

## **Disrupting Polarization in Discourses of Terrorism, the Environment, and Race: The Generative Possibilities of Dialectical Innovation**

**Elizabeth Dickinson, PhD**

Assistant Professor of Communication  
Kenan-Flagler Business School  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
McColl Building; Chapel Hill, NC 27599, USA

**Karen A. Foss, PhD**

Professor  
Department of Communication and Journalism  
University of New Mexico  
MSCO3 2240; Albuquerque, NM 87131, USA

**Yea-Wen Chen, PhD**

Assistant Professor  
School of Communication Studies  
Ohio University  
Lasher Hall 007; Athens, OH 45701, USA

### **Abstract**

*This study examines how highly polarized issues can be interrupted and renegotiated through a rhetorical device that we call dialectical innovation. We analyze three popular texts—a South Park episode called Imaginationland, an Oprah Winfrey Show segment on freeganism, and a blog and book titled Stuff White People Like—to explore the commonly polarized topics of terrorism, the environment, and race. Drawing from the theory of dialectical disorientation, we illustrate how these artifacts uniquely interrogate polarized perspectives and open up a rhetorical space for audience members as individual agents to pursue their own generative possibilities. Facilitating this process is a rhetor within the texts who unsettles polarization and encourages generative rhetorical responses.*

**Keywords:** polarization, dialectical disorientation, dialectical innovation, terrorism, environment, race

News headlines repeatedly announce increasing polarization in the United States around important public issues (Arman, 2007; Balz & Cohen, 2011; Lynch, 2010). Recent examples include the passage of healthcare reform without a single Republican vote; a Congressional standoff on raising the debt ceiling; and divided opinions about taxation, abortion, immigration, and military involvement, to name a few. There is little indication that the extreme alignment of people into differing political and ideological camps will decrease, and pundits predict that it will only worsen (Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008; Smerconish, 2011).

Polarization is the subject of much scholarly inquiry, including how communication patterns, ideologies, fear, geography, and media influence the ways in which people conceptualize and position issues. Findings suggest that the more individuals and groups talk about an issue, the more extreme their views will become (Mackie, 1986; Sia, Tan, & Wei, 2002; Sunstein, 2009). Additionally, in times of fear, such as after the events of September 11, 2001, individuals tend to divide the world into two camps—those like them and “others”—to try to restore a sense of certainty, security, and civility. The “us versus them” produced in this process reifies stereotypes and solidifies beliefs. Moreover, polarization is linked to geography, with U.S. Americans living today in largely politically and culturally homogenous communities (Bishop, 2004). Geographic isolation tends to decrease access to differing views, which can heighten already extreme perspectives. Additionally, media contribute to intensifying polarization; not only are there more mediated outlets and technologies to express views, but individuals tend to seek and consume media that reinforce, accentuate, and further polarize their beliefs (Abramowitz, 2011). The result is often reciprocated diatribe, in which those on each polarized side vilify the opposition as misinformed, ignorant, and evil (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997). Here, we examine three texts on commonly polarized subjects—

terrorism, the environment, and race. Our first text is *Imaginationland*, a three-part episode of the television comedy *South Park* that tackles the topic of terrorism. President George W. Bush first used the phrase “war on terror” after September 11, 2001; over ten years later, the United States continues to debate its role in the “war on terror” in highly polarized ways (Harmon, 2008; Rasmussen Reports, 2011; Ruby, 2002). Second, an *Oprah Winfrey Show* on freeganism illustrates the genre of environmental discourses. Debates about global warming and carbon footprints demonstrate the continued polarization that frames environmental topics. Third, the blog and book *Stuff White People Like* offers a distinctive reading on the highly contested issue of race in a deliberately humorous way.

In this essay, we first draw from and then extend Rasmussen and Downey’s (1989) rhetorical theory of *dialectical disorientation* to consider the rhetorical possibilities for interrogating highly polarized issues. We argue that the three texts analyzed here feature alternative ways of interrupting and renegotiating polarization. We then identify a process we label *dialectical innovation*, which opens up a rhetorical space for audiences as the individual agent to pursue generative possibilities of their own. Aiding this process in each artifact is a rhetor who interrupts polarization and encourages generative rhetorical responses on the part of the audience.

