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# “You’re the Whitest Black Person I Know”: Speaking Back to Microaggressions Through the Poetics of Interruption

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## ABSTRACT

Anti-Black and anti-woman animus is packed into brief and subtle communication exchanges including seemingly mundane moments like jokes and compliments. The lasting negative effects of microaggressions call for what we deem *poetics of interruption*, a Black feminist intervention that dynamically responds to interstices of oppression. Through the creative retelling of a conversation that leads up to and follows the microaggression “You’re the whitest Black person I know,” we demonstrate how the poetics of interruption holds interlocutors accountable to structural and interpersonal power imbalances through purposeful dialogue. Practicing a poetics of interruption refigures language with an anti-sexist, anti-racist aim to refute the passive-aggressive postracial language of microaggressions.

## KEYWORDS

Black feminist methodology; gendered racial microaggressions; intersectionality; poetics of interruption

## Introduction: Interrupting gendered racial microaggressions with Black feminist poetics

*Imagine talking candidly via video chat with your friend Karen. You have recently applied for a job, and Karen, a white friend from childhood, is the first person with whom you share your news and nerves. As a young first-generation Black woman finishing your last year of college during a pandemic, you express doubt about the potential for an interview. Karen’s voice rings through the call: “Don’t worry. You’re the whitest Black person I know. You’ll get an interview. I’m sure of it!”*

*Your mind goes into a frenzy. “You’re the whitest Black person I know.” Is this a joke? A compliment? A denial of your identity? Because this is a friend you trust, you feel caught off guard. Confusion, disappointment, and shock creep into your throat, words too thick to speak. What exactly are you supposed to say?*

*This friendship is not new to issues of race, as the two of you have shared personal anecdotes and debated controversial topics like education, health care, and incarceration. In 2016 you marched together in the Womxn’s March, where she pressed you when you brought a #BlackLivesMatter sign and not a Womxn Power one like hers. But last year you marched together in protests against the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Tony McDade. You’ve shared the countless opportunities that passed over you due to discrimination and the hateful things that strangers have said, including commenting on your “unique” name while repeatedly mispronouncing it. Although Karen has comforted you*

*in the past, in this moment, “You’re the whitest Black person I know” befuddles you. It frustrates you. It hurts.*<sup>1</sup>

This article explores how to interrupt the often-ambiguous gendered and racial microaggressions coded in interpersonal communication that illustrate misogynoir, a term coined by Moya Bailey (2013), which describes the intersection of anti-Black, anti-woman prejudice. Just as Kishonna Gray (2020) writes that “intersectional tech ... render[s] visible ... (dis)orderly social hierarchies and arrangements” in digital spaces, our Black feminist methodology, which we call a *poetics of interruption*, highlights the disorder of race/gender discrimination in dialogue (p. 1). Our poetics not only illuminates power inequities between individuals but, because it is architectural (Lorde, 1984, p. 38), also interrupts the structures that instantiate such interpersonal dynamics. In our experience as participants in and facilitators of microaggression workshops, people who dole out microaggressions tend to deny their harmful nature.<sup>2</sup> Drawing from personal accounts shared during the Interrupting Microaggressions (IM) workshops, which is a section of the Interrupting Privilege program, our analysis speaks back to the interpersonal articulations of intersectional, structural racism that are deployed in everyday communication.<sup>3</sup> Explicitly anti-sexist, anti-racist linguistic resistance such as our poetics of interruption occurs at the level of quotidian interpersonal exchange yet has the ability to dismantle “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” the imbricated social structures that perpetuate cultures of domination (hooks, 2013, p. 4). This intersectional practice not only refuses misogynoir but, as a praxis predicated on theories of difference and identity, also attends to the specific interstices of various minoritized subject positions. It can be boiled down to one simple idea: changing language changes lives.

Advocating for the intersectional poetics of interruption begins with first recognizing communication as fundamental to identity. As race-dialoguing practitioner Ijeoma Oluo (2019) notes, “[A]ll oppression in race, class, gender, ability, religion ... began with words” (p. 138). Race, gender, and class are intertwined in the crucible of communication, a site Tina M. Harris and Kimberly Moffitt (2019) describe as “perpetuating, identifying, processing, and responding to race-based interpersonal transgressions” (p. 67). A poetics of interruption does not just reorganize communicative practices but also uproots the grammars of intersectional violence (Joseph, 2017; Spillers, 1987).

Communication remains a quotidian feature of marginalization, a space where microaggressions register as “insults and indignities” or “subtle attacks and invalidations” which are interpersonal and environmental (Sue, 2010, p. 8; Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011a, p. 40; Gómez, 2015, p. 125). They occur between strangers in line at the grocery store, parents at PTA meetings, and employers and prospective employees during job interviews. Microaggressions can even take place among close companions during intimate and vulnerable encounters. We address how to interrupt microaggressions using two communicative methods: asking questions and punting.

Time and again we have encountered perpetrators who, ironically, rely on microaggressive language as evidence for denying sexism and racism. To refute having committed a microaggression, an aggressor may say, “I was just joking,” “Stop being so sensitive,” “Don’t take my comment out of context,” or “You know my heart.” Yet, as Crenshaw (1991) explains, implicit in such a rebuttal is the “assumption that racist representations are injurious only if they are intended to injure” (p. 1293). With our

exemplar microaggression—“You’re the whitest Black person I know”—the speaker, who is a friend, iterates no explicit statement of inferiority. Nevertheless, the target receives the statement as racist because the speaker *implies* inferiority.

