
A Bridge Across Our Fears

Excerpts from the Annals of Bean¹

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A CONFEDERACY OF BEANS

On the first day of class, I recognize Bean immediately. Bean is a white guy who has taken every class I've ever taught. This semester, he has chosen a seat in the corner farthest from where I stand. He keeps his coat on with his hood up and tucks his head down as if this will make him invisible. Sometimes, Bean sits in the front row with his legs splayed wide before him so anyone who attempts to walk by him is likely to trip over his feet, but Bean never, ever sits in the middle. During some terms, Bean is a vocal participant in class discussion. In fact, sometimes Bean barely lets me get a word in edgewise. He stops me as I work my way through some key concept.

"Do I actually mean to say blah blah blah? Because blah blah blah, who is a very famous scholar of blah blah blah—whose work I am, perhaps, unfamiliar with says thus and so."

Sometimes Bean interrupts his classmates with "well-actualies" and "in-point-of-facts." And sometimes Bean seems to carefully compose lengthy speeches so as to make interrupting him not merely a challenge but an impossibility.

¹ Once, when I was young, I visited the Long Island summer home of a wealthy friend. Also visiting was a wealthy young man—the college chum of my friend's sister. This young man spent the week calling my friend's dad "Old Bean." My friend and I were both amused and annoyed by this nomenclature. "Old Bean" is a term of endearment sometimes used among American blue bloods on the East Coast, especially by young men who attend the same posh boarding schools in preparation for their further education at Harvard, Yale, Princeton, or Brown. "Old Bean" is the mark of shared privilege as well as of conviviality, of familiarity as well as class solidarity. My use of the name, Bean, marks the privilege Bean and I share and, in its strangeness, lifts the character of Bean up and away from the relative invisibility and normalization of whiteness, white privilege, white supremacy, and whiteness that is enabled when he is merely one among many.



Abstract

Grounded in critical race theory and employing counterstory, this excerpt from "the Annals of Bean" recounts the experience of a white and whitely professor contending with her white and whitely nemeses, which turn out not only to be her student, Bean, but also and perhaps especially, herself.

Key words

whiteness, white privilege, anti-racism, anti-racist pedagogy, counterstory

Sometimes, however—and this appears to be one of those times—Bean says *nothing*. His eyes, like a Nazgul's, burn beneath his hood. Occasionally, I catch a small smirk twitch his lips as I make some point or other or when a classmate speaks. At the end of class, a queue of students forms to ask a question that seems too personal to ask in front of classmates, to let me know about sports or family obligations, or simply to introduce themselves. Bean joins the queue, waving students lining up behind him to move ahead so he can be the last one to speak with me. He wants the last word. I sigh inwardly. "Oh, Bean," I think, "here we go again."

When at last the other students have departed, Bean grills me.

"What are the assignments for this course? What are the required readings? How will we be graded?"

Ironically, I designed this course, titled *The Discourse of Dissent*, to encourage students to press back against the rules of school that might constrain their ability to "claim" their education and assert their agency as learners, as Adrienne Rich once suggested. I have urged them to question authority—including my own. Somehow, I feel, Bean has missed the point.

"Bean," I say. "All of these things are in the course outline. Why don't you have a look at it and then come to my office hours with whatever questions still feel unanswered to you."

Bean appears not to have heard. As I pack up my things, he wonders whether I have made errors in the syllabus.

As I depart the classroom and begin my trek across campus toward my office, Bean trots along beside me, suggesting required readings: books he has read in other courses that might be better suited for this class than the texts I have chosen. As we arrive at my office door, I ask Bean as kindly as I can why it is that he chose this class. "What do you most want to learn?," I ask him.

Bean says, "I want to learn where that intersectional feminism thing comes from. I want to know where those girls went wrong and what to do about them."

Bean has made of his whiteness a fine art. In an essay entitled "White Woman Feminist," Marilyn Frye describes "being whitely (like being masculine) . . . as a deeply ingrained way of being in the world" (Frye). She writes that "whitely people generally consider themselves to be benevolent and good-willed, fair, honest and ethical" (Frye). Whitely folks are best equipped to judge, to preach, to martyr themselves or decide who should. Whitely people know what's right, and generally what's right is what they think, what they say, and how they say it. "Whitely people," says Frye, "have a staggering faith in their own rightness and goodness, and that of other whitely people" (Frye). As Black anthropologist John Langston Gwaltney says, "White people are not supposed to be stupid, so they tend to think they are intelligent, no matter how

stupidly they are behaving" (96). Bean embodies a kind of toxic stew of whiteness and masculinity. He takes up a lot of space no matter which version of white he is performing in any given semester.