### **Dialectical Disorientation**

Dialectical disorientation is a term coined by Rasmussen and Downey (1989) to describe a distinct pattern of change in which contradictory positions within a text are managed, not through integration or synthesis but through “disorientation” or the loss of certainty, clarity, and focus. Dialectical disorientation occurs when a text not only presents but heightens and complicates the tension between two irreconcilable and competing perspectives (Rasmussen & Downey, 1989). Rasmussen and Downey distinguish dialectical disorientation from other dialectical patterns, identified by Rushing and Frenz (1978), in that it does not integrate or transform competing positions but highlights them, preventing one position from prevailing. Dialectical disorientation’s distinctiveness lies in how it terminates fictitious unity, resulting in a paradoxical “*acceptance of the uncertainty and ambiguity of the human condition*” (Rasmussen & Downey, 1989, p. 68, emphasis in original). Moreover, what is inadequate is not one side or another but choosing between the two.

Rasmussen and Downey develop dialectical disorientation in their analysis of the 1985 film *Agnes of God*, which follows the trial of a nun (Agnes) who is tried for killing her newborn baby. Two life worlds emerge in the film—a *linear* world, symbolized by the court system and a psychiatrist’s testimony and a *holistic* world that is created by Agnes’s nonlinear world of faith and serenity. In juxtaposition to each other, the flaws become evident in both life worlds, and the only possible outcome is to “accept an ambiguous, uncertain, and imperfect world” (Rasmussen & Downey, 1989, p. 81). In another study, Rasmussen and Downey (1991) use dialectical disorientation to examine Vietnam War films. They position two dialectical perspectives—*moralism* and *militarism*—in tension to show how films are capable of producing a “reasonable but incomplete account of imperfect events” (p. 190).

Other scholars have joined Rasmussen and Downey in elaborating the functions of dialectical disorientation in film. Terrill (1993) applies the concept to the 1989 *Batman* movie, contending that because of the movement toward integration and the hero’s violent opposition to that integration, the film’s resolution is not an acceptance of uncertainty but a “violent suppression of uncertainty and thus continued psychic chaos” (pp. 320-21). Klien (2005) analyzes the war movie *Black Hawk Down* and argues that the film creates disorientation between war policy and the soldier fighting the war: “How does one, after all, oppose war and support the soldiers who make war possible at the same time” (p. 444)? Analyzing another film, *Dead Man Walking*, Dionisopoulos (2010) develops dialectical disorientation by suggesting that audiences experience disorientation when they realize they have accepted simple answers to the complex societal dilemma of capital punishment.

In this essay, we incorporate, elaborate, and extend the understanding of dialectical disorientation in three ways. First, we seek to articulate more fully a possibility that Rasmussen and Downey briefly mention: dialectical disorientation’s generative possibilities. Rasmussen and Downey contend that “rhetorically, ‘disorientation’ becomes generative by promoting and fostering constructive examination of the nature of existence” (1989, p. 81). We return to this generative potential, suggesting how dialectical disorientation encourages audiences to innovatively construct new positions from conflicting narratives. Moreover, this study contributes to a growing interest in better understanding discourses of “civility” and “incivility” in the public arena. Second, we suggest that in polarized discourses, both sides do not need to be explicitly articulated; the presence of one worldview can

imply the opposite. Dialectical disorientation, then, does not require both positions to be present within a text. The artifacts we analyze represent a continuum—a text in which both sides are clearly described (*Imaginationland*), one in which one side is articulated and the other implied (*The Oprah Winfrey Show*), and one in which both sides are implied but understood (*Stuff White People Like*). Finally, we propose a new mode of dialectical management that emerges from this process—*dialectical innovation*—adding to the possibilities for dialectical change. This new mode of dialectical management is evident across various media—a book and blog, a television show, and a cartoon—suggesting the broad applicability of this mechanism of change.

### **Dialectical Disorientation in Discourses on Terrorism, the Environment, and Race**

The artifacts we examine offer three unique examples of renegotiating opposing perspectives. In *South Park's Imaginationland*, terrorism is positioned dialectically as both real and imagined. In a freeganism segment of the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, two polarized environmental discourses emerge—overconsumption and precycling. In *Stuff White People Like*, two perspectives on race are implied—colorblindness and white superiority. Each text positions two distinct worldviews, each of which offers a coherent narrative of a position when considered alone. When considered in relation to the other, however, the limitations of each position emerge. Accepting either alternative becomes problematic, because “such acceptance constitutes a flawed, inadequate choice” (Rasmussen & Downey, 1989, p. 66). Rather than leaving the audience with uncertainty, the tension between competing positions is mediated in these artifacts by a rhetor who uniquely straddles both narratives, unsettles polarization by refusing to take sides, and encourages generative rhetorical responses on the part of their audiences as a result.