Derald Wing Sue (2010) has argued microaggressors may not be aware of the impact of their statements; in this vein, we argue that the speaker’s intent is not the sole determinant of meaning. We follow the critical policy studies adage from Wornie Reed (2009): “impact over intent” (p. 63). Denial is the foundation for many microaggressions.<sup>4</sup> To claim that positive intent should elicit positive reception ignores the sociopolitical powers at play, thus illuminating the reality of the encoder’s complicity in such hegemonic structures. Although their subtlety and slipperiness make them difficult to suss out, elusive microaggressions can unearth biases latent in everyday exchanges.

The difference between intent of encoder and perception of decoder reveals multiple meanings.<sup>5</sup> An “interactional perspective” of this communication exchange examines the relationship between the encoder and decoder by seeing dialogue as a site of constant negotiation and structural forces (Stamp & Knapp, 1990, pp. 290–291). Critical rhetorician Leah Ceccarelli (1998) suggests that in addition to “a close reading of the text itself ... one must conduct a close reading of the receptional evidence” (p. 410). Our work rhetorically enters through the decoder’s position, prioritizing an understanding of the dialogic impact beyond the individual encounter. Microaggressions deployed against Black women are racialized and gendered. As our two examples will demonstrate, a poetics of interruption resists misogynoir-infused communication with Black feminist dialogue despite the different meanings inferred.

Regardless of the speaker’s intent and the method of delivery, the statement’s potency can manifest as an ignorant joke, a backhanded compliment, and overall, a denial of someone’s identity. The comment is packed with intersectional nuance, and its meaning and impact shift dramatically depending on the relationship between interlocutors.<sup>6</sup> We demonstrate how a poetics of interruption provides minoritized people with ways to dismantle power using the master’s tools—in this case, language—not to dismantle the master’s house but to build a bridge for neighbors communicating across difference (Lorde, 1984).

We write from the position of Black women interrupting a particular anti-Black microaggression from a white woman. In 1977, the Combahee River Collective (2000) declared that because of her social position at the bottom, when we attend to the intersecting oppressions that impact a Black woman, we inherently attend to all others who are valued above her. Therefore, her freedom catalyzes the “destruction of all systems of oppression” (p. 267). While we believe that anyone can implement a poetics of interruption, the ways in which we negotiate a response to harmful jokes and backhanded compliments are specific to misogynoir.

In the next section, we revisit the opening scenario and explain how such a comment is never just a joke but, instead, is always a microaggression loaded with misogynoir. We then propose asking questions as a method for countering the comment’s harm. Later, we consider the comment as a backhanded compliment and discuss how punting is a form of interruption that allows the target to respond no matter how much time has passed since the microaggression. Questioning and punting are “microinterventions” that challenge biased behavior and policy (Sue, Calle, Mendez, Alsaïdi, & Glaeser, 2021, p. 30). Interruption halts the flow of one-sided communication such that interlocutors

are held accountable to participating in a dialogic relationship. A poetics of interruption creatively refigures language to dialogically refute the passive-aggressive postracial language that animates microaggressions.

## Questioning “just a joke”

### *Building poetics of interruption from a politic of disruption*

We propose a methodology for dialogic communication across difference. For Dreama Moon and Michelle Holling (2015), possessing a “politic of disruption” entails “race(ing) intercultural communication.” In addition to the vital disruptions of an academic discipline that Moon and Holling name, interpersonal interruptions provide blueprints for social change. Picking up on a similar political ethos to Moon and Holling, we mirror the verbal “confrontation” practices that Harris, Janovec, Murray, Gubbala, and Robinson (2019) identify among students of color in the South (p. 77). Building on Moon, Holling, and Harris et al.’s work in the discipline of communication studies, our intervention challenges the everyday ways in which we all practice communication. Our poetics of interruption strategically alters the script.

In the vein of Chela Sandoval’s (2000) methods for countering dominant ideology, we practice a method of “semiotic-mythology, which works by reading the signs of power, and then self-consciously deconstructing them, through interrupting” the flow of relation between form and meaning (p. 108). This practice is poetry. Drawing on the term *poesis*, meaning “to make something new,” we place emphasis on the act of reappropriating language as action rather than glossary correction (Lorde, 1984, p. 116). A poetics of interruption transforms the rigor and ethics by which we listen and reflect prior to acting (Ohito & Nyachae, 2019). Our methodology reframes communication to afford targets of microaggressions the opportunity to speak back through an economy of words as resistance. In the words of communication scholar Richard Wright (2003), African Americans do language “to continually recreate themselves and their world(s)” (p. 93). Audre Lorde (1984) warns her readers that failing to speak back to oppression does not immunize them from its harm, stating “your silence will not protect you” (p. 41). Lorde tethers language to action, noting that speaking is not only a form of protection but also a way to create new worlds of possibility.

