**Getting it Twisted: An Analysis**

Jabari Asim is no stranger to rhetoric. In addition to being a prolific author, poet, playwright, editor (previously also an edit-in-chief for political journal *The Crisis*), he is also a writing and literature professor at Emerson College and completed a highly coveted nonfiction fellowship at the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. He is also a Black man, who is recognized as very devoted to racial justice and equality and has been described by colleague Harold Augenbraum, executive director of the National Book Foundation, as possessing a distinct ability to “…approach difficult topics with humility.” (Wikipedia.) Such an ability is vital to someone hoping to use their voice to shed light on racial issues and help improve them, particularly in today’s climate of political unrest and highlighted intolerance for racial injustice, and Asim’s book of essays entitled *We Can’t Breathe: On Black lives, white lies, and the art of survival* he aims to do exactly that.In this text, Asim examines in detail, and historical context, the various ways and reasons that Black people are viewed and treated the way they are in today’s society (and have been throughout time) and their resultingly different experiences. These essays can be for nearly any audience, intended to provide background and understanding to those less informed about Black history, as well as relatability to those who have experienced similar things. I will specifically be examining the first essay, entitled *Getting it Twisted.*

In the essay, Asim discusses the plethora of lies and propaganda that have contributed to the distorted view of Black people that gradually formed throughout time. It is written in first person, which is appropriate in this rhetorical situation and adds credibility and weight (via both ethos and pathos) to the anecdotes, statements, and claims being made, considering that the subject matter applies uniquely to the author’s personal experiences and observations as a Black man. The stylistic choices are careful and apt, worded to affect different audiences appropriately, and the arrangement is structured carefully as well, setting somewhat casual groundwork before delving deeply into the more serious matters.

He begins by explaining that his father, a teacher, hated it when the children called each other liars, and to readers at first this seems like one of the annoying but mainly harmless things that parents tend to dislike. He explains that a popular slang or vernacular used by his peers and community was “You a lie,” and how it was mainly a joking accusation, but that he appreciated how it “transformed a person into the very thing they were accused of.” Using AAVE phrases and/or language commonly used in the African-American community in the text could likely help give the author credibility and relatability with Black readers, perhaps helping them connect more with him and his experiences.

Asim goes on to explain that in ‘their’ world, i.e. the life/world of a Black person, a lie was very often not innocent or joking at all, and frequently had grave consequences. On page 3 he says, “Anyone could see that ‘I blamed that broken window on Johnny and he got put on punishment’ was a far cry from ‘I accused that n\*\*ger boy of whistling at me and he got strangled, chopped up, and tossed in the river,’” with the phrase, “A far cry” serving as a fantastically effective understatement that highlights just how far of a cry it is, forcing readers to realize just how different the connotations of lying are for people that saw such disastrous consequences from them.

On the previous page he compares the childhood stories from the African American community to those of white children, pointing out that their stories were primarily about outsmarting the powerful rather than the mainstream white stories’ often-seen trope of “manipulating privilege at the expense of the weak,” serving as strong grounds for Asim’s claims, reinforcing them as well as the notion that oppression and inferiority have so long been forced onto his people that it is ingrained into their very culture. He afterwards presents the powerfully loaded rhetorical questions, “What could be more American than pretending truths were self-evident when they seldom were? What could be more American than dressing up a lie in tailor-made language, like romanticizing treason as a Lost Cause or sugarcoating genocide by rebranding it as Manifest Destiny?” Implying that such things are obviously and inherently American in nature is a very effective rhetorical tool and its intentional vagueness can force the audience to bring to mind examples of this phenomenon that they have witnessed or heard about, validating his point and making it one of many warrants that demonstrate the validity of Asim’s claims.

He continues on to discuss several examples of whites only taking just enough responsibility for their misdeeds to expect forgiveness and absolution from the people they have wronged, more concerned with their own guilt or pain than actually making things right in any other way. Of the examples given, most are relatively current, tragic controversial topics such as the murder of 17 year old Trayvon Martin, and other instances of brutality by police or “armed vigilantes warped by delusions of supremacy.” The language used in that quote- ‘tragically warped,’ ‘delusions’- effectively utilizes pathos to portray such individuals as the sadly misled, deranged monsters that their fundamentally racist and corrupt society has contorted them into. This in itself would likely put the audience into a mindset of sad outrage at such injustice, appropriately preparing them for what comes next, where Asim points out that after such violent wrongdoings are committed against innocent people, the victims are then somehow saddled with the responsibility of putting the transgression behind them and forgiving the perpetrator. “It would be even more helpful if they could also express faith that justice will be done in court, or, failing that, heaven,” he writes. “A forgiving victim who remembers to discourage street protests before pausing to pray for the killer will do more to ‘restore trust’ than any indictment or conviction ever could.”