### **Terrorism: Real Versus Imagined**

Terrorism has become an inescapable topic in media, public, and interpersonal discussions. To interrogate terrorism, we chose *Imaginationland*—a three-part *South Park* episode. The episodes aired on October 17, 24, and 31, 2007 (Southparkstuff.com, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c), and they are among the most popular in the show's history. In the episodes, the show's characters—children from the fictional Colorado town of South Park—discover and enter a portal into the imagination where they are confronted with terrorists who have attacked the collective imagination of U.S. Americans. The children—Stan, Kyle, Cartman, and Butters—work with the government to eliminate the terrorists, most notably via a plan by adults to nuke the imagination. *Imaginationland* places both narratives—terrorism as a real problem that can be resolved through military intervention and terrorism as social interpretation—side by side in ways that call on audiences to understand both the potential and limitations of each narrative.

**Terrorism as real.** Terrorism typically is defined as the systematic use of terror for the purposes of coercion through acts that create a sense of collective fear, deliberately target or disregard the safety of innocent people, and achieve a radical ideological goal (Meisels, 2008). Events such as September 11, 2001, and the subsequent “war on terror” are used as evidence of the existence of broad terrorist networks that are a real threat to national security (Powell, 2011). *Imaginationland* incorporates this definition of terrorism. Adults in *Imaginationland* embody this “real” view of terrorism by positioning terrorists as identifiable, with a nuclear attack the only solution. For example, a military general argues, “We have no choice. Terrorists have attacked us where we are most vulnerable. There's no other option” (Southparkstuff.com, 2009b).

Consistent with many dominant U.S. discourses surrounding terrorism (Powell, 2011), in *Imaginationland*, terrorists are depicted as Muslims connected to Al Qaeda. A military general notes in the first episode: “Two days ago, Muslim terrorists hijacked our imagination ... They've been linked to Al Qaeda” (Southparkstuff.com, 2009a). This theme continues when the terrorists send a message through their child hostage, Butters, who is made to say: “This is the price you pay, America! You have defiled Allah, and now we will turn your imagination against you! Death to the Infidels” (Southparkstuff.com, 2009a)! Muslim terrorists, military and political intervention, and nuclear warfare are all attributes commonly associated with terrorism.

The reality of terrorism is further heightened by a sub-plot in which two of the boys, Cartman and Kyle, make a bet about the existence of leprechauns. If a leprechaun appears, Kyle has to suck Cartman's balls; if it does not, Cartman has to pay Kyle ten dollars. The leprechaun does appear and warns of an upcoming terrorist attack, and Cartman tries to get Kyle to honor the bet. The threats, coercion, and bullying that dominate this subplot parallel the military aggression used to deal with the major plot of terrorism.

**Terrorism as imagined.** In *Imaginationland*, a second competing and equally compelling narrative holds that terrorism is imagined or exists largely in our collective imagination.

Scholars have examined terrorism as a socially constructed framing of events; how terrorism is defined, which acts constitute it, and who is considered a terrorist are issues of social interpretation (Calhoun, 2002; Gole, 2002; Jenkins, 2003; Taylor, 2002). Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis (2002) suggest that “what we expect, are ready to perceive and admit as (valid) experience” (p. 326) depends on the social imaginary. Imagination, in other words, is both constructed and situated: “our imaginary horizons are affected by the positioning of our gaze. But, at the same time, it is our imagination that gives our experiences their particular meanings, their categories of reference” (p. 327).

Puar (2007) argues that “certain desired truths become lived as truths, as if they were truths, thus producing material traces and evidences of these truths” (p. 39). The narrative that terrorism is imagined is evident throughout *Imaginationland*, beginning with the title of the episodes and an early scene where the imagination is under attack. In this scene, a military official announces: “Yesterday, at approximately 18:00 hours, terrorists successfully attacked ... our imagination” (Southparkstuff.com, 2009a). A television news anchor affirms the existence of the imagination by noting: “The Pentagon claims that because imaginary things are not real, the military doesn’t need Senate approval to nuke them” (Southparkstuff.com, 2009c). The reality of the imagination further is proclaimed by Kyle: “They *are* real. It’s all real. Think about it. Haven’t Luke Skywalker and Santa Claus affected your lives more than most *real* people in this room” (Southparkstuff.com, 2009c, emphasis in original)? After the children use their imagination to bring different things into reality, Cartman concludes: “What Kyle said about imaginary things being real and, Butters using his imagination? It makes me think that... well maybe we all have the power to make things a reality”(Southparkstuff.com, 2009c).