*Is it ever “just a joke”?*

*Let’s revisit the time when you were on a video call with your friend because you were nervous about receiving a callback for a potential job interview. Following her comment—“You’re the whitest Black person I know”—Karen’s eyes crinkle as her mouth turns up and the slightest hint of a laugh escapes. Are you also supposed to smile and chuckle?*

*This isn’t the only time you’ve heard this joke. You recall when Karen called you “twofer,” estimating in the diversity, equity, and inclusion calculus that you count for both race and gender. You remember brushing aside her rueful snort when she lamented not being “lucky” enough to be invited to your Black Student Union meetings. You recollect grimacing at her other favorite term for you: “golden token.” She says these things as though you are a unicorn, as if the world is your oyster.*

*Your mind races. You ask yourself: “Am I being oversensitive? Should I find this funny? Do I not have a sense of humor?” You wonder: “Am I exaggerating? Why does Karen think this would make me laugh? Would she tell this joke to anyone Black—or just me?”*

*This comment triggers an indescribable force inside you. You cannot just let this go. You do not want to let this go. You have so much to say, yet your mouth stays shut. Your eyes lower. Karen is staring at you, waiting for you to respond—something to show that you heard her. But you are frozen. You’re angry. You’re confused. You are in disbelief. Yet your lips remain sealed.*

Calling the statement “You’re the whitest Black person I know” a joke demonstrates microaggressions as “the hallmark of power to define reality” (Gómez, 2015, p. 126). What appears as humorous to the perpetrator of this microaggression rests on willful ignorance of the material barriers that Black women face. In other words, to find humor in statements like these, one must iterate the language of postracialism while benefiting from a racialized hierarchy. As Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) writes, “[T]he [racist] joke ... frequently reinforces patterns of social power” (p. 1293). This microaggression, like other microaggressive jokes, reinforces structural oppression.

Further, this iteration of the phrase—“You’re the whitest Black person I know”—is not just racialized, it is gendered, and as such it gains meaning because it targets a Black woman. Jokes that pin the racialized subject always involve the gendered subject as well (Smith, 1998). Holling (2019) conceptualizes *intersectional microaggressions* as “everyday (non)verbal and/or environmental images or indignities, regardless of intention, that highlight activation of a controlling image that communicates hostile, disparaging, or negative messages based on two or more intersecting identities” (p. 109). It is no coincidence that Black women are caught between a double bind of stereotypes when facing racism and sexism (Griffin, 2012; Joseph, 2018, pp. 77–79; Morgan & Bennett, 2006; Springer, 2007; Walley-Jean, 2009). The “Angry Black Woman” and the “Superwoman” tropes are mediated microaggressions that refuse the Black woman a voice for herself. Both are racialized and gendered “controlling images” where she simultaneously signifies as abject and exotic (Collins, 2009; Wallace, 1979). An example of this double bind can be seen in the downplaying of contributions of Black women in the workplace because Black women are perceived as simultaneously threatening and inferior (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Hunt, 2016). Being bound to contradicting stereotypes, as poet and scholar Bettina Judd (2019) argues, “makes apparent the immediate threat that Black women experience by speaking and being” (p. 178).

The force of these converging pressures, invalidations, and insults constrains the lived experiences of Black women. Communication embroiled in the grammars of oppression produces inequitable physiopsychosocial costs: The perpetrator gets a laugh, and the target pays for that laughter. For the target, the comment hurts; it reveals her position as vulnerable, under attack, and devalued. In addition, the perpetrator’s inability to recognize the flop of the “joke” demonstrates not only a lack of empathy but also a complicity in systems of power.

Like Crenshaw (1991), we believe that “claims that incidences of such humor are just jokes and are not meant to injure or to be taken literally do little to blunt their demeaning quality” (p. 1293). Therefore, getting caught up in a debate over whether the comment is in fact a joke does little service to the target. Although such perpetrators may believe grounding these comments as jokes pardons them, they are not excused from

creating a moment of interpersonal oppression with broader social implications. Although the surface of the joke places the target in proximity to whiteness, its underlying punchline simultaneously delineates a permanent exclusion from whiteness and its unearned benefits. In this joke, the one-two punch hinges on drawing the “whitest Black person” close in order to reject her, meanwhile denigrating other Black folks in the process.

### ***“Say what?”: The poiesis in a Black woman’s question***

A handful of coping resources are available to a Black woman to combat this microaggression. Like a knight, she might feel the urge to layer on armor and fortify herself against the harmful words coming her way. Perhaps shielded by apathy, she can prove to her friend that she will not be defeated by a joke. Performance scholar Kemi Adeyemi (2019) claims that apathy allows queer Black women to acknowledge oppression through a refusal to be hailed as a target. While armoring with apathy may illustrate resistance, alone it does not demonstrate a poetics of interruption. Rather than stopping the harm, this response can unintentionally send the message that the target is unaffected by such communicative violence. There are times when apathy may be appropriate, as we note later in examples of punting. However, in contrast, we begin by proposing questioning as a poetic method for interrupting immediately.

Asking a question acknowledges the microaggression while refusing the double bind of anger and immortal strength. The response of “Say what?” charts a new course of active engagement after a stultifying exchange. Lester Olson (1998) notes how asking the oppressor a question puts “at risk ... not only a sense of self, place, and society, but also knowledge of one’s own complicity with oppression” (p. 448). Questioning provides a practical and popular application of how a poetics of interruption can transform a microaggression into an intervention.

Responding to the microaggression rather than the ostensible joke interrupts the flow of communication; instead of proceeding forward through laughter, attention is brought to the tension caused by the injury. Questioning brings both interlocutors into a shared reality. If the target is meant to bear the burden, then pausing the conversation in that precise moment instead hails the perpetrator to take responsibility. Sustaining the conversation by asking a question reveals the transformative power of a poetics of interruption. According to Ruth King (2018), an international teacher of meditation, “[W]e must be willing to exchange comfort for racial consciousness and to be more curious than critical or dispirited” (p. 13). Responding to the microaggression with “Say what?” makes space for a disparaging encounter, through critique, to become a site for inquiry based in accountability. We leave this section with a creative imagining of how questioning works as a *poetics of interruption*.

