self-deception."[14] So, how might denial play a role in accepting figleaves? I'll outline three mechanisms below. One might accept a figleaf through self-deception. One might engage in a form of pretense. Or one might be motivated by fear or hope (or a combination of both: as Stockdale (2019) identifies and characterizes, fearful hope). I think these work more plausibly for some kinds of figleaves than others. I think they particularly work for "just asking questions" figleaves (where the speaker covers up their racist utterance *r* by saying they are just asking or wondering whether *r*), reported speech (where the speaker covers up their racist utterance *r* by saying they are relaying that *someone else* holds *r*), humor figleaves (where the speaker covers up their racist utterance *r* by saying they were just joking), and ignorance figleaves (where the speaker covers up their racist utterance *r* by saying they are ignorant as to *r*).[15]

All three of these mechanisms—self-deception, pretense, and hope—operate on the assumption that the hearer does not want to believe that the speech they hear is racist. The case of self-deception could go as follows. On some level, a hearer recognizes a politician's utterance of S is racist, but deceives themself as to whether this is the case. This can be done by convincing oneself otherwise, omitting relevant evidence, avoiding information, de-emphasizing the relevant racist parts of the utterance, or just simply lying to oneself. Because denial is reassuring—we hold fixed that the hearer does not *want* to believe that the utterance is racist, and so they would be reassured to believe that the utterance is not racist—the mechanisms of self-deception are internally motivated. As Pickard writes, "Denial blocks straightforward attributions of knowledge."[16] And so, the knowledge that the particular utterance is racist, which would be straightforwardly accessible if the hearer were not motivated to believe it wasn't so, becomes blocked.

Denial via fear and hope happens when the hearer resists imagining or believing how bad things are, and so hopes (perhaps fearfully) that things won't be that bad.[17] Denial via fear and hope is related to wishful thinking. As Daniel Williams characterizes it, "In wishful thinking . . . one desires to believe that *p* because one desires that *p*."[18] Wishful thinking can be present in cases of motivated reasoning. This is different from self-deception. As Williams (2021) convincingly argues, self-deception does not need to be present in cases of motivated reasoning such as motivated ignorance: someone can avoid polling because they want to remain ignorant about their unpopularity, and do so without any self-deception.

Denial by way of fear is also connected to *solution aversion*: "the process by which one denies the existence of a problem because one dislikes its available solutions."[19] When applied to being convinced by a figleaf covering up racist speech by a politician, solution aversion could take the form of what I'll call *implication aversion*: denying the existence of a problem because one dislikes its implications. For example, the implications of believing that a certain utterance by a politician is racist could range from the following: people I like support this politician who makes racist utterances, *I* support a politician who makes racist utterances, a politician in power makes racist utterances, these utterances will likely result in racist policies, etc. Aversion to these implications can lead someone to suspend belief in the utterance itself, as a way of avoiding having to believe the utterance's implications.

Another way that solution aversion and fear can play into each other when it comes to denial is something like the following. If a hearer accepts *p* (the proposition that politician x said something racist) and is also committed to anti-racism, then the solution is that the hearer must go about their own life differently. This could mean anything from not supporting politician x to much more major life upheavals like public protest, civil disobedience, taking measures to protect oneself, living in fear, leaving the country, etc. As the implications and consequences of accepting *p* become both more life-changing and recognizing the severity of the situation, the denial looks more like cases that Pickard and Bortolotti discuss: denial about realities that are harmful and dangerous to the believer, such as dangerous addictions, or being in denial about serious medical conditions.

Denial via pretense is similar to self-deception and fear, but might involve more of an element of self-awareness.[20] In a humor figleaf, when a speaker says "I'm just joking" after making a racist utterance, the speaker extends an invitation to participate in the pretense that the racist utterance was not really racist. In this case, the pretense is initiated by the utterer of the figleaf, but taken up by the hearer. I don't think that the hearer just pretends that the utterance of the speaker isn't racist. But I do think that in this case, the hearer lowers their threshold for buying into someone else's claim of pretense. And that itself is a form of denial, rather than a form of pretense (about someone else's pretense). The pretending case is interesting, tricky, and complicated because, unlike the cases of self-deception and fear, it takes two to pretend a figleaf is truly covering up the racist speech.

In this section, I have characterized denial and given some examples of how denial can enable the accepting of a figleaf (and in turn, how figleaves can encourage denial). I've also shown that denial can be a sufficient condition for accepting a figleaf, even if one does not jointly accept Saul's (a) norm of racial equality and (b) flawed theory of racism. Denial allows people to be convinced by a figleaf even if they only accept (a). I want to conclude here that a weaker version of what Saul is arguing is sufficient for being convinced by a figleaf. Whereas Saul takes it that (a) accepting a norm of racial equality and (b) a flawed theory of racism like the White Folk Theory are jointly sufficient

for accepting (or being convinced by) a figleaf, I think that (a) accepting a norm of racial equality, plus a little bit of denial is sufficient, and relatedly, that the higher social and psychological costs of believing that the utterance is racist, the lower the bar for accepting the figleaf, and the more that denial plays a role.

4. CONCLUSION

What I'm after here in introducing denial into the picture is consistent with what I take the spirit of Saul's project to be: trying to understand *why* people might be convinced by a figleaf, both so we can understand figleaves, and also so that we can understand people. Another project, that I believe is also consistent with Saul's, is more explicitly political: to figure out just how dangerous and pervasive figleaves are. How much should we worry when we hear them, call them out, and highlight their mechanisms so that people can stop being convinced by them, before their hearers become what Henderson and McCready call "fanatical followings of trustful listeners"?[21] For the former explanatory project, I hope I have illuminated a bit more why people who reject racism might still be convinced by figleaves. For the latter project, I hope I've shown there are mental commitments we need to be paying attention to beyond commitments to norms of racial equalities and theories of racism, and that we're all a bit more susceptible to accepting figleaves than we might have thought. If we think about the high incidence of people who accept figleaves, we might also start to think there are ways in which it is sometimes in people's self-interest to avoid the truth. All of this together helps us piece together just how powerful and dangerous figleaves are. As Saul says, "Because figleaves facilitate much more open expression of racism, they have the ability to shift people's understanding of what counts as racism. And this is where their special danger lies."[22] As more people's understanding of what counts as racism shifts, the danger increases.

I have suggested that the phenomenon of denial can fit into Saul's framework for figleaves, by way of incorporating considerations about what a hearer of a figleaf wants to believe (or disbelieve), in addition to the mental commitments that Saul already considers: a hearer's commitment to a norm of racial equality. And I hope I have done this in a way that is in keeping with many of Saul's philosophical and political commitments. Some of my discussion has ventured into not-uncontroversial territory regarding a hearer's own conscious or unconscious understanding of their own motivations, desires, beliefs, and acceptances of a figleaf. While I think that most hearers are aware that they accept a figleaf, they may not be aware of their reasons for doing so, especially when those reasons are related to being in denial. I hope that this claim, too, is not too far removed from Saul's framework. In the important discussion of dogwhistles in the first half of the book, Saul convincingly explains how covert dogwhistles can unconsciously influence and activate racial resentment and racial attitudes.[23] I think that figleaves, too, can operate on unconscious levels in different ways.

One might push back and say that we need something *like* the White Folk Theory of Racism—some kind of naive way of thinking about racism—to be convinced by a figleaf while still in a rational framework, and that my shift to thinking denial is a shift away from thinking about hearers are rational agents: instead, treating denial as something psychologically and epistemologically deviant.[24] But I think that it's not always epistemologically deviant to be in the grips of denial.[25] As humans, and especially as humans living in dark political times, we do have reasons to dismiss evidence, accept figleaves, and hope against the evidence that things are better than they appear. As a result, we are likely more susceptible than we think to being convinced by figleaves: especially figleaves for utterances that we would prefer not to believe. Being aware of these things, and able to interrogate ourselves will be very valuable, especially as the stakes for recognizing figleaves get higher.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to Luvell Anderson, Izabela Çupi, Gabriel Gibin Libman, Michaela McSweeney, Daniel Munro, Daniel Star, and Audrey Yap for helpful conversation and feedback on earlier versions of this draft. Thank you to Barrett Emerick and Ami Harbin for their careful and invaluable feedback and support.

NOTES

1. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 71.
2. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 20.
3. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 21–22.
4. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 75.
5. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 73.
6. See Saul's Chapter 4, "Figleaves for Racism," for similar stories the accepter of a figleaf can tell themselves: "For some people, it will be reassuring to remember that they have a Black friend, that really they were only joking, or that they're not really racist in their heart and that's what matters. . . . Either way, the figleaf has functioned in thought as a way of blocking the conclusion that the person was racist" (*Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 98).
7. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 85.
8. See Caponetto, "Undoing Things With Words."
9. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 75. Also see Henderson and McCready, *Signaling without Saying*, Chapter 1, for the deniability argument for dogwhistles.
10. Pickard, "Denial in Addiction," 285. In this paper, I have couched out the phenomenon of denial in terms of belief. But it could be seen as a phenomenon that also plays out in ways that are not straightforwardly doxastic, for example, in terms of what Tamar Szabó Gendler calls aliefs ("innate or habitual prepensit[ies] to respond to an apparent stimulus" which may or may not accord with explicit beliefs ("On the Epistemic Costs of Implicit Bias," 41)) or Jost and Hunyada's account of the role that ideology can play in justification ("The Psychology of System Justification and the Palliative Function of Ideology"). Thanks to Barrett Emerick for the suggestion.
11. Hearing and entertaining two contradictory things at once can also lead to cognitive dissonance which is resolved by denial. Thanks to Izabela Çupi for this insight. See also Gendler on the "cognitive costs of disharmony" ("On the Epistemic Costs of Implicit Bias," 37), and Jost and Hunyada on reducing dissonance and discomfort ("The Psychology of System Justification and the Palliative Function of Ideology," 111).
12. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 93.
13. Much of what I say about what motivates denial in Sections 2 and 3 can also motivate defensiveness (see Yap and Ichikawa, "Defensiveness and Identity"), and denial itself can also be a defense mechanism. I take it that defensiveness often operates on a more conscious level than denial, but the phenomena are closely related and may play important roles in some cases of accepting a figleaf.
14. Pickard, "Denial in Addiction," 279.

15. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 149–52.
16. Pickard, "Denial in Addiction," 283.
17. See Stockdale, "Emotional Hope."
18. Williams, "Motivated Ignorance," 7812.
19. Williams, "Motivated Ignorance," 7822, citing Campbell and Kay, "Solution Aversion."
20. See Funkhouser and Spaulding, "Imagination and Other Scripts."
21. Henderson and McCready, *Signaling without Saying*, 13
22. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 87.
23. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 50.
24. "Two keys to the success of figleaves are the immensely flawed White Folk Theory of Racism and the very thin Norm of Racial Equality. . . . Figleaves . . . function in concert with the White Folk Theory of Racism. Together, these allow White people to avoid facing up to their own racism and the racism of those that they like or support. In short, the false White Folk Theory of Racism allows for a remarkable range of excuses for racist actions or utterances—excuses which may convince adherents to the folk theory that no racism was present. Figleaves weaponize this fact, using the deeply wrong folk theory in order to provide excuses for what would otherwise be seen as clearly racist utterances" (72).
25. See also Bortolotti, "The Epistemic Innocence of Motivated Delusions"; Gunn and Bortolotti, "Can Delusions Play a Protective Role?"

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. "The Linguistics of Color Blind Racism: How to Talk Nasty about Blacks without Sounding 'Racist'." *Critical Sociology* 28, no. 1-2 (2002): 41–64.

Bortolotti, Lisa. "The Epistemic Innocence of Motivated Delusions." *Consciousness and Cognition*. 33 (2015): 490–99.

Campbell, Troy H., and Aaron C. Kay. "Solution Aversion: On the Relation Between Ideology and Motivated Disbelief." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 107, no. 5 (2014): 809.

Caponetto, Laura. "Undoing Things With Words." *Synthese* 197, no. 6 (2020): 2399–414.

Funkhouser, Eric, and Shannon Spaulding. "Imagination and Other Scripts." *Philosophical Studies* 143 (2009): 291–314.

Gendler, Tamar Szabó. "On the Epistemic Costs of Implicit Bias." *Philosophical Studies*. 156 (2011): 33–63.

Gunn, Rachel, and Lisa Bortolotti. "Can Delusions Play a Protective Role?" *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Scientists* 17 (2019): 813–33.

Henderson, Robert, and Elin McCready. *Signaling without Saying: The Semantics and Pragmatics of Dogwhistles*. Oxford University Press, 2024.

Hill, Jane H. *The Everyday Language of White Racism*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2008.

Jost, John, and Orsolya Hunyady. "The Psychology of System Justification and the Palliative Function of Ideology." *European Review of Social Psychology* 13, no. 1 (2003): 111–53.

Pickard, Hanna. "Denial in Addiction." *Mind and Language* 31, no. 3 (2016): 277–99.

Rosenblum, Nancy L., and Russell Muirhead. *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*. Princeton University Press, 2019.