By positioning terrorism as imagined, *Imaginationland* calls into question the nature of terrorism, who can talk about it, and possible reactions to it. Terrorism is presented as a construct brought into being and “imagined” by humans and not a natural phenomenon. Yet, these human-produced systems become so powerful that they make us fearful of the terrorism we have constructed, and we end up terrorizing ourselves with our own thoughts and equating terrorism with our constructions of it. Essentially, this perspective holds that cognitive and social constructions of terrorism are just as important as how terrorism plays out materially.

**Dialectical disorientation in *Imaginationland*.** *Imaginationland* is distinctive in how it avoids privileging one side or pitting two perspectives against each other. Instead, terrorism as both real and imagined is given credence, and the dialectical tension between them is the essence of the plot. Within the episode, the perspective that terrorism is real is legitimate, having been given credibility by September 11 and efforts to defeat terrorism. But this narrative’s weaknesses become evident when juxtaposed with terrorism as imagined, such as the lack of attention it pays to other options; using nuclear warfare is the only answer adults offer. By focusing on terrorism as real and militarism as the response, other creative and effective alternatives are obscured.

Similarly, the position that terrorism is imagined is an intriguing possibility developed coherently within the episode, and it, too, has strengths. Terrorism is produced as part of the public imaginary, which means it can be reconceptualized and redefined—as the *Southpark* children do. Such reinterpretations productively could mitigate the powerful material consequences of the war on terrorism such as violence and stereotyping. But imagination alone is not likely to handle the complicated system that terrorism has become. Nor is the use of imagination a sustainable answer to terrorism—after all, the children in *Southpark* ultimately are forced to return to their everyday lives, where they are in fact grounded for their long absences into *Imaginationland*. Consequently this narrative, too, has its strengths and limitations. When positioned together dialectically, audiences cannot simply choose one side over another because there are merits and weaknesses to each position. The process of considering both positions is complicated by the children in *Imaginationland* who, as rhetors, create a rhetorical space by standing between terrorism as real and as imagined. The children are taken hostage by terrorists and spend time with adults who try to solve the “real” problem; yet, they simultaneously engage the space of the imagination, using the powers of *Imaginationland* to manage various aspects of the terrorist attack.

Children typically are not expected to speak seriously about important issues such as terrorism; the children in *Imaginationland* are often dismissed, which gives them even more room to explore the possibilities of the material-imagined intersection. By finding the portal into the imagination, crossing back and forth between real and imagined, and struggling in both spaces, the children are able to reflect on both. The children bridge both terrorist discourses and challenge the audience as the individual agent to (re)consider, (re)position, and (re)frame terrorism beyond both polarized options. Because each side’s weaknesses become apparent, the children illustrate the difficulty of simply choosing one side and moving on.

### **Environmentalism: Overconsumption versus Precycling**

Environmental discourses, like those of terrorism, often appear in highly polarized forms. For our second case, we chose the February 27, 2008, segment of the *Oprah Winfrey Show* called “Living on the Edge,” in which Winfrey and correspondent Lisa Ling explore “freeganism” (Hudson, 2008). Simultaneously a lifestyle and a political movement, freegans adopt unconventional practices to address excessive consumption.

Freegans generally believe that almost everything people buy is produced in a system that exploits people and the environment; precycling, or not consuming in the first place, confronts this system (Freegan.info, 2008). Freegans combat overconsumption through voluntary joblessness and environmentally friendly practices such as composting, gardening, and repairing. One eye-catching freegan practice, and the focus of the Oprah episode, is dumpster diving. Environmentalism is not presented as the larger frame for this segment, nor is precycling mentioned explicitly in the show, but precycling is constituted in relation to the narrative of overconsumption nonetheless, and both are situated within the environmental movement.