*Imagine that instead of staring doe-eyed, or instead of laughing or letting the whole thing blow over, you interrupt the microaggression with questions. What if you took a breath and asked your friend, “What do you mean I am the whitest Black person you know?” All that you have done is restated what she said, tacking a question mark to the end. You simply took what didn’t sound right and sent it back to the messenger asking for clarification. What if instead of sulking off in silence, you spoke your truth through questions: “Do you actually*

*think I am white? What am I supposed to get out of that comment? When you say I am the whitest Black person you know, do you understand that I feel invalidated and unheard?" Rather than being burdened by internalized misogyny, these questions open both of you up to the possibility of a different outcome.*

Questioning is a poetic form of interruption that foments change through dialogue. When a Black woman is confronted with the intersectional microaggression "You're the whitest Black person I know," she experiences misogyny. Responding with a question—such as "What do you mean?" or "How am I the whitest Black person you know?"—poetically interrupts normal flows of communication that work to keep her oppressed. It takes what is being communicated and reorganizes the words toward new kinds of meaning. Such questions challenge interlocutors to be held accountable to a history of power dynamics infused in the language of that momentary exchange. "Say what?" colloquially seizes the transformative potential laden in interpersonal communication by refiguring the possible conditions for relation. In the following section, we explain how coping practices alone are insufficient solutions to microaggressions because they do not uproot the structural violence embedded in communication across difference. We propose punting, or returning later to challenge a microaggression, as another form of poetic interruption. When responding immediately to a backhanded compliment with a question is not possible, punting becomes an alternative to coping.

## **When coping is not enough: Punting a backhanded "compliment"**

### ***Not just coping, not just resistance***

Our poetics of interruption is distinct from coping. Existing research documents various types of microaggressions,<sup>7</sup> as well as how minoritized people experience and cope with the detriments of microaggressive communication.<sup>8</sup> We first navigate how "You're the whitest Black person I know" is microaggressive even if intended as a compliment. Then we interrupt it using the tool we teach in our Interrupting Microaggressions workshop called punting. Punting has two parts: pausing and choosing to not respond in the moment, then circling back at a later time for the interruption.

Our research addresses how to directly respond to microaggressions when they occur interpersonally, building on the research around the impact of microaggressions, specifically physiological and psychological impacts (Chae, Nuru-Jeter, Lincoln, & Jacob Arriola, 2012, p. 104; Hope, Velez, Offidani-Bertrand, Keels, & Durkee, 2018, p. 26; Sanchez, Adams, Arango, Flannigan, & Kivlighan, 2018, p. 214; Thurber & DiAngelo, 2018, p. 17). Racialized and gendered distress impacts health outcomes and life expectancy rates, manifesting genetically through weathering and psychologically through what Smith, Allen, and Danley (2007) call *racial battle fatigue*.<sup>9</sup> We build on this body of work by providing not simply a coping device but, rather, an interruption mechanism to prevent the need for such coping.

In the small but burgeoning literature on intersectional microaggressions, Lewis et al. (2016) approach coping with a focus on gendered racism and distinguish between resistance and coping strategies. Coping is the attempt to mediate or deal with experiences of discrimination. Black women cope with the impact of microaggressions in several ways, such as disconnecting, internalizing, self-blaming, "community sanity checks,"

“armoring,”<sup>10</sup> “self-care,” and reclaiming stereotypes. While these coping mechanisms are not the same as our poetics of interruption, they illuminate the vital role that women of color communities play in fostering protective, anti-sexist, anti-racist spaces of love and healing. Yet embracing or reclaiming stereotypes such as the strong Black woman, for example (Davis & Afifi, 2019), does not necessarily interrupt microaggressions; nor does it mitigate the continued need for such healing spaces.

According to Cheryl Woods-Giscombé (2010), African American women take on the Superwoman role as a counternarrative to negative stereotypes. In place of the mammy, welfare queen, and tragic mulatta stereotypes, Black women who embrace the Superwoman role demonstrate incessant strength and leadership. They are never swayed by anger or desire. The pressure to become a Superwoman stems from an inability to ask for help, therefore creating disproportionate health issues such as panic attacks, hair loss, and depression (p. 678). Although the Superwoman schema affords Black women a way to create images of power, it does not provide straightforward options for interrupting oppression. Perhaps counterintuitively, the appearance of immortality can perpetuate the onslaught of harm.

Scholars continue to express a need for better ways to counter microaggressions. For example, Amie Thurber and Robin DiAngelo (2018) contemplate how to respond to microaggressions as witnesses, targets, and perpetrators; Audra Nuru and Colleen Arendt (2019) survey how women of color respond to microaggressions in the digital space using “active confrontation,” “casual consciousness,” and “aggressive confrontation” (p. 85). While these scholars unearth responses to harmful communication, Christy Byrd (2018) provides a workshop for developing such self-defense tactics using confrontation. In a similar vein, a poetics of interruption merges scholarship with lived experiences and responds to microaggressions using direct acts of prevention rather than coping. It offers healing through resistance.