This dry sarcasm effectively points out the absurdity of the notion, which can be difficult when confronted with all the other rhetoric that tries to persuade everyone that peace and quiet is the way in the face of injustice, everyone should forgive and forget, rather than taking action or acknowledging the gross misconduct that happens so frequently, and the system that allows it to freely continue with minimal consequential action- disciplinary or otherwise.

In contrast with “You a lie,” a casual accusation of uttering a falsehood, Asim presents another vernacular term associated with lying: “Getting it twisted.” This phrase, however, means to more or less literally ‘twist’ the truth; disputing an oppressed person’s recollection of events, renaming or repurposing them, ‘nurturing’ the lie until the truth is unrecognizable or forgotten entirely. Therein lies the real point behind this essay: the treatment and view of Black people today is a direct consequence of intentional ‘twisting’ of truth throughout time.

On page 5, Asim writes, “We want to believe that the original plutocrats were never vain or insecure, that they were never unfaithful lovers or abusive husbands, that they never kept black women in chains and raped them repeatedly…” These deeds were committed by numerous American forefathers- that much is factually and demonstratably true, but by using the word ‘we,’ Asim creates a sort of relatable kinship with the audience, showing them that it is natural and forgivable to want to have such faith in them, and that he too has felt such a want. Over the next few pages, though, he cites examples of such exploits and quotes a list of horrifically offensive assertions about Black people made (and stubbornly maintained) by Thomas Jefferson. It’s okay to want to venerate them, he subtly assures his audience, but recognize when these wishes are misplaced and unjustified. Recognize when their actions have resulted in centuries of gross injustice and brutal mistreatment.

In the next section, wherein Asim moves on to discuss the recent events following the Trump campaign/presidency and its emboldening effect on white nationalism, he recalls when the day after Trump announced his candidacy, 21 year old Dylann Roof murdered nine Black churchgoers in Charleston, SC. “As black communities nationwide reeled in horror,” Asim writes, “initial news reports described the unrepentant assassin as ‘a bug-eyed boy with a bowl haircut who came from a broken home,’ a waif so bedraggled and forlorn that local cops took him for sandwiches before hauling him to jail.”

Posing these two wildly different perspectives on either side of the event at hand displays an abrupt, jarring contrast. Describing a murderer who had just executed *nine* innocent, unsuspecting people in cold blood, as an ‘unrepentant assassin’ and in the same sentence informing the audience that due to his physical appearance (whether taking race into consideration or not) the *arresting police officers* took *pity* on him- again, a murderer they’d just arrested- and treated him to a meal before taking him to jail really highlights the surreal incredulity of the entire situation and the horror that must have reverberated through the Black community when confronted with this knowledge, that murderous white boys are being taken out to lunch by the authorities in the same world where unarmed Black teenagers are killed walking home from the corner store (and their killers acquitted.)

In discussing Trump’s rhetoric and associates with white nationalist ties, and the media’s disturbingly positive coverage thereof, Asim poses more thought-provoking rhetorical questions: “Is voting for a racist itself a racist act? Can one commit a racist act and not be a racist?” This line of questioning can effectively cause the audience to be forced to confront what really constitutes racism, and the fact that it is not always blatant or black-and-white, so to speak.

“As I watch the forty-fifth president and his lackeys attack the tender flesh of opponents, with claws fully extended and dripping with saliva,” Asim describes on page 12, “I can’t help thinking of Benjamin Franklin’s words […] ‘If you make yourself a sheep, the wolves will eat you.’” This metaphor’s effects are multifaceted. The visceral, grotesque nature of its wording inspire an aura of predatory uneasiness, and the aptly placed Benjamin Franklin quote fits right in, relaying that if one allows themselves to be a victim, they too will fall prey to the aforementioned claws. A subtle call to action.

In conclusion, *Getting it Twisted* is a strongly argued, effective text, containing both relevant anecdotes as well as facts and quotes which combine nicely to serve their purpose. This essay takes important steps in establishing a connection with the audience and demonstrating the reasons and ways in which Black people are viewed and treated as they are, simultaneously inspiring a sense of outrage and injustice as well as the urge to help evoke change for this marginalized group.

**Works Cited**

“Book 1.” *Cicero: De Inventione*, by Guy Achard, Les Belles Lettres, 1994.

“Getting It Twisted.” *We Can't Breathe: on Black Lives, White Lies, and the Art of Survival*, by Jabari Asim, Picador, 2018, pp. 1–17.

“Jabari Asim.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 8 Dec. 2020, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jabari\_Asim.

Purdue Writing Lab. “Toulmin Argument.” *Purdue Writing Lab*, Purdue University, owl.purdue.edu/owl/general\_writing/academic\_writing/historical\_perspectives\_on\_argumentation/toulmin\_argument.html.