**Overconsumption.** The perspective presented by the episode on dumpster diving is that people create problems detrimental to human and environmental wellbeing by partaking in hyper-consumption. Within this model, a manufacture-consume-toss cycle permeates the way most U.S. Americans live; the nation relies on the consumption of natural resources to fuel its economy, and overconsumption determines how most people live and treat the environment. Illustrating this overconsumption and waste, freegans on the show provide examples of perfectly fine discarded goods that they find in dumpsters, including 100 bags of coffee, new bathroom rugs, 2,000 envelopes, a bed-sheet set, lotion, exercise equipment, furniture, eggs, yogurt, fresh vegetables, frozen pizza, ice cream, and dozens of bagels. Lisa Ling furthers the overconsumption narrative by pointing to how restaurants discard uneaten bread in breadbaskets and how cartons of eggs are tossed because one egg is broken. Winfrey reports that grocery stores throw away approximately two to three percent of items, to which Ling adds, “which is estimated to be about \$30 billion in food, which, again, could feed entire countries ... that’s our waste” (Hudson, 2008, pp. 15-16).

In the show, overconsumption is positioned as causing dysfunctional want and excess. One freegan guest notes how “we are slaves to buying and consumerism. The more we buy, the more we want” (Hudson, 2008, p. 3), while another adds, “I started looking at how much I was consuming and how consumerism is really driven by corporations who make lots and lots of money” (p. 3). Another freegan guest notes how hyper consumption creates human suffering: “People, you know, are suffering near the landfills, and the people who we’re harvesting the resources from are actually the ones who pay” (p. 16).

**Precycling.** The problem of overconsumption can be remedied by precycling—reducing consumption in the first place and salvaging waste. Freegans generally position precycling as a preferred alternative to mainstream solutions that promote “smarter” and “greener” practices, such as recycling. The goal of going green purportedly is to help preserve the planet’s resources, but in fact it does so without significantly affecting consumption levels. The implicit message of freegans is that although energy efficient light bulbs, hybrid cars, reusable bags for groceries, and recycling are beneficial, consumption is still involved. Such practices stay within systems of overconsumption that continue to perpetuate environmental damage because they demand money, resources, and energy to fix problems after the fact (Dauvergne, 2008; Landry & MacLean, 1993). Freegans engaged in a number of anti-consumer strategies including salvaging food and other products from dumpsters as a way to think differently about consumerism and environmentalism (Freegan.info, 2008). Many freegans can afford these products but choose to recover them to symbolically defy a wasteful consumer culture.

In the show, freegans and precycling are depicted positively. Freeganism is “fascinating” and an “alternative lifestyle” that is spurring a “grassroots worldwide movement” and addressing “wrong” consumer practices. Furthermore, freegans are normalized by being shown in their homes, which do not appear out of the ordinary, except that they are overflowing with recovered items, food, and even fresh flowers. Illustrating the precycling narrative in her commitment to not consume new items, one freegan argues, “You know, I would rather not have new clothes every year and not be using up all of the world’s resources” (Hudson, 2008, p. 2). Lisa Ling adds, “Freegans have decided to, kind of, turn their back on it [consumption] completely and stop buying stuff” (Hudson, 2008, p. 4). Thus, precycling is presented as normal and rational, and hyper-consumption becomes abnormal and illogical. Mainstream overconsumption is demonized as wasteful and dysfunctional, and precycling becomes a viable way forward.

**Dialectical disorientation in *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.** As in *Imaginationland*, the Oprah segment avoids favoring one side or setting both perspectives in opposition. The strengths of the overconsumption narrative in the Oprah segment are evident and do not need to be explicitly named. No longer just consuming to meet basic needs, shopping has become a form of entertainment, fueled by ever more invasive advertising and marketing.

Alternately, precycling's strengths are convincing as the hosts and guests tout the importance of deciding not to consume in the first place. When presented together dialectically, the weaknesses of each side emerge, making it difficult to choose one narrative over the other. In terms of overconsumption, the show does not address how to change consumer habits in ways most people consider reasonable or feasible. Furthermore, those who do not have the resources to consume what they need for a living let alone unnecessary items are left out of the equation. While it may make a political point, dumpster diving does little to stop overproduction or overconsumption; like most consumers, freegans end up collecting items they normally would not buy and do not need. As an example, one freegan guest salvaged an ab roller but admitted he never used it. Furthermore, it is unlikely that most viewers will dumpster dive because of social stigma. This narrative, too, has a coherence that is admirable but is not without its weaknesses.