Even if punted at first, to ask a question is to speak against hegemony as much of the literature on coping with microaggressions points to. Resistance demands that “paradigms shift—that we learn to talk—to listen—to hear in a new way” (hooks, 1989, p. 15). As communication scholar Shardé Davis (2018) notes, Black women are “transforming discursive practices into weapons of self-protection and fighting against hostilities” (p. 312). Different from “talking back” (hooks, 1989, p. 5) or “aggressive confrontation” (Harris & Abbott, 2011), a poetics of interruption creates new dialogic grounds for communication across difference. Like “active confrontation,” it transforms facing interpersonal and intercultural oppression from a solitary act into a relational engagement (Harris & Abbott, 2011, p. 298; Nuru & Arendt, 2019, p. 93). Moving silence into speech is “a gesture of defiance that heals” (hooks, 1989, p. 9). When Black women speak back, they revolutionize the master’s tool from one of colonization and domination to one that heals relationships (hooks, 1989).

“You’re the whitest Black person I know” and other similar microaggressions may be intended to give hope and dissuade doubt in the prospect of a stressful situation such as a job interview. But when hope is cloaked in racism, as in our example, it only hurts. While Smith et al. (2011a) suggest that “social support is an effective and adaptive coping strategy in dealing with mundane racism” (p. 39), this becomes complicated when one’s own social network is the source of the microaggression. Coming from a friend,

the comment induces racial battle fatigue. Comments that deny a person's racial and gendered identity "serve the function of allowing perpetrators not to have to acknowledge their power and privilege" (Gómez, 2015, p. 126) through the use of postracial rhetoric where "frank discussions of difference can be impossible" (Joseph, 2018, p. 13). When those who experience microaggressions exhaust coping strategies and their resistance tactics fail to heal, punting, or waiting for a more opportune time to speak back, provides a poetic method for interrupting. In other words, when torn between healing and fighting back, it is okay to take pause.

### **Punting: Pause first, then return to the backhanded compliment**

*You can't stop obsessing about that moment. "You're the whitest Black person I know" plays over and over again in your head, yet this time you ask yourself if your friend meant it as a compliment instead of a joke. But why did your friend choose that so-called compliment? Is it because of your clothes, your hair, your jewelry? Is it the way you talk? Your education? Is there a specific way Black people should act? How are you "acting white"? What does that even mean?<sup>11</sup> What gives her the right to say this to you?*

*You've convinced yourself that addressing Karen directly will only make things worse. She will likely produce a quick, dismissive response to anything you say. Or worse, she might begin crying dreaded white woman tears, saying that you are attacking her when she is just trying to be nice. You imagine saying, "You know my racial identity is important to me. Why would you say something like that?" But you can already hear her response: "Woah, I know that race is a touchy topic for you, and this is a trying time. I was just trying to cheer you up." By the time you have convinced yourself that what happened was not okay, it feels like too much time has passed to say anything. You are tired. You deal with this sort of thing every day, and you really don't have the energy to fight with a friend. A chuckle slips out as you laugh to yourself for being tired of feeling tired. Karen sighs in relief (that you are the "nonconfrontational type") and changes the subject. But you know that even though you are choosing not to respond now, you will respond later.*

Microaggressions are so difficult to interrupt precisely because they are linguistically complex; they do not say what they mean. A microaggressor might make a comment that is intended to read in one light as a joke and in another as a compliment. Jennifer Gómez (2015) notes that the "attributional ambiguity" of "microinsults" and "microinvalidations" are "often hidden under the guise of a compliment." Reading the comment as a compliment reveals the ways in which "the viewpoints of the dominant culture are reinforced through perpetrator imposition" (p. 126). Perpetrators prioritize their understanding of Blackness and its relation to whiteness, rather than regarding the Black individual's embodied understanding of his or her own Black experience.

In this exemplary moment, your friend has offered a consolation that is perhaps intended to uplift your spirits while navigating structural misogynoir in employment practices. Yet structured as a compliment, the statement "You're the whitest Black person I know" reveals the deepest of slights in the form of a microaggression, even (or perhaps especially) if between friends. Taking the microaggression at face value, being "like white" is better than being Black. As a joke, the phrase hyperbolically suggests that whiteness—and the concomitant privileges it confers—is indelibly far from achievable; delivered as a compliment, it suggests the person's proximity to whiteness is valuable while Blackness is undesirable. While compliments and jokes are generally understood

as positive, in this case, all potential outcomes of “You’re the whitest Black person I know” are negative. If the target identifies the comment as microaggressive, then they are likely to embody the impact of such harmful rhetoric. On the other hand, should the decoder accept the comment as either a joke or compliment, the microaggression might become internalized.<sup>12</sup>

However, we acknowledge that the moment when a backhanded “compliment” registers may not always be the easiest time to interrupt. Rhetorical events initiate “an active force” that is generative and impactful (Wright, 2003, p. 85), particularly on the body. For example, Tina Campt (2017) unpacks the affective importance of understanding muscular tension as “visible manifestations of psychic and physical responses” to oppression (p. 51). Being left alone, frozen at the site of the rhetorical event, produces a “slow death,” to borrow Berlant’s (2007) term. Performing a poetics of interruption can be a way of resisting such tension as part of daily survival. Because interruption resists the flow of communication as usual, it has the ability to rectify the past.