Saul, Jennifer. *Dogwhistles and Figleaves: How Manipulative Language Spreads Racism and Falsehood*. Oxford University Press, 2024.

Stockdale, Katie. "Emotional Hope." In *The Moral Psychology of Hope*, edited by Claudia Blöser and Titus Stahl. Rowman & Littlefield: 2019.

Williams, Daniel. "Motivated Ignorance, Rationality, and Democratic Politics." *Synthese* 198 (2021): 7807–27.

Yap, Audrey, and Jonathan Ichikawa. "Defensiveness and Identity." *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 10, no. 2 (2024): 261–80.

Just Asking Questions: Salience and Political Speech

Audrey Yap
UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA

1. PUBLIC POLITICAL SPEECH

This piece is being written in January 2025, with the United States on the verge of a second Trump presidency, and Pierre Poilievre's Conservative party leading in the polls. Even prior to Trump taking office, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion offices in universities have been banned or voluntarily closed in several US states, plausibly as a response to pressure from conservative lawmakers.[1] Echoes of this are also taking place in Canadian provinces like Alberta with conservative provincial governments.[2] This makes a book like Jennifer Saul's *Dogwhistles and Figleaves* extremely relevant for understanding linguistic phenomena in the current political climate.

The focus of Saul's book—or at least the cases it's best designed to explain—are instances of public political speech or communication. This might help to explain how there can be Trump voters who support his rhetoric of mass deportation, with its particular focus on the US-Mexico border, who would nevertheless claim that neither they nor Trump are racist. For example, we might look at cases of undocumented people currently living in conservative communities whose loved ones don't believe that the threats of mass deportation apply to them, maybe not counting them as among the "bad hombres" that Trump singled out.[3] The kinds of mechanisms that Saul focuses on are well placed to explain this kind of dissonance.

While the central examples that Saul uses to illustrate dogwhistles and figleaves pertain to race, there can certainly be such phrases and messaging used to cover up or sanitize other kinds of discrimination. For instance, it seems important to many people that they not be (seen as) anti-trans, even while they endorse policies that would deny many trans people access to gender-affirming care.[4] Saul helpfully clarifies these complicated linguistic phenomena by classifying them in terms of types of utterance. More specifically, Saul provides a range of useful definitions for both dogwhistles and figleaves that captures many of their common occurrences. For example, the following definition connects a racist utterance R to a bit of speech F serving as a figleaf for it:

> A racial figleaf F for an audience A and utterance R is a bit of speech which blocks A from *correctly* concluding that either (a) R (the bit of speech) is racist; or (b) *R indicates that* the person who uttered R is racist.[5]

Though Saul's definition of dogwhistles for racism is more complicated, allowing for them to be divided into two distinct categories of Overt Code and Covert Effect dogwhistles, they both nevertheless provide ways for speakers to conceal racist sentiments or speech, and are

both ways of communicating with a smaller subset of people who hear them.[6] As an example of an Overt Code dogwhistle, Saul uses the classic example of the US phrase "states' rights," a rallying cry of many southerners during the Civil War, that can be used to signal a speaker's support for racist practices like segregation.[7] If a politician signals their support of states' rights, then voters unfamiliar with the history of the term might see it as an innocuous phrase, while others, who might support the racist practices it was used to defend, could correctly infer some political affinities between themselves and the speaker. Covert Effect dogwhistles, however, are interestingly different, and I think lead us to some potentially complementary lines of investigation. These kinds of dogwhistles, on Saul's account, function by "raising racial attitudes to salience without the awareness of those whose attitudes are affected."[8] Certain kinds of phrases are commonly cited examples of Covert Effect dogwhistles, like the use of the term "inner city" to covertly talk about race.[9] In such a way, someone might speak negatively about, say, "inner city violence," perhaps knowing that their audience will imagine violence in a largely Black community, but without having explicitly raised race as an issue.

It's exactly the question of salience that I want to explore further in my discussion of Saul's work. In particular, I think that a complementary treatment of racist speech, or speech that promotes racism, could focus primarily on the *effects* rather than the *types* of utterances. For example, while Saul treats the idea of "just asking questions" and the use of reported speech under the rubric of figleaves, such tactics also have a lot of features in common with Covert Effect dogwhistles, if we focus instead on the idea of salience. While it seems plausible that these can often serve as figleaves for falsehood as Saul suggests, there are other related but important features of "just asking questions" that I think would complement her account.

2. JUST ASKING QUESTIONS

Some of Saul's examples of people who often use asking questions as a figleaf for falsehood are talk-show host Glenn Beck and podcaster Joe Rogan.[10] The latter also shows up as a person using a similar, related technique as a figleaf for falsehood, namely, reporting others' speech. By using figleaves, public figures like Rogan can introduce the idea that Ivermectin could be an effective treatment for COVID by attributing it to an unnamed doctor to whom he had spoken. In that way, he doesn't need to take responsibility for the idea or its truth-value but is able to introduce it in public discourse nevertheless.[11] Helpfully for such kinds of misinformation, this also distances the messenger from being discredited when it is discovered that the claims are baseless. These kinds of techniques are often also deployed against queer and trans youth; in another of Rogan's podcasts, he claimed that a friend's wife worked at a school in which a litter box was installed for a girl who identified as an animal. These kinds of rumors were circulated by conservative politicians and activists, sometimes posed as questions, but without specifying any schools in which this had actually taken place. These have provided significant traction to those who oppose protections for LGBTQ+ children, despite there being no examples of a school in which such a thing had happened.[12]

Saul's discussion of the mechanics of such cases is helpful in understanding what is going on with the speaker and their plausible deniability. This makes it much easier to understand how people like Trump and Rogan face so few consequences for their misleading speech. But there's another surprising aspect of the success of dogwhistles and figleaves, namely, how the lies they help to spread remain so difficult to dislodge in public life. Andrew Wakefield's original study purporting to link vaccines to autism was demonstrated to be fraudulent over ten years ago, yet scaremongering over vaccination remains. And this aspect of misleading speech isn't as easy to explain by looking at its mechanisms. So we can complement Saul's analysis of dogwhistles and figleaves by considering what the overall effects of pernicious speech might be. That is, Saul's account provides us with a clear understanding of how figleaves like reported speech and "just asking questions" can serve as mechanisms that allow someone to spread falsehoods without having to take direct responsibility for them. This helps us understand why people who use those techniques don't lose as much credibility as one might think they would, given their role in spreading provable misinformation. But it's also important to consider how we can understand the ongoing pernicious effects of these falsehoods, even after they have been shown to be false or baseless.

This is where I think Covert Effect dogwhistles and some kinds of figleaves have more in common than Saul's account discusses. I think in both cases, the promotion of racism (or trans- and queerphobia in these latter cases) can take place by raising certain kinds of issues to salience. This is to give an audience the impression that these issues are both relevant and important to the discussion at hand. Issues raised to salience are often things that might not have been attended to—the purpose of a speaker raising them tends to be to ensure they aren't overlooked. Someone with significant food allergies might raise the issue of cross-contamination to salience since it's important for them that this be considered. Or someone concerned with ensuring the inclusiveness of an event might raise the accessibility of the venue to salience out of a more general concern that as many people as possible be able to attend.

The idea of salience is a defining feature of Covert Effect dogwhistles—they can conjure up racist imagery without a speaker having to be explicitly racist. And in Saul's example of Joe Rogan's secondhand speech about Ivermectin, something that becomes salient is the question of whether the government or pharmaceutical industries might be suppressing alternative treatments. While protected to some extent by the figleaves he uses, it's important that Rogan is providing a candidate explanation for why mainstream science wouldn't be touting Ivermectin as a COVID treatment: if it were, then you wouldn't be able to fund vaccine research.[13] Then, even though Rogan's information didn't come from a credible source, raising the issue also raises the profile of certain kinds of questions, making them important to address before the discussion can continue. In that case, particularly *because* he's framed himself as someone just in search of answers, he's able to shift the focus of discussion away from, say, how to ensure an equitable and efficient distribution of vaccines

to the topic of how we can be sure that the pharmaceutical industry isn't being deceptive in their attempt to hide a potential alternative cure. By insisting on the importance of these kinds of questions, and on their status as non-partisan questioners, people like Rogan are able to advance an agenda without explicitly advocating for it.

Not every interesting research question can and will be pursued. Given limited time and resources, as well as the potential for policy decisions to rest on research findings, different questions will inevitably be prioritized. And I've argued elsewhere that in cases of science used to prop up racist beliefs, like Rushton and Jensen's studies about IQ and heritability, more research will not generally be effective in dislodging such beliefs.[14] As Catherine Hundleby has also argued, this suggests that feminist empiricism should explicitly be grounded in politics.[15] In practical terms, this might mean being explicit about how social values influence research agendas and the ways that some questions are prioritized over others.[16] So to sharpen what I think can be said about dogwhistles and figleaves is that they can contribute to prioritizing questions in ways that potentially cause harm.

Contrast the two questions I mentioned earlier in the discussion of Joe Rogan and Ivermectin. There are many important questions we can ask given the availability of a COVID vaccine, but they are not independent of each other, since the background assumptions of some questions will treat other issues as settled. For example, if the primary focus of public attention is the question of how we ensure that people most vulnerable to serious complications from COVID receive their vaccines quickly and efficiently, then this presumes the vaccines are part of a pharmaceutical system whose medications can generally be trusted. But if we instead prioritize the question of how we know we can trust this vaccine (or vaccines in general) to be safe, then this in many ways will forestall the possibility of even addressing the question of efficient distribution, since the latter depends on the former. After all, distribution only becomes an important question if there is sufficient trust in the system responsible for the product in question.[17] Then by treating the question of trust in vaccines and public health systems as unsettled, even those who frame themselves as seeking answers still end up drawing attention away from questions like those of distribution. So the issue of salience is also important if we consider the lasting effects of some figleaves. In general, then, a focus on salience and the effects of dogwhistles and figleaves can complement Saul's analysis—while Saul gives us a clear picture of how speakers can avoid negative consequences, this analysis helps us understand how their tactics are so effective even when the falsehoods are exposed.

3. QUESTIONS AND POLITICAL AGENDAS

The upshot, then, of the analysis here is a clearer sense of how people can use dogwhistles and figleaves that raise certain kinds of questions to salience as a means of promoting various political agendas. We can also talk about this mechanism without having to speculate about the intentions of the people who use these techniques—whether they are motivated by genuine curiosity or a desire to promote particular ends, we can still understand how their public speech *does* contribute to those ends. This mechanism is plausibly at work in undermining public trust in vaccines, as illustrated by the Ivermectin example above. Other examples can lead us to consider cases where people prioritize some questions at the expense of others through a more extensive body of work.

A lot of people very effectively harming trans and queer people do so under the guise of concern for children. Several US states have already taken steps to criminalize gender-affirming care for trans youth, despite evidence across a range of countries that people very rarely regret receiving such care.[18] However, analogous to the vaccination case above, important questions about how to ensure that people are safely able to access such care rest on a more foundational issue, namely, that such treatment is safe and effective in the first place. As such, strategies of the kind Saul suggests, like reporting others' speech, "just asking questions," or bringing up what "people are saying," can serve to undermine public trust in such interventions.

For example, journalist Jesse Singal often presents himself as broadly supportive of trans people, yet largely writes articles questioning the effectiveness and safety of the medical assessments and treatments that trans people access. What these kinds of argumentative moves accomplish is ensuring that trans people and medical practitioners will first need to answer the questions that are raised about whether kids are genuinely trans or are genuinely in need of the kinds of medical interventions they might want to access. Yet such lines of questioning can be continued indefinitely, and the existing bodies of evidence can always be called insufficient—one of the features of most lines of inquiry after all is that they can always be extended to increase certainty. It's notable, then, that one of his complaints about his critics is their claim that the science behind youth gender medicine is settled.[19] Whatever Singal's intentions might be, continuing to question the safety and effectiveness of treatments for trans kids has the effect of ensuring the same issues will have to be re-legislated. The effect of insisting that the evidence base for gender-affirming care is low quality is that people who want to continue to access it will have to continue to shoulder the burden of proof to demonstrate that it is safe, that assessments are robust, and that people who receive it very rarely regret doing so. There can always be calls for more evidence on any subject that cannot be perfectly settled, which is indeed most of science and medicine. As such, the raising of this issue to salience will undermine the ability to investigate questions, like how to reduce long waiting lists at gender clinics, that depend on it being treated as settled.

4. REFUSAL AS RESPONSE

While Saul's book gives a robust classification of types of dogwhistles and figleaves, this classification isn't mirrored by a robust set of solutions—mostly because countering these rhetorical devices is extremely difficult. The most promising solution Saul considers is the idea of inoculation, or exposing people to weakened versions of problematic speech and explaining the rhetorical techniques involved.[20] This might render people less susceptible to misinformation, but we might also wonder how to respond

more immediately to people using dogwhistles and figleaves in real time.

One reason for focusing on the effects of techniques like "just asking questions" is to provide some guidance into what can be done in response—and in this case, I suggest that refusal to answer is a viable technique, though it may not convince an interlocutor.