Just as do the children in *Imaginationland*, Winfrey positions herself between the two perspectives, suggesting the values and weaknesses of overconsumption and precycling and asking viewers to question both. Winfrey acknowledges the powerful problem of each perspective, asking her viewers "to start thinking about, as I have started thinking about, how much you consume." (p. 5). Yet, Winfrey later questions dumpster diving and both narratives when she notes, "Our intention is not to get everybody, now, to start going to trash cans but to start thinking about how you can consume less" (p. 8). As the rhetor, Winfrey struggles with her own role when she notes: "Listen, my own being hypocritical is not lost on me. As I say, we'll talk about how you can consume less as we come right back, as I go to commercial break, as we go to a commercial to try to sell you some more stuff" (Hudson, 2008, p. 8). Winfrey adds that not going to commercials or turning off the TV "is called biting off your nose to spite your face" (p. 10). By interrogating both perspectives and admitting her own contradictions, Winfrey leaves it open and challenges her audience as individual agents to come up with their own ways of handling this issue.

### **Race: Colorblindness versus White Superiority**

To analyze discourses on race-based issues, we chose a popular blog and book titled *Stuff White People Like*. Created and released by Christian Lander in 2008, the blog and book expose the objects, activities, and practices that capture the tastes and values of "white people." In the manner of a pseudo-ethnographic investigation, Lander—who is white himself—gives advice in his blog on how to handle and win the hearts of white people by understanding the things they enjoy, such as "coffee" (#1), "'80s night" (#29), "Japan" (#58), "Halloween" (#113), and "rock climbing" (#150). The blog has been extremely popular and has attracted a plethora of news coverage (Conan, 2008; France, 2009; Rodriguez, 2008). Lander's book features the first 150 blog listings.<sup>1</sup> *Stuff White People Like* places two contradictory and commonly polarized narratives side by side—white superiority that assumes a racial hierarchy with whites on top and colorblindness that asserts that racial equality in the post-civil-rights United States has been achieved. In other words, one side holds that racial inequality still exists and racial stratification matters, and the other contends that racism has ended and race no longer matters. White people tend to fall on the side that race no longer matters while people of color tend to argue that it does.

Neither position actually is articulated within the book or blog, but both sides are called up by the artifacts. In fact, we believe that the dominance of discourses of race help account for the popularity of Lander's books and blog.

**Colorblindness.** Within *Stuff White People Like*, Lander exposes the often invisible and obscured concept of being white, which is considered obsolete in a colorblind society. Typically, racial adjectives describe people of color, such as African American, Hispanic, and Asian; in the absence of such markers, the individual is assumed to be white. As members of the dominant group, many white people typically think of themselves as being culture- and race-less and do not usually see or question their whiteness; nor would they consciously use the label *white* to describe their primary identity. That white people typically do not see themselves as a racial category—or as a group at all—is precisely Lander's point. Through factual assertions (such as "white people are ...," "white people love...," and "white people hate...") and reinforced by unsubstantiated statistics (such as "95% of white males have..."), Lander points to colorblindness by lumping individual white people into a racial group and

naming their preferences, thus making a lie of the colorblind narrative. In *Stuff White People Like*, colorblindness is reinforced by the dominant discourse of individualism that tends to position whites to think of themselves as individuals, instead of members of the privileged category of a white racial collective.

On one hand, some of Lander's descriptions of whites implicitly point to colorblindness, suggesting that racial inequality no longer exists. Examples such as desegregation and the election of Barack Obama are used as proof that racism has been resolved and that a colorblind society is now in place. On the other hand, Lander reinforces that white people are not used to thinking of themselves as a cultural group by singling out examples in which whites privilege their individualism. For example, in number 71, "being the only white person around," Lander explains how white people desire to be the only white person dining at a new ethnic restaurant or traveling to a foreign country, where, "nothing spoils their fun more than seeing another white person."

In other instances, Lander directly exposes a colorblind ideology by spelling out situations in which white people assume that racial inequality does not exist. For instance, in post number 62 "Knowing what's best for poor people," Lander explains what he considers a poorly guarded secret that "deep down, white people believe if given money and education that all poor people would be EXACTLY like them" (emphasis in original). Of course, this argument requires whites to continue "helping" people of color, which belies the equality that presumably has been achieved. Despite the belief, then, that colorblindness has been achieved, Lander in fact argues just the opposite in his book and blog.