A poetics of interruption seeks less to respond, as do forms of coping, and more to prevent. Microaggressions not only smack the target once but also continue to pummel the target unless interrupted. Therefore, the punting tool allows targets an opportunity to release the grip of the rhetorical event by providing space in the moment for the victims to not have to respond. Later, the targets can choose to return to the incident, hailing the perpetrators to return to that moment as well. Doing so disrupts the sustained power forces that allow privilege to reign. When punting, the target registers what has occurred but takes as much time as needed to respond to the perpetrator. We imagine a poetics of interruption using punting in response to the “compliment” of “You’re the whitest Black Person I Know” in this fashion:

*While you punted on responding directly in the moment—it’s been days, weeks, even months now, and you can’t bear to return Karen’s texts because of what happened—you still want to address the microaggression. Your friend needs to hear how what she said was a denigration of who you are and not a compliment. Though you’ve delayed your response, you’ve thought about it every day since.*

*So, you take a deep breath, call Karen, and ask her if she wants to go get coffee. After sitting down, you begin to conjure the scenario and bring the uncomfortable statement into the space. You begin what you imagine will be an easy way for your friend into the conversation, saying, “This isn’t about being ‘like white.’ It is about how people racialize my name as Black and how anti-Black racism prevents me from getting interviews.” Or maybe you say, “Hey, remember when you said I was the ‘whitest Black person’ you know? What did you mean by that? Why did you choose to say something like that to me? It sounded to me like you didn’t think being Black was a good thing.” In this last example, you draw on both punting and questioning.*

*You exhale at the immediate relief you feel of finally getting this off your chest. At the same time, Karen’s shoulders slump as your interruption halts her chipper mood: She is forced to confront her ignorance and implicit biases. You talk it out, perhaps a little longer than you’d like, and she still manages to cry some. You know this won’t be the last time you punt her microaggressions, as she will again be microaggressive, and you will again not have the energy to interrupt it in the moment. But something is also different, things feel a bit restored, and possibility opens for this friendship where you can hold the differences between you, together.*

## A Black feminist community method for interrupting microaggressions

### *A Black feminist intervention is intersectional*

A commitment to community-engaged scholarship centers the communities from which we come; our communities are diverse among multiple intersecting axes and rich with knowledge and practices. Rather than try to eliminate the “biases” and “even out” our differences, we embrace the ambiguity that resides in the margins, approaching language as a radically open space for “new, alternative, oppositional aesthetic acts” (hooks, 1989, p. 15). Our research emerges from women of color feminist-led, anti-racist, community-based workshops on microaggressions that work to inoculate against silence. As women of color scholars/practitioners who regularly experience microaggressions, we witness how subtle expressions of misogynoir, painful as they are, can be transformed into sites for understanding culture, power, and privilege. In this section, we explain how a poetics of interruption is an intersectional Black feminist intervention that can be taken up by anyone and used beyond the specific microaggression “You’re the whitest Black person I know.”

As bell hooks (1989) has aptly explained, “[F]or us, true speaking is not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless. As such, it is a courageous act—as such, it represents a threat” (p. 8). Black feminist interventions are a threat because they are intersectional. They attend not only to racism but sexism as well. In the face of being seen as a threat, our proposed methodology exposes the intersecting ways that gender and race stack up to build such a facade.

For example, as Claudia Rankine (2014) poetically describes in *Citizen: An American Lyric*, when a Black woman approaches the house of a new white woman therapist during her scheduled appointment time, the therapist snaps for her to “get away.” As a Black woman she is misrecognized as a vagrant, a burglar, an intruder—anyone other than the paying client that she is. Rankine demonstrates that while the speaker may “mean no harm,” the target experiences much detriment that is specific to her social position as a Black woman.

Looking solely at race or gender is not enough to capture the effect of this microaggression for a Black woman. Interpersonal mechanics as well as larger structures shape the context of the encounter. Nursing professor Laura Serrant (2020) claims that intersectional analysis surfaces the “screaming silences” within the individual and group understandings of Black women’s health. Not only are Black women subject to the harmful effects of racial and gendered microaggressions; because of their social position they also experience substandard access to health care, insufficient treatment, and discrimination. Proponents of intersectional methods for interpreting how disparities manifest at the crossroads of gender, race, and health call for further research on the subject (Bey, Jesdale, Forrester, Person, & Kiefe, 2019; Caiola, McGee, & Harmon, 2015; Jackson, Williams, & VanderWeele, 2016; Krieger, 2020; Krieger, 2000; Williams et al., 2012). As clinical psychologist Gómez (2015) has theorized, institutional betrayal within the field of mental health is a way toward understanding the systematization of microaggressions. Being turned away from a scheduled therapy appointment is the confluence of racism and sexism, along with other potential modes of discrimination based on

sexual orientation and class, that takes place not just between two individuals but between overlapping groups of people and health care institutions.

As Rankine's example illustrates, the threat of a microaggression is magnified because of misogynoir. Without an intersectional Black feminist analysis, complex and ambiguous microaggressions operate in ways that allow perpetrators to defend themselves while the target alone puzzles through layers of meaning. As Valerie Smith (1998) explains, "[R]ace and gender principally—but also sexuality and class—function as interrelated ideologies that can produce relations of domination and subordination but can also operate as sites of social change" (pp. xxii–xxiii). Our goal with a poetics of interruption is that everyone can seize the opportunities for social change by reconceptualizing how we communicate with one another using Black feminist intersectional interventions.

### ***Why intersectional interruption is for everyone***

One does not need to be a Black woman to experience, witness, and interrupt intersectional microaggressions. Smith (1998) takes this notion further, arguing that "black feminism is not a biologically grounded positionality" (p. xv), which means anyone can read, or in Serrant's (2020) case, listen for the imbricated structures that manifest materially as oppression in Black women's lives. Anyone can utilize a poetics of interruption. While you cannot simply fit data on Black women into existing communication theories, "the goal of sharing insights about black women and communication does not preclude a scholar from adding to knowledge about the general nature of the communication process" (Stanback, 1988, p. 29). A poetics of interruption enables communicators to break down oppressive structures by surfacing what is latent through the act of speaking back.