UN Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese has as her mandate the human rights situation in occupied Palestine and has been extremely vocal about her belief that Israel has committed acts of genocide in Gaza.[21] When speaking about the situation in November 2024, a reporter asked her whether she believed in Israel's right to exist, which she notably refused to answer, saying instead that Israel does exist, and instead suggesting that what is important in international law is the right of a people to exist.[22] Many people, including the reporter who posed the question in the first place, accused her of evasiveness,[23] but refusal to engage with certain kinds of questions may end up being preferable to trying to answer them, since treating them as relevant might result in us taking on board undesirable presuppositions. In a case like this one, if the subject matter is the victimization of Palestinians by the Israeli state, treating the question of Israel's right to exist as something relevant that needs to be addressed can serve to reinforce anti-Palestinian racist stereotypes that portray them as inherently dangerous or threatening. So a response like Albanese's might be the best way to deal with such situations in the moment.

It might not always be possible to ignore questions that are asked, and people with public platforms can raise questions without immediate pushback. But in other cases it might be possible to more directly reject someone's attempt to raise a question to salience. Sometimes this might be worth doing because the question isn't one worth pursuing further, perhaps because the extant evidence on it seems sufficient. This might be the case with the science behind vaccines or gender-affirming care. A tactic for responding to questioners like these could be pointing to the wealth of existing evidence and suggesting that the conversation has moved on. Sometimes a question should be rejected because it should not be treated as relevant to an ongoing conversation. This is the case with the example of Albanese above, where treating the right of the country of Israel to exist as relevant to a discussion about Palestinian well-being builds in negative assumptions about Palestinian people that ought to be rejected.

Some people have made explicit cases for prioritizing some questions over others on certain subjects. For example, Katharine Jenkins argues against taking an ontology-first approach when it comes to adjudicating issues of trans-inclusive social practices.[24] The question "What is a woman?" is a staple of trans exclusion, with conservative commentator Matt Walsh making a film of that name in 2022, in which he poses it to academics and activists who support trans people as kind of "gotcha" move. If people can't define what a woman is, the reasoning goes, then surely they can't say that trans women really are women. Jenkins's book, however, argues for moving the focus away from that question, and the general issue of the ontology of gender, if what we are really interested in is how gendered spaces or activities ought to be organized. This suggests that in a discussion of trans inclusion in sports, the question of "What is a woman?" should be rejected in favor of others, like what the consequences are of adopting various policies about trans and cis athletes. This is another case of arguing that a question—even one that could on its own be interesting and worth investigating—is irrelevant to an issue at hand.

These latter considerations are hopefully complementary to the kind of analysis Saul provides in her book. "What is a woman?" and "Does Israel have a right to exist?" don't seem to fall under the "just asking questions" kind of strategy, and while they could be counted as kinds of Covert Effect dogwhistles, what's important about them are the ways that the questions they raise interact with other issues we might want to address. So that means someone who wants to reject the political stance that they are aligned with, perhaps because they support trans people or Palestinian liberation, has to find a way of rejecting the questions themselves rather than trying to answer them as posed. This also suggests that when we look for ways to counteract problematic speech, a focus on their pragmatic effects might be needed to complement the other ways they might be classified.

NOTES

1. Alonso, "DEI Bans Flourished in 2024."
2. Baig, "University of Alberta Rebrands DEI Policy to ACB."
3. Saslow, "Family Voted to Support Trump's Deportation Plan," 47.
4. While Saul largely uses the Norm of Racial Equality in its more basic formulation, as "don't be racist," she does consider it a live possibility that in some cases, what really matters is whether one is seen as racist—though it's certainly not easy from the outside to know what's really going on with someone's desires on this subject (20–21). Something analogous might be said with a norm about not being transphobic.
5. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 90; emphasis in original.
6. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 42.
7. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 42–43.
8. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 48.
9. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 50.
10. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 144–45.
11. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 145–46.
12. Kingkade et al., "Urban Myth about Litter Boxes in Schools." The closest case of this is a school in which there are small amounts of cat litter in emergency kits in case of a classroom lockdown caused by a school shooting.
13. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 145–46.
14. Yap, "Feminist Radical Empiricism, Values, and Evidence."
15. Hundleby, "Where Standpoint Stands Now."
16. I say that we should be explicit about this instead of saying that we should allow this. That's because, as feminist philosophers of science have argued for a long time, social values have always influenced scientific work. This means that research agendas are already being influenced by them—the argument then is that we should be open and clear about when and how it takes place.
17. For much more discussion of this issue, see Maya Goldenberg's (*Vaccine Hesitancy*) work on the subject.

18. Turban, Kraschel, and Cohen, "Legislation to Criminalize Gender-Affirming Medical Care for Transgender Youth"; Kinitz et al., "Scope and Nature of Sexual Orientation"; Wright et al., "Benefits and Risks of Puberty Blockers."
19. Singal, "American Media Distorted the Transgender Debate."
20. Saul, Dogwhistles and Figleaves, 190-94
21. Albanese, "Report of the Special Rapporteur."
22. Blaff, "UN Official."
23. Passifume, "UN's Albanese Blames pro-Israel Lobby."
24. Jenkins, *Ontology and Oppression*, chap. 8.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Albanese, Francesca. "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian Territories Occupied since 1967." A/79/384. United Nations. October 1, 2024. https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/a79384-report-special-rapporteur-situation-human-rights-palestinian.

Alonso, Johanna. "DEI Bans Flourished in 2024. Politicians Aren't Finished." *Inside Higher Ed*. December 16, 2024. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/faculty-issues/diversity-equity/2024/12/16/how-battle-over-dei-shook-out-2024-and-whats-come.

Baig, Fakiha. "University of Alberta Rebrands DEI Policy to ACB: 'Time for a Refresh.'" *Global News*. January 8, 2025. https://globalnews.ca/news/10948859/university-of-alberta-dei-acb-diversity/.

Blaff, Ari David. "UN Official Says Israeli Soldiers Are 'Wilful Executioners of an Extermination Plan.'" *National Post*. November 6, 2024. https://nationalpost.com/news/politics/un-official-says-israeli-soldiers-are-wilful-executioners-of-an-extermination-plan.

Goldenberg, Maya J. *Vaccine Hesitancy: Public Trust, Expertise, and the War on Science*. 1st ed. Science, Values, and the Public. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2021.

Hundleby, Catherine. "Where Standpoint Stands Now." *Women & Politics* 18, no. 3 (1998): 25–43. https://doi.org/10.1300/J014v18n03_03.

Jenkins, Katharine. *Ontology and Oppression: Race, Gender, and Social Reality*. Studies in Feminist Philosophy Series. Oxford University Press, 2023.

Kingkade, Tyler, Ben Goggin, Ben Collins, and Brandy Zadrozny. "How an Urban Myth about Litter Boxes in Schools Became a GOP Talking Point." *NBC News*. October 14, 2022. https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/misinformation/urban-myth-litter-boxes-schools-became-gop-talking-point-rcna51439.

Kinitz, David J., Travis Salway, Elisabeth Dromer, Dean Giustini, Florence Ashley, Trevor Goodyear, Olivier Ferlatte, Hannah Kia, and Alex Abramovich. "The Scope and Nature of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression Change Efforts: A Systematic Review Protocol." *Systematic Reviews* 10, no. 1 (2021): 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-020-01563-8.

Passifume, Bryan. "UN's Albanese Blames Pro-Israel Lobby for Cancelled Meeting with Canadian Officials." *Toronto Sun*. November 6, 2024. https://torontosun.com/news/uns-albanese-blames-pro-israel-lobby-for-cancelled-meeting-with-canadian-officials.

Saslow, Eli. "His Family Voted to Support Trump's Deportation Plan. That Includes Him." *New York Times*. December 15, 2024. https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/15/us/trump-immigrant-deportations-rome-georgia.html.

Singal, Jesse. "How the American Media Distorted the Transgender Debate." *The Dispatch* (blog). April 22, 2024. https://thedispatch.com/article/the-cass-review-wont-go-away/.

Turban, Jack L., Katherine L. Kraschel, and I. Glenn Cohen. "Legislation to Criminalize Gender-Affirming Medical Care for Transgender Youth." *Journal of the American Medical Association* 325, no. 22 (2021): 2251–52. https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2021.7764.

Wright, Daniel, Ken C. Pang, Simona Giordano, and Lynn Gillam. "Evaluating the Benefits and Risks of Puberty Blockers and Gender-Affirming Hormones for Transgender Adolescents." *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health* 61, no. 1 (2025): 7–11. https://doi.org/10.1111/jpc.16734.

Yap, Audrey. "Feminist Radical Empiricism, Values, and Evidence." *Hypatia* 31, no. 1 (2016): 58–73.

Reply to Critics

Jennifer Saul

UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO AND UNIVERSITY OF ST ANDREWS

I am honored and grateful that my book was selected for this special issue by Barrett Emerick and Ami Harbin, and for the detailed and deeply illuminating engagement with it from the critics. These have very much advanced my thinking about these topics—in some cases, along lines I was already considering; and in other cases, along entirely new ones. Four of the authors have written on dogwhistles. Two of these, by Alnica Visser and Jacob Smith, focus on what dogwhistles *do*, arguing for modifications to the claims in my book. Two more, by Taylor Koles and Kelly Weirich, focus on how various kinds of dogwhistles are defined, suggesting refinements or changes to my definitions. One article, by Samia Hesni, is a closer look at the functioning of figleaves. And the final article, by Audrey Yap, moves us beyond the framework of dogwhistles and figleaves.

1. WHAT DO DOGWHISTLES DO?

1.1 VISSER ON WHAT KINDS OF DOGWHISTLES CAN RECRUIT

Alnica Visser focuses in on the role that I suggest dogwhistles may have in recruitment to extremist groups. She rightly notes that different dogwhistles are suited to different roles. A polysemous dogwhistle like "Save the Children" can refer either to the well-known charitable organization or to a QAnon slogan. People seeking out the charitable organization, or perhaps just interested in helping children, may find themselves consuming QAnon content—and this content is likely to include shocking claims about children in need of saving, so it does tie in to their initial interest. As a result, they may find themselves gradually pulled into the conspiracy theory. This dogwhistle, then, is especially suited to spreading QAnon propaganda beyond the confines of conspiracist groups. Other dogwhistles will not work in this way. Although "Skittle" is a racist dogwhistle[1] referring to Muslims or Arabs, it is highly unlikely that someone looking for information about candy will find themself accidentally drawn in to a neo-Nazi group. Nonsense dogwhistles will be even less suited to bringing in new recruits in this way, as Visser notes. Nobody at all will go looking for "WWG1WGA" unless they have already at least encountered QAnon content. Visser writes:

> Nothing about this code risks drawing people into the idea that political elites are pedophiles. The only role it can play is that of *recognition*, helping fellow travelers identify one another in public.[2]

As a result, she argues, polysemous dogwhistles (with their closely related alternative meanings) are well suited to recruitment and nonsense codes like "WWG1WGA" are not. Codes like "Skittle" are also less well suited to recruitment because of the lack of a connection of the right sort between the two meanings.

I completely agree with almost all of this, and I think a closer examination of which sorts of dogwhistles are suited for which purposes is very important to carry out. We can't understand how dogwhistles work and how to combat them until we understand patterns of the sort that Visser points to. She is right that the sort of recruitment described above can only happen with polysemous codes, where there is a substantial link between the two meanings, such that a person looking for one might nonetheless be drawn to content derived from the other.

The one claim I disagree with is this: "The **only** role it [a nonsense code like "WWG1WGA"] can play is that of *recognition*, helping fellow travelers identify one another in public." While it's true that this code cannot recruit in the same way that "Save the Children" can, it may nonetheless play a role other than helping fellow travelers to recognize each other. In particular, it is often used as a hashtag on QAnon posts. On phones, it is often not visible to the casual observer, but it nevertheless links the post to other posts with the same hashtag.[3] Even when it is visible, it will probably not be noticed by one who is unfamiliar with it. Nonetheless, it can help a message to spread. This is because of the way that hashtags work. As Kukla writes:

> The hashtag on X/Twitter is used to connect whatever symbolic string is hashtagged to all other instances of that same symbolic string being hashtagged in other tweets, whether one's own or other people's. So the hashtag serves to tie a speech act together with other speech acts with which it shares a particular part. Hashtagging also makes a tweet searchable by way of the hashtag. Hashtagging is a pervasive and multifaceted practice, and people hashtag for a variety of purposes. Whatever the motive for using it, including a hashtag in one's speech act has the interesting effect of tying that speech act technologically to every other speech act that contains the same hashtag.[4]

The dynamics of hashtags mean that a hashtag can help a message to spread more readily and farther, even if it is not noticed or understood by people viewing the posts. Savvy use of hashtags plays an important role in helping posts to go viral. As a result, "#WWG1WGA" increases the chances of QAnon posts being viewed beyond their original conspiracist contexts and thereby plays a role in helping recruitment. One might still wonder, though, whether the dogwhistle aspect of this hashtag makes any difference to it playing this role. Surely, one might suppose, a hashtag like "#QAnon" could serve the same purpose. But this is almost certainly not right. Because "#WWG1WGA" looks innocent or unintelligible, it can slip by unnoticed in a way that "#QAnon" could not, and this is important for spreading the messages.