**White Superiority.** Another story suggested by *Stuff White People Like* is that, opposed to a colorblind and race-free society, racism still plays an influential role in contemporary U.S. culture, and many whites enjoy superior or privileged positions in relation to most people of color. Because racism is visible, predictable, structural, institutional, mainstream and not a sporadic phenomenon (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller & Thomas, 1995; Delgado, 1995), whites enjoy unearned privileges due to the racial hierarchy in place.<sup>2</sup>

Through the unconventional yet deliberate outing of a white collective, Lander brings white superiority to the forefront of race-based discourses by flipping the gaze onto the dominant white group—specifically middle/upper class white liberals. Lander evokes white superiority through his consistent use of the adjective *white* to highlight a particular group of whites who enjoy higher tastes and can afford things that people of color should emulate. Lander highlights white superiority by exaggerating the *white* signifier and stressing the often shared but infrequently discussed habits and interests of many white people as a norm, such as having an Oscar party (number 74), loving the show called *Arrested Development* (number 38), and desiring to be the only white person at a new ethnic restaurant or in a foreign nation (number 71). By exposing and mocking how white people come to terms with their white privilege, the texts expose an oversimplified "acceptance" of white privilege. Moreover, several examples point to self-spectacularity, or the concept of standing out in a crowd. The very existence of the book and blog and its plethora of listed items name white people and bring them into the realm of consciousness. According to this perspective, there needs to be open and honest talk about race in the United States, especially among whites.

**Dialectical disorientation in *Stuff White People Like*.** This text indirectly presents the narratives of colorblindness and white superiority through Lander's different treatment of white people in relation to people of color, and each are commonly held beliefs in the United States. When presented together dialectically, the weaknesses of each become more apparent, making it difficult to choose one over the other. The narrative of colorblindness—that race no longer matters and that racial equality has been achieved—is a regularly held perspective. In the text, Lander illustrates this narrative by highlighting the many "colorblind" practices of white people. Yet, there are weaknesses to the colorblind story. One shortcoming emerges in how Lander (2008) positions white people, including himself as a veteran white person, as self-deprecating:

When white people attempt to put themselves down by making a joke around working too hard and not having a social life, they are saying that anyone who does have a social life is probably working less than them. If a white person is a self-proclaimed "nerd," all jokes around the topic are essentially their opportunity to say that they are smarter than you. (p. 138)

Here, white people put themselves down to show that they are not superior, but they end up reinserting superiority by suggesting people of color do not work hard enough. The result is a system that allows colorblindness to remain dominant and thus largely invisible.

Similarly, the format of a “how-to” guide for people of color to win the hearts of whites is in part responsible for the sarcastic humor in the artifact. Sarcasm here functions to elevate the white speaking subject through first pretending to put oneself down.

Essentially, Lander is suggesting, via the use of the second-person *you* that non-whites should seek to understand, if not emulate, dominant cultural practices of middle/upper-class white liberals. As a humorous narrative, this works, but in practice it can further perpetuate and reproduce dominant white cultural practices that already set the standard for things to do and like. Once again, people of color are responsible for “teaching” white people about race and racism.

At the same time, the narrative of white superiority—that race still matters and that racial equality has not been achieved—is another commonly held perspective. In the text, by highlighting the practices of a racial group that is not normally named, white superiority is implicated. By pairing the two dialectically, however, the weaknesses become more obvious. One significant weakness of this narrative is how Lander omits other cultural positionalities besides race. Lander uses the label *white people*, but in fact, his examples only include the cultural practices of middle- and upper-class, left-leaning white liberals. Numerous listings highlight practices that require access to money and leisure time, such as “Expensive Sandwiches” (number 63), “Taking a Year Off” (number 120), and “International Travel” (number 19). This middle/upper-class white liberal lifestyle further is captured by Lander’s statement: “All white people are expected to read the *Sunday Times*. You are given an exemption during your early college years, but by age 22 it is pretty much law” (2008, p. 57). Here, class is obscured as Lander does not name the class dimension of his examples. Moreover, in decontextualizing the historical, social, political, and economic forces that shape how middle/upper-class white liberals come to like and use certain things over others, the weaknesses of white superiority are easier to see. Each narrative by itself is understandable as a way to make sense of a situation from one’s own racial location. When juxtaposed against each other, it becomes possible to see that both narratives are problematic as well.