Several years ago, I was sitting in a hotel bar with Neisha Anne Green. We had just met and would be presenting on the same conference panel the next day on the subject of anger as performance rhetoric. If the truth be told, we were spending as much time kvetching about annoying white women as we were giving one another feedback on our conference papers. We might have been on our second or third glass of wine when Neisha Anne got down to it.

"Frankie!" she said. "Frankie! I am so done. You gotta snatch your people, Frankie, cuz I am fucking OUT. I mean OUT."

We laughed. And we both knew she wasn't kidding.

I've travelled around to a lot of colleges and universities to talk about racism and teach antiracism. I am often asked by white faculty—mostly white women, to be honest—to prescribe just exactly *how* antiracist pedagogy is to be done. My experience has been, however, that no answer I give seems precise enough, direct enough to meet their needs. In my most frustrated and judgey moments, I think what the folks who demand a prescription really want is a way to *appear* to be doing antiracism work without having to read anything any Person of Colour has written, talk with any Person of Colour, let alone cite a Person of Colour. I think they want a way to *appear* to be doing antiracism work without having to take on their own internalized white supremacy, their own white privilege, and their own whiteness. They want to do the thing and get the credit without making the change. Hell, I wanna do that sometimes too. Change is hard. And when it comes to white supremacy, to racism, to whiteness, it seems like you make a change and then you fail. You make another change and fail again. The idea that as a white person you're ever going to be done with all the changing you need to do is some fierce kind of hallucination.

Neisha Anne says I need to snatch my people, says that's my job if I'm to be her accomplice in the struggle against racism. I stare at Bean as we stand outside my office door.

"Bean," I think, "you are first in line, pal! I'm going to work on you and while I do I'm going to learn to keep on working on myself."

Because you just can't snatch your people without snatching yourself too.

BEANISHNESS

One sunny autumn day, my students and I gather in a bright classroom for a discussion of social justice discourses. Today we are

beginning to explore, in the most tentative and precarious way, the rhetorical means by which folks are persuaded that they share common cause—or not—with other folk and the ways antiracist social movements in particular form and move from common cause to political action.

Bean is still sitting about as far away from me as he can get. He's a bit rattled by this course. There are a lot of smart Feminists of Colour in it and rather than avoiding Bean they choose to sit at the table he has chosen for his own. He has yet to make a contribution to class discussion this term, but today Bean is staring at me unblinkingly—his focus, his energy, his need to be heard vibrating in the air around his still form.

"Bean," I say, having decided that we might as well get things out on the table and that the other students are centred and strong enough to hear it. "Bean, you look like you've got something brewing in there? What's going on?"

"It's not what anybody says that makes *me* not join," he says. "I don't join because I don't really care. I don't have anything to gain, no skin in the game." Bean doesn't smirk. He means it and he's serious.

After class, Bean walks me to my office again. As we circumnavigate the Canada geese who waddle along our campus walkways, hissing if you meet their eye or come too close, Bean explains things to me:

"The problem," he says, "is that *these people* go too far, they're extremists."

"Who are 'these people,' Bean?" I ask.

He skirts the question. "What I mean is," as if I didn't understand his point, "*these people* make up problems and then they make those problems so huge and they aren't even problems to begin with."

"But Bean," I say, "who are 'these people?'"

"Like, take the Civil Rights Movement, for example."

I sigh inwardly. "Men," I think, "explain things to me—even young ones."

Bean is on a roll now. "The Civil Rights Movement, *they* didn't need to do all that stuff; everybody knew, I mean *everybody* knew that what was happening was wrong. *Everybody* knew."

"I'm not sure that everybody knew, Bean." I say. "To suggest such a thing is to elide history: 500 years of slavery, which clearly not everyone knew was wrong, but also the meagre measures of Reconstruction, the sabotage of Black people by Southerners and

sympathetic Northerners, the rise of Jim Crow, the lynchings . . ." I am about to say "that, frankly, continue to this day" because I'm on a roll now and getting a little, shall we say, het up.