1.2 SMITH ON DOGWHISTLES AS IN-GROUP MARKERS AND RESISTANCE TO CALLING OUT

Jacob Smith draws attention to an underexplored reason that people using dogwhistles may not respond well to call-outs, which bring the dogwhistle content out into the open and subject it to criticism. The reason that he explores is that dogwhistles perform an important function with respect to group bonding and cohesion. While I touch on this in my book, I do not explore it in much depth, and Smith is right to delve in much deeper. Moreover, he is right to suggest that this provides an important explanation for why people would be so resistant to having others point out that they are using a term which functions as a racist dogwhistle. If using that term is a crucial calling card for one's group, a way that the group recognizes and bonds with each other, one is unlikely to be willing to acknowledge the term as racist, and to distance oneself from it. Moreover, one thing that group markers like dogwhistles do is call attention to in-group/out-group dynamics, and, as Smith writes, "when an in-group/out-group dynamic is made salient, it is somewhat epistemically burdensome to attend to features of out-grouped individuals that do not merely categorize them as out-grouped." I think this is important, and correct.

However, I am less convinced by Smith's view that *covert effect* dogwhistles specifically may function this way. It is possible that some do, ones which are particularly used within certain groups, and not much by others. But many covert effect dogwhistles are ordinary items of speech, such as the phrase "government spending," which has been shown to function in the US as an activator for racial attitudes.[5] This is a very ordinary phrase, used by members of all groups: there is nothing special about it, nothing that makes users aware of its status as a covert effect dogwhistle. Indeed, this is a part of what makes terms like this so dangerous: ordinary, well-intentioned people may use them repeatedly, thus distorting the way that discussions of certain topics are engaged in. Dogwhistles like this one will be ill-suited to marking users out as members of one's in-group.

2. HOW SHOULD WE DEFINE VARIOUS KINDS OF DOGWHISTLES?

2.1 KOLES ON REDEFINING "COVERT EFFECT DOGWHISTLE"

Taylor Koles argues very effectively that the definition given in my book for "unintentional covert effect dogwhistle" is too broad. He's right. Here is what I wrote:

> a communicative act of unintentionally raising to salience attitudes that violate some widespread norm. Often this will be through unwitting use of a term that has these effects.[6]

Koles points out that many speech acts which are clearly not dogwhistles will meet this definition. For example:

> Sam is going to introduce his friend Pat to a group of old friends. Pat is wearing a nice watch. Sam says "Hey everyone, this is my friend Pat," which causes Sam's old friends to turn their attention to Pat and Pat's nice watch. Unbeknownst to Sam, Sam's old friend Van has a penchant for robbery. Having had his attention drawn to Pat and Pat's nice watch, the attitude *Pat would be good to rob* becomes more salient for Van.[7]

This is clearly not the sort of thing anyone should want to call a dogwhistle. However, the desire to rob someone is definitely a norm-violating attitude, and the speech act has indeed raised this to salience. It meets my definition. He also points to a very disturbing pattern:

> Among certain audiences, bigoted attitudes become more salient whenever a discriminated-against person makes *themselves* more salient. In the parallel of the Sam case where Sam introduces a Black friend or where a Black person introduces themselves, this will also make anti-Black attitudes more salient.[8]

Again, we have a case that meets my definition which is not something we would want to call a dogwhistle. Another sort of case comes from research indicating that priming white people with texts remarking on the historic importance of Barack Obama's election leads to increased manifestation of implicit racial bias. The same is true for texts describing increases in the proportion of the US population that is not white.[9]

Koles also suggests a solution to this problem. His suggestion is to require that to be an unintentional covert effect dogwhistle, an expression or other communicative item must be regularly linked to producing the relevant changes in attitude salience period. More specifically, it must be the case that it would have had these effects despite changes in speaker and audience. "This is my friend Sam" or "Meet my friend Betty" are not like this, so the account works well for the problem cases he raises. However, I don't think this solution will get us all that we need. I think there will still be non-dogwhistles that meet his criterion of stability across contexts. There are phrases that reliably activate racial attitudes, which we would not want to call dogwhistles—such as "America has its first black President" or "Whites are declining as a proportion of the US population."

This is why I'd want to alter my definition in a different way. My alternative solution is, first, to maintain that something cannot be used as an unintentional covert effect dogwhistle unless there has been a practice of using it as an intentional one. This rules out "meet my friend Betty" (the black friend), but it also rules out "Barack Obama has been elected President."[10] In addition, Koles's examples have made me notice a further problem with my official definition: in my discussion of covert effect dogwhistles, I made it clear that the attitudes raised to salience need to be raised to salience outside of the audience's awareness. However, this did not make it into my official definition of *unintentional cover effect dogwhistles*, which Koles quoted. This was an omission. Including this addition provides yet another way of blocking the example of introducing my friend Pat to my friend Van, who likes to rob people. The desire to rob Pat is clearly not occurring outside Van's consciousness. I wish I hadn't made these errors in my official definition, but I am grateful for the chance to correct them here.

2.2 WEIRICH ON BRAZEN DOGWHISTLES

Kelly Weirich's discussion focuses on what she calls "brazen dogwhistles." These are a species of overt code dogwhistle. Standard overt code dogwhistles are directed at a sympathetic ingroup and meant to be missed entirely by the outgroup, which would be far less sympathetic. (Think here of Nazis using "88" to say *Heil Hitler* to each other, the members of the ingroup.) However, Weirich notes that I also discuss cases in which the outgroup is meant to notice the dogwhistle—as with using the "OK" symbol (dogwhistling *white power*) to "own the libs." The idea here is to upset the anti-racists on the left and get them complaining, while insisting that they are inappropriately reading meaning into a completely innocent symbol. Partly this is done for its entertainment value, and partly as a distraction from more substantive moves. But the important point is that the intent is clearly that members of the out-group will recognize the white supremacist meaning and be offended by it.

Weirich correctly notices that this sort of dogwhistle does not meet the definition that I give in the book:

> a term or speech act with (at least) two plausible interpretations, **such that one of these violates some widespread norm, and is meant to be understood primarily by those who are comfortable with this norm violation**; and one appears innocent, and is meant to be understood primarily by those who would not want to see the norm being violated.[11]

The problem with the definition is the highlighted clause: a brazen dogwhistle is *not* meant to be understood primarily by those comfortable with the norm violation—it's designed to be understood by, and to provoke, those who reject the norm violation. In the book, I call dogwhistles that are understood more widely than the in-group "broken dogwhistles."[12] But that makes it sound like something has gone wrong, and for that reason I think Weirich's term is actually better: It captures the fact that in some cases this dynamic is exactly what is planned.

Weirich considers the possibility of not counting brazen dogwhistles as dogwhistles. Her main reason for insisting that they should be categorized together is that both of them "use nonexplicit speech to exploit differences in commitments among the audience." It also helps us to make sense of this situation where a dogwhistle has been discovered and is being discussed (as in a news article, or academic book). Despite this discussion, we'd want to say that it remains a dogwhistle. Weirich also notes that there may be something of a continuum between standard and brazen dogwhistles. I think this last point is the most important one. A key way—though not the only one, as the complex case of the OK sign shows—that brazen dogwhistles come into being is by starting their life as standard dogwhistles, which gradually become more and more known. It is often unclear how widely known a dogwhistle is, and what the intention is in using it. Someone who uses "states' rights" might be trying to provoke the left. But they might also be trying to signal just to their fellow racists. It's helpful to have a term which encompasses both of these possibilities.

I am genuinely uncertain what the best way is to redefine dogwhistles in order to accommodate brazen dogwhistles.

One option might be to add them as an additional subcategory of dogwhistle. As it is, covert effect and overt code dogwhistles are unified mainly by the fact that both are commonly called dogwhistles. The same is true for brazen dogwhistles, so they could be simply added and it's an additional category in my taxonomy. But Weirich's own solution is also an elegant one, which I want to think more about.

3. MY EVOLVING VIEW OF DOGWHISTLES

Over the course of this reply, I've noted some changes that I think are required for my view of dogwhistles. In particular, motivated by the sorts of cases that Koles discusses, I am now convinced that my official definition of unintentional covert effect dogwhistles was inadequate: it's important to require that these be communicative items which there is a practice of using as intentional covert effect dogwhistles, and that the attitudes raised to salience must be unconscious. It will also be important to do something to accommodate brazen dogwhistles as a subtype of dogwhistles, though it's not yet clear to me how best to do that.

Partly as a result of this additional precision about dogwhistles, I've become convinced that some examples which might initially seem to be dogwhistles are not. These include some of those raised by my respondents, as well as some that I myself have in the past mistaken for dogwhistles.

a. Jacob Smith discusses "states' rights," "America first," and "welfare queen" as covert effect dogwhistles. I am not so sure about any of these. "States' rights" has long been used as an overt code, first in favor of slavery and then in favor of segregation, and Jim Crow: those who knew what the phrase meant understood it quite consciously, and others were not meant to be affected unconsciously.[13] Although "welfare" has been shown to be a covert effect dogwhistle, I don't know how "welfare queen" worked/works. And I have seen no studies of "America first." In a work in progress, I have begun exploring the distinction between political slogans and dogwhistles. Because political slogans are often encountered by those who are not a part of the movement, they may seem to function as dogwhistles—somewhat mysterious phrases used by those who are in the know. However, a key difference is that there is no effort to conceal. Those using political slogans would like everyone to adopt them and be convinced by them. For example, users of "America first" will happily explain that they think putting America first requires being anti-immigration. There is no attempt to conceal this. It isn't, then, a dogwhistle for anti-immigration views, but an allusion to an argument for them. I suspect that both "welfare queen" and "America first" may work like this.

b. Another political slogan which I used to think was a dogwhistle is "save women's sports" (discussed by Visser). This *feels* like a dogwhistle to people who aren't part of the anti-trans movement. After all, concern for women's sports seems to be used as a cover for opposing trans rights. However, what proponents are doing is making an argument. They are arguing that if you support women's sports, you should oppose trans women being recognized as women. They have no desire to conceal this argument and indeed would like it to be known far and wide. There is, then, no overt code dogwhistle because there is no effort to conceal one meaning with another.

c. The requirement of making an effort to conceal one meaning with another also rules out Weirich's example of an anti-Japanese slur functioning as a dogwhistle for her, because she didn't know its meaning. Users of the slur are not making using one meaning of a term as cover for another, so this is not an overt code dogwhistle.

d. Finally, it's worth briefly discussing Taylor Koles's discussion of holding a rally in Waco, Texas, on the date of the infamous Waco raid, in order to dogwhistle violent white supremacist views. These sorts of location- and date-related dogwhistles are, as I noted in my book, quite common. However, Koles classifies this as a covert effect dogwhistle. It's not; it's meant to be picked up on entirely consciously by people who notice the date and notice the location and reflect on what else happened on that date in that location. That makes it an overt code dogwhistle, rather than a covert effect one.

4. HESNI ON FIGLEAVES AS ENABLING DENIAL

Samia Hesni explores the way that figleaves may serve as mechanisms for denial, "understood as a psychological phenomenon that involves ignoring, dismissing, or avoiding the truth of what one is confronted with." They rightly point out that denial is such an important and powerful phenomenon that it can be an important generator of figleaves. In fact, Hesni argues very convincingly that people may accept figleaves not because they accept the White Folk Theory of Racism but because they are in denial. Such a person might have a highly accurate theory of racism, one which allows for the possibilities of structural racism, or unintentional racism—yet nonetheless fall victim to figleaves. The reason for this is simple: whatever one's theory of racism it can still be very painful to acknowledge that one's favorite politician, loved one, or self is racist. Hesni writes: "Here, cursorily, is how I'm thinking denial could work in an audience: H hears a politician utter S: where S contains blatantly racist claims. H thinks something like: *I don't want to be in a world where S is being uttered sincerely*. Or, *those things are too heinous, horrific*, etc., to be believed."[14]

I think this is a really great point. Hesni is exactly right that the White Folk Theory of Racism is not necessary for racist figleaves to succeed, and that denial may do this all on its own. Noticing the importance of denial, as Hesni describes it, also helps to make sense of a very disconcerting and increasingly prominent phenomenon: audiences providing

figleaves as they interpret utterances, even though they are not present. This is something we have seen, for example, in interviews with people who voted for Trump despite the fact that their loved ones were undocumented immigrants.[15] Trump never said that he wanted to deport undocumented immigrants, *but only the bad ones*. Yet nonetheless, this is what people seem to have heard. When interviewed, they insisted they thought he didn't mean people like their loved ones. This fits with the idea that these people were in denial: they just didn't want to believe that Trump could have meant what he actually said. In these cases, they didn't just *accept* figleaves, but *supplied* them where they were not present. This phenomenon is one that I plan to explore in future work focused on utterance interpretation, and it fits nicely with Hesni's reflections on the power of denial.