Speaking back is poetry, and for Black women poetry is a theoretically informed and embodied practice (Christian, 1987; Lorde, 1984; Walker 1972/1994). Applied to the broader academic realm, the power of poetics illuminates how impartial scholarship remains a fallacy (Ono, 1997), and work that blends creative and academic prose as well as the political with the personal provides a greater lens into our multiple realities (Griffin, 2012; Lorde, 1984; Madison, 2000; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981). As power operates best when unnoticed, enacting interruption requires an awareness that structural barriers are elusive. Such insight exposes the insidiousness of inequality. Calling out systemic oppression requires understanding and acumen as it is hidden and woven into the tapestry of intercultural, interpersonal, verbal, and nonverbal communication.

For example, in our workshops, a number of young Black men lamented the fact that they are often assumed by fellow white students, faculty members, and alumni to be athletes. These students identify being labeled "athlete," as opposed to "student," as an intersectional microaggression that values them only for what their Black masculine bodies bring to the football field and not for what their minds bring to the classroom. However, when these students speak back to these microaggressions, some white community members dismiss the students' perceptions, saying things like, "When did complimenting someone on their wonderful athleticism become an insult?" This microaggressive denial of how Black athleticism is at odds with intellectualism

demonstrates how words alone instantiate gendered racism. Interrupting microaggressions must be taken on by everyone, everywhere.

Our praxis in countering microaggressions is not just reading and observing from afar; it is also striving to practice our own poetics of interruption daily. We draw this research from the space between theorization and daily embodied practice, focusing on creation and not just criticism (Murphy, 1992). Training participants to interrupt microaggressions encourages them to actively speak back while also celebrating the ways in which our communities already resist power. Even more, our collaborative writing further speaks back to “the absence of non-white scholars from the canon of communication across all subfields” (Chakravartty, Kuo, Grubbs, & McIlwain, 2018, p. 255). A poetics of interruption can be performed by anyone, and we all benefit from it.

In our striving to enact a poetics of interruption, we may also perform microaggressions ourselves. Therefore, we aim to practice not just interruption but also self-reflexivity and community accountability. We understand that while a poetics of interruption is a tool available to everyone, it may not be the appropriate tool each time someone experiences a microaggression. There are always multiple power differentials at play that potential interrupters must consider. Such power differentials are exactly what predicate the microaggression’s structural ability to harm. It may be easier for someone with the wealth, popularity, and status to make a grand gesture of resistance than it would be for someone who lacks those privileges.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, addressing one microaggression, while doing the healing work of resistance, does not end all microaggressions. A poetics of interruption is an intersectional Black feminist response that is accessible to anyone and benefits everyone by seizing the subtleties of everyday language and massaging the gendered racism out of it. Its efficacy strengthens as more people take it up in practice.

### ***“The transformation of silence into language and action”: A conclusion for intersectional microaggressions***

In almost every Interrupting Microaggressions workshop and more broadly in our work, we have repeatedly encountered various forms of “You’re the whitest Black person I know,” the microaggression we examined throughout this article. Microaggressions may occur unintentionally; perpetrators often decry in rebuttal: “I didn’t mean it like that” or “It was not my intent to hurt you.” They might even say “Come on, it’s just a joke!” or “Why can’t you take a compliment?” Yet using the words, sentence structure, and tone as evidence of good intention negate neither how the recipient of the microaggression perceives the communication exchange nor how the oppressive nature of that communication may be internalized. Words are not floating signifiers evacuated of history and meaning; rather, as Hortense Spillers (1987) writes, “[S]ticks and bricks *might* break our bones, but words will most certainly *kill* us” (p. 68; emphasis in the original).

Microaggressions such as “You’re the whitest Black person I know” and its cousins “You talk so white for a brown guy,” “I always forget you’re Black,” and “You really are pretty for a Black girl” use everyday language as a sly tactic for invalidating the reality of a marginalized person’s life. In each instance, whiteness is posited as the desired goal for the Black subject while Blackness remains defined and confined by whiteness.

“You’re the whitest Black person I know,” like so many other microaggressions, represents a denial not only of race and gender but also of the current structures of power and the material influences of that power in our lives. Nevertheless, this particular microaggression demonstrates how a difference in meaning between the encoder and the decoder does not nullify the impact of language. The communication exchange exists within a shared sociopolitical power context, even as one member of that communication dyad might work to invalidate the other’s context by subtly infusing a communication exchange with everyday gendered racism exemplified by postracial quips such as “You know I didn’t mean it like that” or “Don’t be so sensitive.” Regardless of the method of delivery and the rhetoric, if the person on the receiving end decodes the language as microaggressive, the encoder must be held accountable for his or her part in the construction of meaning.

When we are hit with a microaggression, we are often frozen in place by a mental stun gun. The impact stirs up a dizzying array of questions: “Did he really say that to me? Did she really mean that? Am I being oversensitive?” If the target is left frozen in the place of the microaggression, the perpetrator is free to move on without accountability. Therefore, racialized and gendered hierarchies reinforced by the power of everyday language prevent interlocutors from having equitable interpersonal communication. Interruption intervenes in harmful interpersonal communication flows and kinetically restructures relational linguistic possibilities with structural implications. We utilize a methodology that bridges listening into action and interpersonal interruption into dismantling structural inequities.