But Bean interrupts me. "Are you sure? Because history shows that everybody knew."

I run through the possible responses in my head. I'm a bit stuck on the "are you sure?" and considering trotting out my CV. I'm even more stuck on the "history shows" and considering how I could name the thousands, literally thousands of books and articles by scholars across a host of disciplines that demonstrate the absurdity of his claim. But I'm utterly stuck on the "these people" and the "everybody." He will-not-say-the-words. But I know: as a teacher, as a scholar, and from my fifty-seven-year-old GUT I know—"everybody" is white people and "these people" are Peoples of Colour. Bean will not say the words but they vibrate between us. He is disguising his anger as I am disguising mine, and what he thinks is the ambiguity of those terms is his disguise. Mine is the teacher mode into which I have moved: the "Socratic Method" that buries my rage in the carefully phrased and nicely turned questions "Who are 'these people,' Bean?" "Where did you learn to think that, Bean?"

Bean, I realize, will be with me not only for the next eleven weeks but apparently forever. I have got to figure out how to get under this Bean's skin. But there are thirty-nine other students in my class—many of them students of colour. Why then do I feel so compelled to teach to and for Bean? I feel my body rising to meet my rage—at Bean, but also at myself. I breathe. My students and I will read together Barbara Deming's extraordinary essay "On Anger." In it, she writes that "there is clearly a kind of anger that is healthy. It is the concentration of one's whole being in the determination: this must change." "This kind of anger," she continues, "is not in itself violent—even when it raises its voice (which it sometimes does); and brings about agitation, confrontation (which it always does). It contains both respect for oneself and respect for the other. To oneself it says: 'I must change—for I have been playing the part of the slave.' To the other it says: 'You must change—for you have been playing the part of the tyrant.' It contains the conviction that change is possible—for both sides; and it is capable of transmitting this conviction to others, touching them with the energy of it—even one's antagonist."

Bean's anger is not the healthy kind. And God knows I'm trying, but mine isn't either.

I need to get away from Bean right now. I need to breathe, I need to think, I need him to step back! I need to step away.

"Bean," I say, "I will be very curious to hear your views once you've actually done some reading."

I step into my office and close the door. Still fuming, I sit in at my

desk staring at my bookshelves. I have no idea where to begin. I tell myself I am afraid of Bean: afraid of Bean's judgement, his derisiveness, his dismissiveness, that he may actually catch me out one day and publicly humiliate me. I have felt scorn for other white cisgender women who tut-tut about their own precarity and their worries about not being liked, their fluttery nervousness about making students and colleagues feel uncomfortable and about "putting their careers at risk"—as they justify inaction. This justification, I have often thought, serves to relieve white women who claim it of responsibility for intervening in or even speaking to the material realities of racism and white supremacy. Of course, to relieve oneself of that responsibility, however, is to lay it on someone else's shoulders: most often on the shoulders of Women of Colour. This is one way whiteness operates or, more accurately, one way white women employ whiteness to absolve themselves and, concomitantly, implicate People of Colour as the ones who must both act and bear the risks of acting. But I have been using my anger to disguise the degree to which I'm tapping into the same attachment to the comfort of privilege and calling that attachment "fear." That I can even consider *not* intervening should be, for me, an indication that it's time to check my privilege. I need time to do some come-to-Jeezus thinking. I need to ask myself, am I more concerned with Bean's anger than with the possibility of failing all of the students who are not Bean? Am I *that* white woman? That whitely woman? I have to snatch myself!

(MAKING) TROUBLE IN BEAN TOWN

In her essay "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," Audre Lorde writes that "poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before" (356). In the preface to his 1993 edition of *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*, Derrick Bell also advocates for literary forms—in this case, for allegory, narrative, and (counter)story as a means of illuminating the permanence of structural racism and, concomitantly, sustaining and encouraging resistance and hope. Derrick Bell aligns with Frantz Fanon in arguing that racism is "an integral, permanent, and indestructible component" of western society (xiii). In this context, Bell acknowledges the challenge he and other antiracist scholars, activists, and revolutionaries have faced in telling "the truth about racism without causing disabling despair" (xiii). Fanon, Bell notes, holds, simultaneously, two apparently contradictory perspectives: the first that structural racism possesses permanence and the second that resistance to structural racism is constituted in the iterative processes of creating the self in spite of and against racism's inevitability.