5. YAP ON ATTENTION-SHIFTERS

Audrey Yap suggests that for some purposes we may want to divide up our landscape of devices differently. She points to a commonality between some figleaves and some covert effect dogwhistles: they alter what is salient, shifting the audience's attention in pernicious ways. We have already discussed how covert effect dogwhistles do this. Yap rightly points out that figleaves can also alter what is salient. In particular, the use of a figleaf like "just asking questions" can turn people's attention from the subject matter under discussion to these questions that can always be asked. So, for example, a discussion of how to increase access to gender-affirming care may be derailed by someone who "just wants to ask questions" about how to define "woman." When this happens, suddenly questions about what a woman is become salient when they were not salient before. Yap writes, "There can always be calls for more evidence on any subject that cannot be perfectly settled, which is indeed most of science and medicine. As such, the raising of this issue to salience will undermine the ability to investigate questions, like how to reduce long waiting lists at gender clinics, that depend on it being treated as settled."[16] She proposes that for some purposes we may want to focus not on the distinction between dogwhistles and figleaves, but instead examine *devices that perniciously shift attention*.

Once we make this shift, we see that there are many techniques for perniciously shifting attention and many different ways of categorizing them. For example, "sealioning" has become a popular term for people on the Internet who insert themselves into a discussion in an apparently non-aggressive manner, asking ostensibly helpful questions. Nonetheless, sealions manage to derail discussion by shifting it to their queries rather than what it was meant to be about.[17] Or consider the "dead cat strategy" famously formulated by Australian political strategist Lynton Crosby and described by Boris Johnson:

> Boris Johnson (who had previously employed Crosby as his campaign manager during the 2008 and 2012 London mayoral elections) had once described the strategy like this: "There is one thing that is absolutely certain about throwing a dead cat on the dining room table—and I don't mean that people will be outraged, alarmed, disgusted. That is true, but irrelevant. The key point, says my Australian friend, is that everyone will shout, "Jeez, mate, there's a dead cat on the table!" In other words, they will be talking about the dead cat—the thing you want them to talk about—and they will not be talking about the issue that has been causing you so much grief."[18]

Once we take up Yap's suggestion and focus on the commonality of *strategically shifting salience*, all of these mechanisms—the dead cat strategy, sealioning, covert effect dogwhistles, and some figleaves—emerge as importantly connected. And for all of these, Yap's proposed strategy—refusal to engage—is an excellent one. The problem, however, is realizing that this is what's happening and that this is the strategy to employ. This is clearest in the case of covert effect dog whistles, which by definition are not perceived by their recipients. It would be nice for recipients to refuse to shift salience, but this is highly unlikely to be workable. However, it can also be tricky in the other cases. It may feel very important to comment on the dead cat. And it can be very hard to tell what is going on with the question that may be part of a sealioning, and may be a figleaf, because it might also be a completely genuine question which offers an opportunity to engage with someone in a way that changes their mind. Yet if Yap is right, and I think she largely is, it's worth doing some hard thinking about how to recognize which of these is happening, as we think about how to respond.

In short: the papers in this special issue are everything an author could hope for. They challenge me, make me re-think things, and raise important new avenues of inquiry. I'm so grateful to have read them, and to have the opportunity to comment on them.

NOTES

1. Andrew Griffin, "Far-right Twitter and Facebook Users Make Secret Code to Avoid Censorship," *Independent*, October 3, 2016, https://www.independent.co.uk/tech/racist-facebook-twitter-skype-google-skittles-donald-trump-farright-a7343356.html.
2. Visser, "Recognition and Recruitment," 5.
3. Drainville and Saul, "Visual and Linguistic Dogwhistles."
4. Kukla, "Pragmatics of Technologically Mediated Online Speech," 2116.
5. Valentino et al., "Cues That Matter."
6. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 51.
7. Koles, "Covert, Not Innocent," 14.
8. Koles, "Covert, Not Innocent," 15.
9. Skinner and Cheadle, "The 'Obama Effect'?"
10. In fact, in "Can't Unsee," I had made this criterion explicit, though without noticing that I had failed to do so in the book.
11. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 51.
12. Saul, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*, 67.
13. Haney López, Dog Whistle Politics.
14. Hesni, "On Denial and Deniability," 27.
15. See, for example, anecdotes like this one: Lautaro Grinspan (@lautarogrinspan), "Update: Several of the migrants I've been speaking with say they would have voted for Trump themselves. Most are folks who crossed the border illegally in the last 2-3 years. They don't believe Trump will deport them, because they

are here to work and are 'not criminals'," X, November 6, 2024, https://x.com/lautarogrinspan/status/1854178354972287207.

16. Yap, "Just Asking Questions," 32.
17. Green, "Sealioning."
18. Lynton Crosby, "How Lynton Crosby (and a Dead Cat) Won the Election: 'Labour Were Intellectually Lazy'," *The Guardian*, January 20, 2026, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jan/20/lynton-crosby-and-dead-cat-won-election-conservatives-labour-intellectually-lazy.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Drainville, Ray, and Jennifer Saul. "Visual and Linguistic Dogwhistles." *The Oxford Handbook of Applied Philosophy of Language*. Oxford University Press, 2024. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780192844118.013.4.

———. "Can't Unsee: Perspectival Dogwhistles and Deniability." In progress.

Green, Jerry. "Sealioning: A Case Study in Epistemic Vice." *Southwest Philosophy Review* 38, no. 1 (2022): 123–34. https://doi.org/10.5840/swphilreview202238113.

Haney López, Ian. *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

Hesni, Samia. "On Denial and Deniability in Jennifer Saul's *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*." *APA Studies on Feminism and Philosophy* 25, no. 1 (2025): 25–30.

Koles, Taylor. "Covert, Not Innocent—Narrowing the Reach of Saul's Account." *APA Studies on Feminism and Philosophy* 25, no. 1 (2025): 13–18.

Kukla, Quill R. "The Pragmatics of Technologically Mediated Online Speech: Don't Me!" *The Oxford Handbook of Applied Philosophy of Language*. Oxford University Press, 2024. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780192844118.013.5.

Saul, Jennifer M. *Dogwhistles and Figleaves: How Manipulative Language Spreads Racism and Falsehood*. Oxford University Press, 2024.

Skinner, Allison L., and Jacob E. Cheadle. "The 'Obama Effect'? Priming Contemporary Racial Milestones Increases Implicit Racial Bias among Whites." *Social Cognition* 34, no. 6 (2016): 544–58. https://doi.org/10.1521/soco.2016.34.6.544.

Valentino, Nicholas A., et al. "Cues That Matter: How Political Ads Prime Racial Attitudes During Campaigns." *The American Political Science Review* 96, no. 1 (2002): 75–90. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055402004240.

Visser, Alnica. "Recognition and Recruitment in Overt Code Dogwhistles." *APA Studies on Feminism and Philosophy* 25, no. 1 (2025): 2–7.

Yap, Audrey. "Just Asking Questions: Salience and Political Speech." *APA Studies on Feminism and Philosophy* 25, no. 1 (2025): 30–34.

Trans Perspectives in Philosophy of Mind

Gen Eickers

OSNABRÜCK UNIVERSITY

1. WHY (CARE ABOUT) TRANS PERSPECTIVES IN PHILOSOPHY OF MIND?

Trans philosophy and philosophy of mind seem to be concerned with radically different questions and issues. While philosophy of mind is concerned with the nature of the mind and its relation to the body and the external world, trans philosophy is concerned with explaining the nature of transness and its relation to the external world. However, both the rise of feminist philosophy of mind and the extension of trans philosophy beyond concerns with the metaphysics of gender point to possible intersections between trans philosophy and philosophy of mind, and to the importance of trans perspectives in philosophy of mind. This paper asks what are trans perspectives in philosophy of mind, and how could philosophy of mind benefit from recognizing the importance of trans perspectives? I will proceed as follows: first, I will explain what I take philosophy of mind to be and what I take trans philosophy to be. I will do so by way of pointing to some of the history of each area and by pointing out the main questions addressed in each area. Based on these considerations, I suggest that philosophy of mind could benefit from acknowledging and incorporating trans perspectives. In order to get a clearer understanding of how acknowledging and incorporating trans perspectives in philosophy of mind might work, I briefly examine some examples of this and explain how they contribute to philosophy of mind and to the expansion of trans philosophy. Although my focus is on arguing that a consideration of trans perspectives would be beneficial for philosophy of mind, I also point out that trans philosophy of mind contributes to the expansion of trans philosophy and thus adds a valuable possibility for the future(s) of trans philosophy.

The key question in philosophy of mind is the following: What is the mind and how does it work?[1] The concept of mind employed in philosophy of mind has changed significantly over the course of history. In recent years, philosophy of mind has increasingly acknowledged that social factors influence how individuals' minds work[2] and that philosophy of mind can be enriched by drawing on other philosophical areas, such as feminist philosophy, social philosophy, and social epistemology. For a long time, philosophy of mind focused on individualistic approaches; that is, mental states were assumed to be only a matter of the individual mind. When philosophy of social cognition and other subdisciplines of philosophy of mind developed, social aspects of the mind were increasingly recognized. However, even in philosophy of social cognition, which can be seen as the subfield of philosophy of mind that most centralizes social factors, the focus has still been mainly on individual mental states and individualistic explanations of social cognition.[3] Some theoretical approaches to social cognition have focused on how neutral observers (i.e., neutral minds) explain the behavior of others. Considerations of social identity, such as considerations of gender bias or the influence of oppressive social structures, have not been taken into account. Trans perspectives (among other marginalized perspectives) have thus not only been omitted from these accounts but have also been deemed irrelevant for explaining how the mind works.

Feminist philosophy of mind[4] and further critical, situated, and socio-structural perspectives on philosophy of mind[5] have challenged this individualistic focus. Feminist philosophy of mind describes the practice of applying feminist methods and feminist theory to address problems in traditional philosophy of mind, and vice versa. A feminist approach to questions in philosophy of mind asks us to consider the ways in which placing different kinds of bodies at the center of philosophical analysis alters our traditional accounts of phenomena such as perception, intentionality,

emotion, and consciousness. Feminist philosophy of mind "takes the three focal questions already mentioned—*What* is the mind? *Whose* mind is the model for the theory? *To whom* is mind attributed?—and treats them collectively rather than separately."[6]

Maitra and McWeeny also point to the thematic overlap between philosophy of mind and feminist philosophy.[7] This can be applied similarly to trans philosophy and philosophy of mind. "Although they rarely use the same vocabularies as philosophers of mind, feminist philosophers have written extensively on the natures of consciousness, the self, personal identity, and agency, and have attended to differential experiences of these phenomena across social groups."[8] Trans philosophy, too, has been extensively concerned with questions around personal identity, agency, and the self.[9]

In light of these considerations, I take philosophy of mind to be concerned with asking what the mind is and how the mind works. However, I do not take philosophy of mind to be restricted to individualistic approaches. Rather, I take the question of how the mind works to include questions about how social factors and structural considerations, especially social identity and possible related structural injustices, shape the mind. This is also recognized by Cristina Borgoni, for example, who emphasizes the significance of addressing bias and prejudice in philosophy of mind, underscoring the necessity of examining social structures and of acknowledging the political role specific psychological phenomena play:

> Because implicit biases involve a particular form of prejudice, and prejudices concern corrupted ways of treating certain social groups, they are political phenomena. Having them and acting on them promote certain social structures that benefit certain groups at the expense of others. Precisely because the primary question in the philosophy of mind concerns the constitutive aspects of certain psychological phenomena, it is crucial to understand implicit biases as phenomena that play this particular political role.[10]

Like feminist philosophy, trans philosophy has offered a fundamentally different starting point for how to do philosophy—one that might fruitfully challenge the remaining individualistic focus in philosophy of mind, while at the same time enriching critical, feminist, and socio-structural approaches to philosophy of mind. Talia Mae Bettcher criticizes mainstream areas in philosophy for pretending that their perception of the world is universal. "Philosophers' worldly perception is obviously shaped and limited by their social milieu: It's culturally, geographically, and temporally indexed."[11] But this situatedness (and construction), Bettcher continues, is rarely acknowledged in mainstream areas in philosophy and mainstream approaches to philosophy. Trans philosophy, according to Bettcher, can offer this "centrality of worldly perception in philosophical method"[12] that other philosophy areas, including philosophy of mind, often lack. "Trans philosophy needs to proceed from pretheoretical sociality among trans people—whatever form that takes."[13]

Amy Marvin makes a similar point in her essay on the history of trans philosophy, and further shows how trans philosophy seems to function differently from mainstream philosophy:

> By emphasizing trans people's knowledge and lived experiences, trans philosophy runs at odds with much of mainstream professional philosophy, in which trans people are seen as politically biased or self-deluded as opposed to the unsituated, unbiased, disengaged philosopher. What many philosophers do not acknowledge, however, is that the distant, critical, non-trans writer has actually been the historical norm when it comes to practitioners of trans scholarship.[14]

Robin Dembroff addresses the related point of "philosophy's transgender trouble." They point out:

> Whose commonsense constitutes philosophically legitimate commonsense? Whose pretheoretical concepts and terms constrain philosophical inquiry? And whose intuitions are philosophical intuitions? . . . the commonsense of the racialized, poor, queer, transgender, or disabled is considered philosophically irrelevant "ideology," "activism," or "delusion."[15]