Straddled between the implied discourses of colorblindness and white superiority, Lander as rhetor illustrates both narratives but still oscillates between the two without having to choose and/or stick to one position over the other. By doing so, Lander opens up a discursive space for the audience as individual agent to generate their own positions. This liminal location simultaneously gives him the license to critique and make fun of other whites, and, at the same time, to embody the interests of white people because he himself is white. His positionality is revealed in his use of the pronoun *they*. He identifies with the white position but stands outside of it at the same time. From his perspective, then, both whiteness as visible and whiteness as invisible are narratives that have a coherent logic to them which he simultaneously understands and challenges and asks his audiences to do as well.

### **Conclusions**

Our analysis has suggested that positioning polarized topics within a rhetorical framework of dialectical disorientation can be instrumental in challenging ways of thinking, notably by creating two contradictory narratives that are coherent and logical when viewed alone. Yet, when positioned in dialectical relation to one another, the drawbacks of each emerge.

An adequate, acceptable choice cannot be made between them, effectively destabilizing both positions and opening up a rhetorical space for possibilities that can manage the tension in new ways. In the artifacts examined here, new possibilities are facilitated by rhetors—the children in *Imaginationland*, Winfrey, and Lander—who move between and negotiate the polarized stories, simultaneously affirming and questioning both. The rhetor, in other words, assumes a both/neither stance that suggests both narratives are flawed and that keep audiences from falling back on a polarized perspective. In the act of straddling the two positions, encompassing them, and then rejecting either position as suitable, the audience member is encouraged to follow suit.

In combination with the dialectical frame, the distinctive position of the rhetors in these artifacts can encourage the audience to think differently about these issues. When standing among two polarized endpoints, it is easier to understand the positive and negative dimensions of each position; they are highlighted in the contrast established between them. As a result, it becomes easier to consider other possibilities, especially when a rhetor enables this process. Interestingly, none of the three rhetors here actually articulate a middle position between the texts themselves. There may be not just one good answer in the middle but several or even innumerable ways to confront and negotiate the polarization. That the rhetors do not explicitly name or pick one middle option keeps the focus on the generative possibilities that call on the audience to step into the position of the individual agent.



Audience members cannot get stuck debating the rightness or wrongness of a middle alternative nor can they simply go along with whatever option the rhetor chooses. Instead, they are asked to be creative in finding their own space within the dialectic of the issue, using the various dimensions of each narrative as resources to resolve the polarization in a manner that works for them. Audiences are encouraged to contemplate, consider, and deliberate many possibilities rather than simply moving to one polarized end or to any particular position between. The strategy offered by these rhetors suggests a new pattern of dialectical discourse beyond that of dialectical disorientation. A new term is needed because the focus here is not on acceptance of chaos and ambiguity in human life; the focus is on generating options for understanding and engaging the world in new ways. We suggest the label *dialectical innovation* to highlight the process of sifting through the narratives on each side and crafting from the various dimensions of each to create a new story. Members of the audience, then, serve as creative accomplices to the rhetor; together they intervene in and potentially disrupt the polarization that is in place by contemplating and creating new ways to address an issue.

Whatever renegotiation takes place here, we do not insinuate that the process is quick and tidy. In fact, rhetors may not even be conscious of the ways in which they are setting up generative possibilities for their audiences. Certainly, none of these artifacts function in isolation; all kinds of other factors are operating and may influence how these and other artifacts are read and processed. Yet these artifacts suggest a model by which highly contested and polarized discourses can be renegotiated by rhetors who consciously and deliberately move to liminal positions and demonstrate and embody the movement asked for from the audience. We encourage other scholars to explicitly investigate what such a process looks like, what might facilitate and hinder audience members from exercising agency, and what impact such reinterpretations can have on the issue at large. In addition, the analysis of implied positions—not actually articulated in a text but evident nonetheless—suggests that scholars might productively pursue the implied as well as the explicit in future examinations of artifacts and texts. Moreover, while humor is not the focus of this study, each text uses humor, and a possible future area for investigation is how humor may contribute to dialectical innovation. Ultimately, we hope to see our theorizing tested with other polarized topics and texts to better understand the possibilities of dialectical disorientation and its extension to dialectical innovation for generating new ways of seeing.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>In 2010, Lander published a second book, *Whiter Shades of Pale*.

<sup>2</sup>This perspective has been espoused by academic scholars in the field of Critical Race Theory (e.g., see Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Delgado, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Lander's take on this issue has been popular, and this is one reason why we found this artifact intriguing.