We organized this article into two parts coinciding with two possible pathways wherein one may first notice the microaggression, interpret the perpetrator’s intentions, embody the impact, and then interrupt. The first scenario interpreted the comment as a joke and proposed questioning as a tool for interruption. The second scenario considered the comment intended as a compliment and contemplated the use of punting as a tool for interruption. Drawn from a composite of experiences and affective patterns within our community, we explained how a poetics of interruption can restructure the way we communicate, thus rerouting the racialized and gendered flows of interpersonal exchange.

A poetics of interruption is a way to harness the power of language so that we might collectively begin to take our power back from moments of interpersonal racial and gender inequality. A poetics of interruption does not destroy the possibility for communicating across differences. Rather, it addresses the harmful slippages of language, accumulated over time and rooted in a particular sociopolitical context, and offers a new mode of navigating across differences within communication. This is not merely an idealistic statement of creating connections and community through shared responsibility. It is an acknowledgment that the aggressor and the target live, connect, and communicate in an unequal, exploitative culture and among historical structures of power where the privileges of some shore up inequality for others. In that social fabric, work for equity is not simply education and dialogue but also self-reflection, the ability to acknowledge and leverage privilege, and the ability to wield language as a tool for justice. But interruption is not a one-time task. Therefore, to close, we forecast the next likely scenario for our young Black woman to encounter.

*It happened again. You can't punt this time, and you don't want to ask questions. While at your new job, you catch yourself holding your breath, not wanting to respond to the annoying coworker who is determined to make your life a nightmare by questioning your grammar, touching your hair, and mocking your name. Your job security feels at stake if you stir the waters too much. Besides, you just started working here. But you know that you cannot remain silent. You take a breath and check in with yourself. Do you have the energy right now? You know you can choose to stay silent, but you decide you must speak now. Coaching yourself through this poetics of interruption practice, you prepare by looking the coworker in the eyes. "I value you as a colleague," you begin, "and what you said really hurt me. Can we talk?"*

## Notes

1. The use of italics signifies a creative form of writing that dramatizes a common internal process of dealing with interracial microaggressions. Regardless of who says this particular microaggression, it can hurt; however, in this article, we reenact a particular gendered and racial power dynamic between a Black woman and a white woman.
2. This exploration has been collaborative from the beginning. We thank those who contributed in participation or in research, especially Dr. Gina Aaftab, former Center for Communication, Difference, and Equity assistant director, whose instruction stoked our collective interest in this case study, as well as Jhasmine Cadiente, Jhanelle Cadiente, and Jenny Cai, three undergraduate students who copresented an earlier version of this article at the 2019 Western States Communication Association with Meshell Sturgis. As a form of public scholarship, none of this work would be possible without the support and engagement of the vast communities to which we each belong.
3. The Interrupting Privilege program at the University of Washington's Center for Communication, Difference, and Equity brings together students and community members from across Seattle for intergenerational conversations about race, racism, and its intersections. All data collected from the Interrupting Microaggressions workshops have undergone institutional review board approval through the University of Washington, STUDY00003443.
4. This particular comment is constructed in a complex and ambiguous way that crosses over different microaggressions we have encountered in the larger Interrupting Privilege research project. Drawing on data from the Interrupting Microaggressions workshops, we found that microaggressions were delivered via several methods, including (1) questioning the target; (2) "complimenting" the target; (3) denying the existence of racist/sexist behavior; (4) finding humor at the target's expense; (5) making assumptions about the target or target group; and (6) ignoring the target.
5. Hall (2001) notes that effective communication between interlocutors is "not given by nature . . . it is the result of a set of social conventions" (p. 22), as "all meanings are produced within history and culture . . . the reader is as important as the writer in the production of meaning" (pp. 32–33).
6. There is a difference between structural racism and interpersonal exclusion (which may be the case in an intraracial instance). However, within an interracial communicative exchange across the gender spectrum, we account for structures of racism and sexism when weighing the inequities of power.
7. See Decuir-Gunby and Gunby (2016); Holder, Jackson, and Ponterotto (2015); Lewis et al. (2016); Nadal (2011); Nuru and Arendt (2019); Pierce (1970); Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, and Torino (2007); Sue (2010); Sue and Sue (2010).
8. See Edmondson Bell and Nkomo (1998); Franklin (2019); Hernández and Villodas (2019); Lee and Hopson (2019); Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, and Huntt (2013); Sanchez et al. (2018); Smith et al. (2007); Smith, Hung, and Franklin (2011a, 2011b); Torres-Harding, Andrade, and Diaz (2012); Woods-Giscombé (2010).

9. See Carlisle (2014); Chae et al. (2012); Franklin (2019); Hernández and Villodas (2019); Holder et al. (2015); Lewis et al. (2013); McEwen (1998); Smith et al. (2011a); Woods-Giscombé (2010).
10. Armoring is a coping strategy meant to protect oneself from the effects of racial oppression. Edmondson Bell and Nkomo (1998) define it as a “psychological buffer for self-protection” against both racism and sexism (p. 292).
11. In a study of African American youth, Burrell, Winston, and Freeman (2012) argue that “the meaning of race-acting is varied and complex,” noting that “students’ conceptualizations of race-acting appear to reflect ‘dominant cultural meanings’ as well as meanings that challenge master narratives of race” (pp. 95–107).
12. For more on the physiological effects of internalized racism, see Hipolito-Delgado (2010), Molina and James (2016), and Tull, Wickramasuriya, Taylor, and Smith-Burns (1999).
13. We self-reflexively notice the power differences even between the two authors: one of us a graduate student and the other tenured faculty.

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