Trans philosophy, then, "cannot be determined by subject alone," as Bettcher puts it. "It must be undertaken, rather, with an overarching aim of exposing and combating trans oppression, of illuminating and enacting a kind of trans resistance."[16]

1.1 THE USEFULNESS OF TRANS PERSPECTIVES IN PHILOSOPHY OF MIND

In light of this, bringing trans perspectives into philosophy of mind would not mean illuminating a niche area of philosophy of mind or considering *one* specific standpoint, but rather bringing in a range of socio-culturally situated and engaged perspectives that fruitfully enrich philosophy of mind. Bringing trans perspectives into mainstream areas of philosophy such as philosophy of mind does not mean simply *using* a trans perspective to make an argument, as in philosophizing *about* trans issues, but arguing from *within* trans perspectives, as in doing trans philosophy. C. Jacob Hale makes this vividly clear in his essay on how to write about transness (from non-trans perspectives but also in trans-trans contexts). He writes that trans experiences should not be presented "as monolithic or univocal." He continues, "Ask yourself if you can travel in our trans worlds. If not, you probably don't get what we're talking about."[17] Perry Zurn contextualizes Hale's essay and characterizes Hale's essay as an "invitation to theorize on the rough ground of living and struggling together."[18] Zurn also makes clear that Hale thinks of the rules spelled out in his essay as "'epistemic guidelines' rather than puritanical standards of conduct."[19]

Trans perspectives in philosophy of mind, or trans philosophy of mind, this way, contribute to doing away with rigid boundaries between different approaches to

philosophy and the different epistemic norms upheld within these systems, such as the analytic/continental divide. That is, trans perspectives may not just be useful for mainstream areas of philosophy to illuminate these specific perspectives, i.e., trans philosophy of mind is not aimed at illuminating "the trans mind," nor does it make such a reductive and pathologizing claim. Rather, trans perspectives shed light on how subjective experiences, embodiment, and world-embeddedness, including obstacles and exclusions that impact one's particular position and (possibilities of) embodiment, impact what we perceive, know, and experience, how we perceive, know, and experience, and how we interact with what we perceive, know, and experience. That is, traditional issues considered in philosophy of mind, such as self-knowledge, mind-body relations, the problem of other minds, reason and emotion, etc., herein clearly appear from within trans perspectives as actual, real-world issues, and as issues to be addressed as such, from real-world informed stances, rather than as abstract issues unrelated to lived realities. This is akin to Bettcher's formulation of the "WTF." According to Bettcher, transness includes living in what she refers to as "the WTF," where understanding one's own body, how one is perceived by others, and what is happening are all urgent real-world matters that don't require abstracting away or fantasizing about what-it-is-like possibilities, that are still dominant in (analytic) philosophy of mind. Bettcher emphasizes: "We trans people live an 'everyday' shot through with perplexity, shot through with WTF questions. We live in the WTF. We did not need philosophy to uncover its perplexity. It was already there."[20]

We may also consider the usefulness of trans philosophy of mind alongside feminist philosophy of mind and critical phenomenology. Critical phenomenology means the philosophical practice of suspending "commonsense accounts of reality in order to map and describe the structures that make these accounts possible."[21] That is, subjective experiences, particularly emotions and affectively structured phenomena are considered to be crucially impacted by social norms, values, and practices in critical phenomenology.[22] Trans philosophy of mind is not only to be seen as oriented along lived realities as isolated subjective experiences, but also as taking into account how social forces influence lived realities and minds, respectively.

A similar point is made by Scheman in the feminist philosophy of mind volume: "Feminist perspectives shift attention to understanding persons as both bodily and social, and knowledge as interpersonal and interactive."[23] Scheman argues for the claim that mental states are not physical particulars because they have the integrity that they do (meaning, they can be explained, have specific causes and effects, can be named and referred to) but because they are socially salient patterns. According to her, it is through the social practices we perform that "we interpret as meaningful bits of experience that may well be related in significant, nonsocial ways."[24] This way, the mental can be(come) real. A consequence of this view, as Scheman points out in reference to Lugones (2003), is that we make each other up. Making each other up, here, means: "set the terms in which we will be intelligible, mark out the patterns of salience that construct the phenomena of mentality."[25] This is necessary, in Scheman's understanding, as some people's existences or lived realities are rendered unintelligible. Trans people, thus, are "impossible beings" as our lived realities are not normalized and not included in the commonsense.[26] This applies to philosophy of mind as well: as philosophy of mind has focused on individualistic approaches and approaches that are based on "possible beings" and normalized minds and assume universality of normalized minds, philosophy of mind has failed to address non-normalized existences, such as trans existences. This includes the questions of what this failure to acknowledge the non-normalized means for understanding the mental, and how this restricted perspective on the mental has impacted models and theories.

Trans experiences and perspectives, in this sense, can not only constitute *trans philosophy*, but also expand the boundaries of other philosophical disciplines, such as philosophy of mind, epistemology, and ontology, among others. The focus of this paper is to ask what trans perspectives in philosophy of mind are, and how philosophy of mind might benefit from recognizing and incorporating trans perspectives. In doing so, the paper also suggests that a consideration of trans philosophy of mind contributes to expanding our understanding of what trans philosophy is.

In the following, I briefly look at three examples of trans perspectives in philosophy of mind and explain how they contribute to philosophy of mind and to the expansion of trans philosophy.

2. WHAT ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF TRANS PERSPECTIVES IN PHILOSOPHY OF MIND?

Finding examples of trans perspectives in philosophy of mind is extraordinarily difficult for a number of reasons. First, depending on how broad our understanding of philosophy of mind is, the examples I list below as trans perspectives in philosophy of mind may not be recognized as such or may not be recognized as philosophy of mind. The same is true of some socially informed approaches to philosophy of mind, or approaches that incorporate structuralist explanations into philosophy of mind. Such approaches may be seen as bordering on philosophy of mind, but not as *really* being concerned with the central question how the mind works. Second, trans philosophy has had to emerge from the margins and is still an emerging philosophical subdiscipline, so there are few texts that can be placed alongside trans philosophy in other branches of philosophy, even by self-definition. I would like to present some cases that might be considered as examples of how trans perspectives might contribute to philosophy of mind, even if these cases do not technically belong to philosophy of mind (or even if the authors do not consider themselves philosophers of mind). In order for trans perspectives to contribute to a more expansive understanding of philosophy of mind—and also of trans philosophy—it is necessary to adopt an understanding of philosophy of mind that goes beyond individualistic frameworks. As noted above, I take philosophy of mind to be concerned in one way or another with the question of what the mind is and how it works.

I take this question to include a consideration of how social and structural factors, especially social identity, and possible related structural injustices, shape the mind. This parallels Maitra & McWeeny's understanding of feminist philosophy of mind as taking "the three focal questions . . . *What* is the mind? *Whose* mind is the model for the theory? *To whom* is mind attributed?—and treats them collectively rather than separately."[27] Based on this understanding of philosophy of mind, we can briefly identify the following examples of trans perspectives in philosophy of mind:

(1) Talia Mae Bettcher's "Trans Identities and First-Person Authority"

Bettcher distinguishes between different notions of first-person authority and asks what it means to say that one has first-person authority over one's gender. To answer this question, she examines what first-person authority is, explores various cultural practices of doing gender, and explains the role that intersubjectivity plays in first-person authority. In examining what first-person authority is, and specifically considering the role mental attitudes play herein, Bettcher's paper can be considered to speak both to the broader question "How does the mind work?" and the question "To whom is mind attributed?" For example, Bettcher points out how first-person authority operates intersubjectively and emphasizes that communicating one's mental life (including one's gender identity) asserts first-person authority in social contexts:

> In publicly avowing an attitude, the first person has in some sense staked a social claim and certified a view about their mental life on which we can "bank." In avowing an attitude, one authorizes a view of one's mental life that is then fit for circulation.[28]

Bettcher further explores where things can go wrong in avowals of mental attitudes. She points out that "third-person assessments of mental attitudes (and gender self-identities) are interpretative in nature," as our first-person avowals are embedded in specific contexts.[29] However, she says, "What seems problematic is the attempt to avow somebody else's mental attitudes on their own behalf."[30] Bettcher does not treat these questions as merely epistemic, or merely about the nature of mental attitudes, but also addresses their social and ethical implications, and thereby points to an intersection of philosophy of mind with social philosophy as well as ethics. Specifically, Bettcher distinguishes between epistemic and ethical first-person authority, and formulates the goal "to understand FPA as an ideal for that which already exists in less-than-politically-ideal practice, to help transpeople treat ourselves and each other better."[31] This leads her to understand first-person authority not as "constituted by a serious epistemic advantage. . . ; rather, it is ultimately a kind of ethical authority."[32] Bettcher thus emphasizes that our relation to ourselves is not primarily epistemic, but agential and relational: we construe our minds in interaction through practices. This implication may be considered to directly speak to philosophy of mind and bring trans perspectives into philosophy of mind. By investigating first-person authority and the role that individuals and epistemic communities play in it, Bettcher explores issues central to the intersection of philosophy of mind and (social) epistemology and does so from a trans perspective.

(2) Gayle Salamon's "The Sexual Schema: Transposition and Transgender in Phenomenology of Perception"

Salamon's work revisits issues in phenomenology and philosophy of perception, focusing in particular on embodiment and the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and applies this work to trans experiences. The focus of her work is to understand the epistemic weight of subjective experience and embodiment (in relation to gender) and to contrast it with objectivist views.

Salamon's work speaks directly to the debate about embodied cognition, which is still one of the central debates in philosophy of mind, especially given developments in recent 4E approaches. 4E approaches to mind and cognition regard cognition to be embedded, embodied, extended, and enactive (or any combination thereof). While traditional philosophy of mind, cognitive science and neuroscience have focused on the mind and the brain in isolation from the rest of the body and the environment bodies are surrounded by, 4E theorists emphasize the intricate, reciprocal relationship between minds, bodies, and the environments they occur in. Specifically, embeddedness entails that the environment plays a structuring, constitutive role for cognition.[33] Embodied cognition means that cognition and minds depend not only on brain processes but also crucially involve other bodily reactions, and these constitute or realize a kind of behavior or interaction with the environment.[34] Extended mind theorists argue that the material environment is sometimes incorporated into our cognition.[35] Enactivism focuses on the active role played by the cognizer in their relation with the external world—cognizers have "sense-making" capacities that shape the reality of the external world as we perceive it.[36]

For these debates, a consideration of Salamon's work may add important layers of complexity that could enrich 4E approaches on the question of what the mind is, and on the question of how mind attribution works. Gender, and even more so trans perspectives, have not been considered here, even though they intricately shape our bodily self-perception as well as the embodiment of certain mental states, such as certain emotions. I will say more about this below.

(3) Perry Zurn's work on curiosity (e.g., Perry Zurn: "Puzzle Pieces: Shapes of Trans Curiosity" or Perry Zurn & Dani S. Bassett: "Curious Minds")

Zurn explores curiosity both in relation to transness and more generally. He not only explores the political dimensions of curiosity, but also asks what curiosity is, how it relates to knowledge, and thus explores the relevance of curiosity to the mind. That is, Zurn's research on curiosity borders on questions raised in philosophy of mind, such as questions about emotions and desires, but also questions about intersubjectivity.

In his essay *Puzzle Pieces*, for example, Zurn reflects on research on curiosity and transness as bridging individualistic and structuralist approaches. He states that "curiosity is a trained affect, embedded in a habitus, appearing on individual and collective registers. Curiosity is something one or more persons feel and what one or more persons do."[37] And he continues:

> As such, curiosity might be defined as a material and discursive multivariant praxis of inquiry, coupled with certain affects and neurological signatures, and traceable in individuals and groups. Thus, in the following analysis of curiosity's role in trans objectification—and especially in trans freedom, the question is both how does curiosity feel and how does it function? How are the practices of gazing, querying, investigating, experimenting, and worldtraveling lived and deployed?[38]

By identifying trans people as both objects and subjects of curiosity, Zurn reflects on both the question of mind attribution and the social aspects or biases that influence mind attribution, as well as questions of agency over one's own mind. Zurn states: "To be trans . . . is a journey, a discovery, a quest, an exploration, an evolution, involving experimentation, observation, imagination, and so, so many questions. It is a vortex of curiosity."[39] Zurn's research program, here, connects to Bettcher's discussion about ethical first-person authority and the implications for philosophy of mind discussions of the complexities of self-knowledge. Rather than understanding transness as something that we come to suddenly explicitly know about ourselves, or as purely epistemic first-person authority, Zurn emphasizes the explorative and experimental nature of transness. Transness, on this understanding, is also imaginable as something that is, at least in part, construed in interaction and through social practices.[40]

Furthermore, and Zurn hints at this when he calls curiosity a trained affect, curiosity can be considered an (epistemic) emotion, it enables us to see how knowing and feeling are related, and is thus a part of philosophy of mind and emotion. And so trans curiosity can be seen as a trans perspective on curiosity, adding a trans perspective to philosophy of mind.