Noting Martin Luther King's recognition and embrace of the necessity to speak the truths about racism that "alienated rather than unified, upset minds rather than calmed hearts," Bell acknowledges implicitly, at least, that the point of writing against racism is to give to Peoples of Colour and Black People, in particular, that

affirmation and uplift that attends hearing the truth of their lived experience under racism—truth that structural racism systematically suppresses and denies. On the other hand, the creative practice of truth-telling, Bell suggests is, in fact, to agitate and unsettle: to "harass" white people—to make living in the white-supremacist world our people created, and that we participate in sustaining and reproducing, at least less comfortable and perhaps more miserable.

Perhaps, I reflect, these things are true for teaching as well as for writing against racism. The challenge is discerning how to uplift by affirming the lived experience of Students of Colour with racism *and* unsettle the complacency, the comfort, the privilege of white students in ways that are learningful for us all; to enact, model, and engage antiracist interventions in the real time of the classroom and beyond. Attending this challenge, for me as a white woman, is the necessity for awareness of my own enactments of privilege, of my own tendencies to slip out from under any responsibility to act. I must be willing to go wholeheartedly for critical self-reflection absent any conviction that I ever finish with this work. In the public spaces of the classroom, the hallways of my university, my office as I meet and talk with students, I will need to do this work for as long as I am working. I am unnerved, I think, by Bean and even more so by the immediacy of responsibility with which I am confronted as we speak. I tell myself I am afraid, then check myself.

To feel harassed and thus to be uncomfortable, to sense the precarity of one's position, one's commonplaces, one's commonsenses—to feel fragile—is not the same thing as to be afraid. Fear is a language the body speaks. The words "I am afraid" have no meaning in this tongue. What signifies instead may be the bitter taste of blood and bile. Perhaps a prickling along the scalp, a *frisson* that skitters up skin and down bone. A sudden immobility—the dreamlike inability to run as eye, ear, or some inexplicable sense of danger screams GO at frozen limbs. Fear has a grammar and a rhetoric, and from within the maelstrom between those two, the body shapes its utterances. The body speaks fear. What I feel, what Bean feels, is not and never was fear; this is not the language we are speaking. Whiteness simulates fear even as it insulates white bodies from fear's affects. Bean and I are talking whitely, contending over which of us is the more right and the better arbiter of the good; our whitely affects, whether anger or fear or both all-at-once disguising our various absolutions.

The afternoon sunlight filters through my office windows, catches on the blooms of the geraniums that sit upon my window sill, slips along the rows of books that line my bookshelves, and alights on an abstract painting representing the wicked problem of racism given to me by a former student. I know where to start, and I know starting means heading into the outside edges of what I know, means essaying into the unknown.

"Bean," I say aloud to the stillness of my office, "I am coming for you, pal!" I'm going to teach every class for the people you

despise. I'm going to make you uncomfortable—on purpose. And every whitely move you make, I'm going to name and attempt an intervention. In all likelihood, I am going to fail—and when I do I'm going to model what it looks like to acknowledge one's failure in the struggle against racism, to learn from that failure, and then to get on up and out and try again. Bean, I'm going to embrace the opportunity your presence in my classes presents to teach students of colour and their white accomplices as many wicked, smart, creative, tricky, funny, and fierce ways as I can imagine for interrupting and intervening, challenging and, yes, harassing white folks when we go to whiteness. Then, we're going to talk about what worked and what didn't, why, and what to do differently next time.

I'm going to call myself out, Bean, even as I call out to you. You won't be alone. I'm going to teach that we all have a role to play in the struggle for racial justice—not the same role as people of colour may have, but a role nonetheless. I'm going to teach that Cornel West's question 'What needs to *die* in you in order to *be hope*?' resonates differently, but powerfully, for all of us. I am going to challenge myself, and, Bean, I'm going to challenge you too—to sit with that question. What needs to die in us in order that we may learn, and through learning, change?

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Acknowledgements

Special thanks go to Aja Martinez for her inspiration, encouragement, and support, as well as to my fellow MLA 2020 panelists, Neisha Anne Green and Cindy Tekkobe. Thanks also to the many, many undergraduate and graduate students from whom I have learned so very much. This essay is particularly dedicated to Grace, who knows a Bean when she meets one.