(4) Work on trans phenomenology, incl. gender dysphoria and gender euphoria (e.g., Gayle Salamon: "Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality"; Florence Ashley: "What is it like to have a gender identity?"; Tamsin Kimoto "Merleau-Ponty, Fanon, and Phenomenological Forays in Trans Life")[41]

Work in trans philosophy on gender identity and on gender dysphoria is often seen as located in philosophy of gender or (social) ontology or trans studies, but some of it can also be seen as located in the trans philosophy of mind and trans phenomenology. Particularly papers that are located at the intersection of trans philosophy, philosophy of gender, phenomenology, and philosophy of mind might well be considered as contributing trans perspectives to philosophy of mind.

At the intersection of trans phenomenology and trans philosophy of mind is, for example, Salamon's book *Assuming a Body* (2010), which includes a more detailed discussion of bodily awareness and materiality in relation to gender. Salamon argues that bodily materiality is best understood through phenomenological accounts, such as Merleau-Ponty's account of what materiality feels like. Thus, Salamon's work is directly concerned with the mind's relationship to the body and the external world.

Tamsin Kimoto makes use of Salamon's approach. Their paper explores the phenomenology of both hormonal transition and transphobia, drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Fanon, and Salamon. Specifically, they explore how "Fanon and trans phenomenological theory rework, rewrite, and retheorize what it means to be embodied in the world."[42] That is, Kimoto's work is not only a piece of trans philosophy, but also a pertinent contribution to the canon in phenomenology, to the understanding of embodiment, and to the understanding of the mind-body connection in philosophy of mind.

Florence Ashley's 2023 paper is located at the intersections of philosophy of mind, trans philosophy, and phenomenology. She argues that "understanding gender identity as phenomenologically synthesized out of gender subjectivity, out of our everyday experiences of ourselves as gendered."[43] Ashley also discusses gender dysphoria and gender euphoria as key components of understanding gender identity. These experiences underscore the emotional and psychological realities of having a gender identity. Thus, Ashley also speaks immediately to the relationship between the mind and the body and, of course, to the what-X-is-like question.

The texts and research examples presented here of what trans perspectives in philosophy of mind might be and offer at the very least show us what it might mean to investigate trans perspectives in philosophy of mind, and how trans philosophy and philosophy of mind might be linked. Trans perspectives in philosophy of mind may prove particularly fruitful for debates about embodiment, emotions, desires, social cognition, but also for debates about knowledge, inquiry, and consciousness. That is, trans perspectives can provide compelling cases for the questions framed by Maitra and McWeeny's definition of feminist philosophy of mind: "*What* is the mind? *Whose* mind is the model for the theory? *To whom* is mind attributed?"[44]

Work on trans phenomenology, in particular, but also work in trans philosophy of mind, in general, can also help to break down artificial philosophical boundaries and rigid epistemic systems, such as the analytic/continental divide in philosophy, as mentioned before.

In what follows, I will focus on one of these questions—to whom is mind attributed?—because I believe that much progress has been made in recent years in bringing socio-structural perspectives to bear on related debates, especially debates located in philosophy of social cognition and emotion, where the question of mind attribution is particularly relevant.

3. TO WHOM IS MIND ASCRIBED?

Philosophers who research social cognition and emotion have recently begun to examine the ways in which social norms, biases, and epistemic injustices influence our social cognition, emotions, and social interactions.[45] Social norms specify normal or acceptable ways of being in society and regulate our emotions, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.[46] In other words, they prescribe the appropriate conduct for individuals within a given social context. As Brownstein et al. elucidate, social norms "come with a complex motivational oomph."[47] The pressure to conform to social norms in social interaction is significant.[48]

Spaulding and Del Pinal and Spaulding examine how bias operates in social cognition and interaction.[49] They argue for a more or less pluralistic understanding of biases and do not merely focus on implicit biases. Instead, they understand biases as social biases that operate in different cognitive structures. They specify that a social bias is an association between a social category and a feature. For example, we tend to associate the category "woman" with the trait "family-oriented" or with the affective trait "warmth"; this association, according to Del Pinal and Spaulding, is a social bias. In addition to Spaulding and Del Pinal's work on bias in social cognition and interaction, there are various case studies of the influence of bias on cognition in philosophy of mind. For example, there is work on bias in perception. Research on bias in perception suggests that bias affects the way we perceive the world, and that this has epistemic consequences, such as questions of reasonability or justification when we act on the basis of biased perception.[50] This may be relevant in legal contexts or in moral judgments. LeBoeuf argues that biases operate not only at the level of perception, but also by being social and embodied. Individuals, according to this understanding, enact biases through their socially embedded bodily behaviors, and at the same time, biases are "enacted by social groups as a whole. Implicit biases 'live in' the bodies of individuals and also in the social world."[51]

Understanding biases as social highlights the influence of biases and social norms on mind attribution and social interaction. For example, if biases affect the way an individual perceives the world around them, due to their membership of a specific social group, they also affect the way they perceive and interpret the social behavior of others. If an individual harbors an implicit bias against individuals belonging to group Y, due to their membership in group X, they may be more prone to ascribe specific social behaviors to members of group Y, as opposed to others. They may also exhibit a proclivity to engage in particular modes of interaction with them. Consequently, biases and social norms also interact with or influence our knowledge of others,[52] thereby potentially giving rise to biased social cognition and interaction.

The connection between bias and social norms and gender and transness is evident: if social norms and bias influence our social cognition, emotion, and interaction, this includes gender norms and biases surrounding gender (which, in turn, also interact with norms and bias around race, class, disabilities, and so on). Some research on social cognition explicitly addresses this issue.[53] There is also a substantial body of social psychology and interdisciplinary research on emotion that specifically highlights the influence of gender norms on emotion attribution and emotional expression.

EXAMPLE: EMOTIONS

In this section, I will point to examples that illustrate research on gender and emotion. I will briefly look at how this might affect trans perspectives in particular, and why this in turn points to the importance of trans perspectives in philosophy of mind. Some of the research I am citing here is not exclusively located in philosophy of emotion. Rather, it is situated at the intersections between social psychology, gender studies, and philosophy. Nevertheless, philosophers of emotion, particularly those working within the domains of philosophy of mind and psychology, have made extensive use of this research.

A number of studies have been conducted with the objective of demonstrating the relationship between gender and emotion attribution, as well as the impact of emotion on gender attribution. The following examples illustrate this research: Hess et al. found that individuals who expressed happiness were more likely to be categorized as "feminine," while those who expressed anger were more likely to be categorized as "masculine."[54] In a similar vein, Albohn et al. examine the role of gender information in facial cues and its impact on behavioral predictions.[55] This may have particular implications for trans individuals, as their gender identity may be incorrectly or differently categorized depending on the situation.

Facial information plays a significant role in how individuals categorize and interact with others. How this information is categorized is influenced by social norms and stereotypes, such as gender, and is subject to cultural variation. Even identities that are thought to remain largely hidden, such as transness for some trans people, are more likely than average to be recognized from a static image of a face alone.

> Even mere social categorization of an ambiguous face as "male" or "female" is enough to elicit a preferential response bias that is congruent with gender-emotion stereotypes. When gender ambiguous faces were expressing joy, they were more likely to be categorized as female than male, and these faces were expressing anger were more likely to be categorized as male.[56]

In philosophy of emotion, and in particular in the trans philosophy of emotion, there is work showing how gender norms are related to the emotional marginalization of trans people (and explaining what emotional marginalization means)—arguing that trans people (as well as inter- and non-binary people) may not conform to (or appear to conform to) prevailing emotional norms.[57] There is also work on trans joy (Ainscough, manuscript), which argues that trans people are often unable to express joy in ways that are accepted in dominant social contexts. And there is work on trans affect at the intersections of gender studies and philosophy; in particular, Hil Malatino's "Side Affects: On Being Trans and Feeling Bad."[58] In this work, Malatino

locates negative feelings, such as anger and exhaustion, at the center of transness and analyzes the complexity of these feelings for shaping trans experiences.

Trans perspectives in philosophy of mind could particularly help shed light on the question to whom mind is attributed, and questions around phenomena that connect gender and mind. Research could also explore the emotional effects of gendering and misgendering, linking psychological processes to work on emotional injustice[59] and moral emotions such as anger.[60]

In this way, trans perspectives in philosophy of mind can help to combine socio-structural considerations with philosophy of mind, thus enriching philosophy of mind.

4. HOW TO TRANS PERSPECTIVES IN PHILOSOPHY OF MIND

After exploring why we should care about trans perspectives in philosophy of mind, what they might be, and exploring a specific question in philosophy of mind related to trans perspectives, I will offer some concluding thoughts on how we might incorporate trans perspectives into philosophy of mind, as in the question: do we need to adopt a specific methodology or theoretical framework in order to incorporate trans perspectives into more mainstream branches of philosophy?

What does it mean to propose that trans philosophy can offer a "centrality of wordly perception in philosophical method"[61] and that trans philosophy "needs to proceed from pretheoretical sociality among trans people—whatever form that takes,"[62] especially when considering trans perspectives in philosophy of mind? The approach and framework called for here may seem to imply doing philosophy from *within* a trans perspective. However, as Bettcher, Hale, and Zurn point out, there is no one trans perspective, and trans scholars working on transness are also situated in specific social locations that produce multiple specific trans perspectives rather than one unified trans perspective.[63] Integrating these thoughts and approaches might suggest, for example, the use of feminist standpoint epistemology.[64] This might enable to bring trans perspectives into philosophy of mind (or other mainstream philosophy) in a way that starts from the pre-theoretical sociality among trans people that Bettcher points out, and in a way that does not take trans perspectives as uniform.

While feminist standpoint theorists argue that marginalized people may be epistemically advantaged in knowing "some things better than those who are comparatively privileged . . . by virtue of what they typically experience and how they understand their experience,"[65] they also caution against (mis)assuming that experiences are uniform across a particular social location. Trans people are members of very different communities depending on race, class, where they live, where they were born, language, disabilities, etc. Though as individuals we are located across different communities, as trans scholars we are also engaged in knowledge production around transness that ideally enhances the understanding of some of the communities we belong to. This allows for doing trans philosophy (including trans philosophy of mind or trans epistemology or trans ontology, etc.) with the "aim of exposing and combating trans oppression, of illuminating and enacting a kind of trans resistance,"[66] even if achieving this aim cannot be guaranteed.

Bringing trans perspectives into (mainstream) branches of philosophy such as philosophy of mind, then, does not mean relying on a specific social category—even if it is a category that the scholar associates with themselves—but rather critically evaluating that specific social category and one's membership in it from within in order to make room for the advantaged epistemic access that membership may entail.

Bringing trans perspectives into mainstream branches of philosophy, such as philosophy of mind, may also entail a special kind of responsibility. Elucidating the knowledge of oppressed communities and communities currently under attack, even when done "from within," requires special care and caution in order not to engage in epistemic exploitation[67] or potentially harm the respective and associated communities.

5. FINAL REMARKS

The aim of this paper was to explore what trans perspectives can contribute to philosophy of mind, and thereby to mainstream approaches in philosophy more generally. Specifically, the paper asked, What are trans perspectives in philosophy of mind, and how could philosophy of mind benefit from recognizing (the importance of) trans perspectives? What do trans perspectives do other than illuminate trans perspectives? I explained that I take philosophy of mind to ask what the mind is and how the mind works and to acknowledge how social factors, including gender identity, influence how the mind works. In light of this, I suggested that philosophy of mind could benefit from acknowledging and incorporating trans perspectives as they shed light on matters of the mind via lived realities that are embedded in specific socio-structural systems rather than considering questions about the mental as abstract problems.

Although the focus of this paper was how a consideration of trans perspectives could be beneficial for philosophy of mind, I also sought to imply that our understanding of trans philosophy might be broadened by considering work on trans perspectives in philosophy of mind.

NOTES

1. Vosgerau and Lindner, *Philosophie des Geistes und der Kognition*.
2. Spaulding, *How We Understand Others*; Borgoni, "Philosophy of Mind after Implicit Biases"; Eickers, "Are All Emotions Social?"; Eickers, *Scripts and Social Cognition*.
3. See Schlicht, *Philosophy of Social Cognition*, 8f.
4. E.g., Maitra and McWeeny, "Introduction: What Is Feminist Philosophy of Mind?"; Andrada and Flores, "Philosophy of Mind Should Be a Feminist Place (and Here's How)."
5. E.g., Slaby and Gallagher, "Critical Neuroscience and Socially Extended Minds"; Zawidzki, *Mindshaping*; Ratcliffe, *Rethinking Commonsense Psychology*; von Maur, "Taking Situatedness Seriously"; Eickers, *Scripts and Social Cognition*; Maiese and Hanna, *The Mind-Body Politic*; Tzima and Slaby, "Political Philosophy of Mind."

6. Maitra and McWeeny, "Introduction: What Is Feminist Philosophy of Mind?" 3f.
7. Maitra and McWeeny, "Introduction: What Is Feminist Philosophy of Mind?"
8. Maitra and McWeeny, "Introduction: What Is Feminist Philosophy of Mind?" 2.
9. See Bettcher, "What Is Trans Philosophy?"
10. Borgoni, "Philosophy of Mind after Implicit Biases," 145.
11. Bettcher, "What Is Trans Philosophy?" 656.
12. Bettcher, "What Is Trans Philosophy?" 656.
13. Bettcher, "What Is Trans Philosophy?" 656.
14. Amy Marvin, "A Brief History of Trans Philosophy."
15. Dembroff, "Cisgender Commonsense," 403.
16. Bettcher, "What Is Trans Philosophy?" 647.
17. Hale, "Suggested Rules."
18. Zurn, "The Path of Friction," 71.
19. Zurn, "The Path of Friction," 73.
20. Bettcher, "What Is Trans Philosophy?" 651.
21. Guenther, "Critical Phenomenology," 15.
22. See von Maur, "Taking Situatedness Seriously"; Thonhauser, "Phenomenological Reduction and Radical Situatedness."
23. Scheman, "Against Physicalism," 243.
24. Scheman, "Against Physicalism," 249.
25. Scheman, "Against Physicalism," 252.
26. Scheman, "Queering the Center by Centering the Queer," 131.
27. Maitra and McWeeny, "Introduction: What Is Feminist Philosophy of Mind?" 3f.
28. Bettcher, "Trans Identities and First-Person Authority," 102.
29. Bettcher, "Trans Identities and First-Person Authority," 112.
30. Bettcher, "Trans Identities and First-Person Authority," 102.
31. Bettcher, "Trans Identities and First-Person Authority," 99.
32. Bettcher, "Trans Identities and First-Person Authority," 100.
33. See Hutchins, *Cognition in the Wild*.
34. See Shapiro, "Embodied Cognition"; Hufendiek, *Embodied Emotions*.
35. See Colombetti and Krueger, "Scaffoldings of the Affective Mind."
36. See Thompson, *Mind in Life*; Thompson and Stapleton, "Making Sense of Sense-Making."
37. Zurn, "Puzzle Pieces," 11.
38. Zurn, "Puzzle Pieces," 11.
39. Zurn, "Puzzle Pieces," 12.
40. See Bettcher, "Trans Identities and First-Person Authority."
41. For further examples see also C. Riley Snorton, "A New Hope," and Talia Mae Bettcher, "Trans Phenomena."
42. Kimoto, "Merleau-Ponty," 18.
43. Ashley, "What Is It Like," 1070.
44. Maitra and McWeeny, "Introduction: What Is Feminist Philosophy of Mind?" 3f.
45. Eickers, *Scripts and Social Cognition*; Eickers, "Are All Emotions Social?"; Spaulding, *How We Understand Others*; Zawidzki, *Mindshaping*.
46. Bicchieri, "The Grammar of Society."
47. Brownstein et al., *Somebody Should Do Something*, 63.
48. Cf. Bicchieri, *Grammar of Society*.
49. Spaulding, *How We Understand Others*; Del Pinal and Spaulding, "Conceptual Centrality and Implicit Bias."
50. See, for example, Siegel, "Bias and Perception"; LeBoeuf, "The Embodied Biased Mind."
51. LeBoeuf, "The Embodied Biased Mind," 51.
52. See Beeghly, "Bias and Knowledge."
53. E.g., Spaulding, *How We Understand Others*.
54. Hess et al., "Face, Gender, and Emotion Expression."
55. Albohn et al., "Perceiving Emotion."
56. Albohn et al., "Perceiving Emotion," 38; see also Hess et al., "Face, Gender, and Emotion Expression."
57. Cf. Eickers, "Pathologizing Disabled and Trans Identities."
58. Malatino, *Side Affects*.
59. See, e.g., Pismenny et al., "Emotional Injustice."
60. Srinivasan, "Aptness of Anger"; Cherry, "Errors and Limitations."
61. Bettcher, "What Is Trans Philosophy?" 656.
62. Bettcher, "What Is Trans Philosophy?" 651.
63. Bettcher, "What Is Trans Philosophy?"; Hale, "Suggested Rules"; and Zurn, "The Path of Friction."
64. E.g., Harding, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology."
65. Wylie, "Why Standpoint Matters," 26.
66. Bettcher, "What Is Trans Philosophy?" 647.
67. See Berenstain, "Epistemic Exploitation."

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ainscough, Harry. "Trans Joy." Unpublished manuscript.

Albohn, Daniel N., Joseph C. Brandenburg, and Reginald B. Adams Jr. "Perceiving Emotion in the 'Neutral' Face: A Powerful Mechanism of Person Perception." In *The Social Nature of Emotion Expression: What Emotions Can Tell Us About the World*, edited by Ursula Hess and Shlomo Hareli. Springer, 2019.

Andrada, Gloria, and Carolina Flores. "Philosophy of Mind Should Be a Feminist Place (and Here's How)." *Blog of the APA*. August 23, 2023. https://blog.apaonline.org/2023/08/23/philosophy-of-mind-should-be-a-feminist-place-and-heres-how/.

Ashley, Florence. "What Is It Like to Have a Gender Identity?" *Mind* 132, no. 528 (2023): 1053–73.

Beeghly, Erin. "Bias and Knowledge: Two Metaphors." In *An Introduction to Implicit Bias: Knowledge, Justice, and the Social Mind*, edited by E. Beeghly and A. Madva. Routledge, 2020.

Bettcher, Talia Mae. "Trans Identities and First-Person Authority." In *You've Changed: Sex Reassignment and Personal Identity*, edited by L. J. Shrage. Oxford University Press, 2009.

———. "Trans Phenomena." In *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*, edited by G. Weiss, A. V. Murphy, and G. Salamon. Northwestern University Press, 2020.

———. "What Is Trans Philosophy?" *Hypatia* 34, no. 4 (2019): 644–67.

Berenstain, Nora. "Epistemic Exploitation." *Ergo* 3 (2016): 569–90.

Bicchieri, Cristina. *The Grammar of Society: The Nature and Dynamics of Social Norms*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Borgoni, Cristina. "Philosophy of Mind after Implicit Biases." In *The Political Turn in Analytic Philosophy: Reflections on Social Injustice and Oppression*, edited by David Bordonaba Plou, Víctor Fernández Castro, and José Ramón Torices. De Gruyter, 2022.

Brownstein, Michael, Alex Madva, and Dan Kelly. *Somebody Should Do Something: Stories and Science of Social Change*. Manuscript submitted to MIT Press.

Cherry, Myisha. "The Errors and Limitations of Our 'Anger-Evaluating' Ways." In *The Moral Psychology of Anger*, edited by Myisha Cherry and Owen Flanagan. Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.

Colombetti, Giovanna, and Joel Krueger. "Scaffoldings of the Affective Mind." *Philosophical Psychology* 28, no. 8 (2015): 1157–76.

Del Pinal Guillermo, and Shannnon Spaulding. "Conceptual Centrality and Implicit Bias." *Mind and Language* 33, no. 1 (2018): 9–111.

Dembroff, Robin. "Cisgender Commonsense and Philosophy's Transgender Trouble." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (2020): 399–406.

Eickers, Gen. *Scripts and Social Cognition: How We Interact with Others*. Routledge, 2025.

———. "Are All Emotions Social? Embracing a Pluralistic Understanding of Social Emotions." *Passion: Journal of the European Philosophical Society for the Study of Emotion* 2, no. 1 (2024).

———. "Pathologizing Disabled and Trans Identities: How Emotions Become Marginalized." In *The Bloomsbury Guide to Philosophy of Disability*, edited by S. Tremain. Bloomsbury, 2023.

Guenther, Lisa. "Critical Phenomenology." In *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*, edited by G. Weiss, A. V. Murphy, and G. Salamon. Northwestern University Press, 2020.

Hale, C. Jacob. "Suggested Rules for Non-Transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals, Transsexuality, Transsexualism, or Trans ____." 1997. https://hivdatf.files.wordpress.com/2010/09/suggested-rules-for-non-modified.pdf.

Harding, Sandra. "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is Strong Objectivity." *The Centennial Review* 36 (1992): 437–70.

Hess, Ursula, and R. B. Adams Jr., K. Grammer, and R. E. Kleck. "Face, Gender, and Emotion Expression: Are Angry Women More Like Men?" *Journal of Vision* 9, no. 12 (2009): 1–8.

Hufendiek, Rebekka. *Embodied Emotions: A Naturalist Approach to a Normative Phenomenon*. Routledge, 2016.

Hutchins, Edwin. *Cognition in the Wild*. 2nd ed. MIT Press, 1996.

Kimoto, Tamsin. "Merleau-Ponty, Fanon, and Phenomenological Forays in Trans Life." *APA Newsletter on LGBTQ Issues in Philosophy* 18, no. 1 (2018): 16–21.

LeBoeuf, Celine. "The Embodied Biased Mind." In *An Introduction to Implicit Bias: Knowledge, Justice, and the Social Mind*, edited by Erin Beeghly and Alex Madva. Routledge, 2020.

Lugones, María. "Tactical Strategies of the Streetwalker/Estrategias Tácticas de la Callejera." In *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.

Maiese, Michelle, and Robert Hanna. *The Mind-Body Politic*. Springer Verlag, 2019.

Maitra, Keya, and Jennifer McWeeny. "Introduction: What Is Feminist Philosophy of Mind?" In *Feminist Philosophy of Mind*, edited by Keya Maitra and Jennifer McWeeny. Oxford University Press, 2022.

Malatino, Hil. *Side Affects: On Being Trans and Feeling Bad*. University of Minnesota Press, 2022.

Marvin, Amy. "A Brief History of Trans Philosophy." *Contingent Magazine* (2019).

Pismenny, Arina, Gen Eickers, and Jesse J. Prinz. "Emotional Injustice." *Ergo* 11 (2024).

Ratcliffe, Matthew. *Rethinking Commonsense Psychology*. Palgrave, 2007.

Salamon, Gayle. "The Sexual Schema: Transposition and Transgender in Phenomenology of Perception." In *You've Changed: Sex Reassignment and Personal Identity*, edited by Laurie Shrage. Oxford University Press, 2009.

———. *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*. Columbia University Press, 2010.

Scheman, Naomi. "Queering the Center by Centering the Queer: Reflections on Transsexuals and Secular Jews." In F*eminists Rethink the Self*, edited by Diana T. Meyers. Westview Press, 1997.

———. "Against Physicalism." In *Feminist Philosophy of Mind*, edited by Keya Maitra and Jennifer McWeeny. Oxford University Press, 2022.

Schlicht, Tobias. *Philosophy of Social Cognition*. Palgrave, 2023.

Shapiro, Lawrence. "Embodied Cognition." In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Cognitive Science*, edited by Eric Margolis, Richard Samuels, and Stephen P. Stich. Oxford University Press, 2012.

Siegel, Susanna. "Bias and Perception." In *An Introduction to Implicit Bias: Knowledge, Justice, and the Social Mind*, edited by Erin Beeghly and Alex Madva. Routledge, 2020.

Slaby, Jan, and Shaun Gallagher. "Critical Neuroscience and Socially Extended Minds." *Theory, Culture, and Society* 32, no. 1 (2015): 33–59.

Snorton, C. Riley. "A New Hope: The Psychic Life of Passing." *Hypatia* 24, no. 3 (2009): 77–92.

Spaulding, Shannon. *How We Understand Others*. Routledge, 2018.

Srinivasan, Amia. "The Aptness of Anger." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 26, no 2 (2018): 123–44.

Thompson, Evan. *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind*. Harvard University Press, 2007.

Thompson, Evan, and Mog Stapleton. "Making Sense of Sense-Making: Reflections on Enactive and Extended Mind Theories." *Topoi* 28, no. 1 (2008): 23–30.

Thonhauser, Gerhard. "Phenomenological Reduction and Radical Situatedness: Merleau-Ponty and the Method of Critical Phenomenology." *Genealogy+Critique* 9, no. 1 (2023): 1–18.

Tzima, Sofia, and Jan Slaby. "Political Philosophy of Mind: Inverting the Concepts, Expanding the Niche." *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*. Forthcoming.

von Maur, Imke. "Taking Situatedness Seriously: Embedding Affective Intentionality in Forms of Living." *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (2021).

Vosgerau, Gottfried, and Nicolas Lindner. *Philosophie des Geistes und der Kognition: Eine Einführung*. J.B. Metzler, 2021.

Wylie, Alison. "Why Standpoint Matters." In *Science and Other Cultures: Issues in Philosophies of Science and Technology*, edited by Robert Figueroa and Sandra G. Harding. Routledge, 2003.

Zawidzki, Tadeusz. *Mindshaping: A New Framework for Understanding Human Social Cognition*. MIT Press, 2013.

Zurn, Perry. "Puzzle Pieces: Shapes of Trans Curiosity." *APA Newsletter: LGBTQ Issues in Philosophy* 18, no. 1 (2018): 10–16.

———. "The Path of Friction: On Hale's 'Rules' for Accountability to and within Trans Communities." *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (2023): 71–85.

Zurn, Perry, and Dani S. Bassett. *Curious Minds: The Power of Connection*. MIT Press, 2022.