

Defining Whiteness: Perspectives on Privilege

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Although white people have largely dictated the global narratives of history, philosophy, literature, and beyond, whiteness as a racial category remains vague. How, then, do we define whiteness and how do those considered white relate to other racial groups? One path to understanding these questions is to provide an overview of whiteness, including its history, as well as Black authors' interpretations of white identity and its impact on populations of color, critical whiteness studies, case studies, and contemporary scholarship in the field. The overview concludes by addressing white privilege and the ways in which whites can support people of color in the pursuit of racial justice. In terms of scholarship, the research presented here is focused primarily on the United States, drawing on research from other countries when applicable.

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Introduction: What is Whiteness?

Given the global history of colonization and imperialism of generally lighter peoples over darker, discrimination on the basis of skin color and other manifestations of prejudice have played a pivotal role in shaping the world. Although most modern scholars carefully consider the role of race in society, the ways in which whites' racial identities impact their lives remain widely unrecognized and understudied. Research must then address the formation of what is now considered the "white race," beginning with the broader global narrative, which informs the development of North American whiteness.

The concept of race is socially constructed, developed over centuries partially as a method of social control (McIntosh 2007, 349).¹ Science has shown that race is not biological, but merely an ideology based upon superficial value judgements (Painter 2010, 2). The term white refers most obviously to light skin, but also denotes those who historically have benefitted from light-skin privilege. Thus, both definitions of whiteness will be considered here when referring to white people.

As opposed to the racialization assigned to people of color, whiteness can be defined by its hyper-visibility, which counterintuitively leads to invisibility.² Journalist Nicholas Kristof observes that while individuals refer to "people of color in terms of their group individuality, [whites] insist on referring to ourselves individually, almost as if to suggest

that we lacked a racial identity, or if that we possess one, it contains no relevance" (2014, 20). Whites are permitted to exist outside of racial identity, even though non-whites are constantly assigned racial labels. In other words, to be white enables one to retain a sense of individuality, while barring people of color from exercising that same right.

Privilege is inherent within any construction of whiteness. For example, white dominance in the United States has produced institutions that elevate opportunities for whites over those of other groups. Professor of Sociology Clifford Leek notes that whiteness can be defined "as a set of practices that function to protect and maintain privilege, while others define whiteness simply as the experience of privilege" (2014, 214). Both definitions are necessary; however, even those who acknowledge their whiteness often do not recognize the ways in which it protects privilege, which is one way in which whiteness becomes problematic. Indeed, even "seemingly 'benign' practices of whiteness reinforce white supremacy" (ibid., 215). When the white way is enforced as the only right way, people of color are viewed as divergent, and marginalized as a result.

The term ethnicity is often conflated with race. Ethnicity can be equated with culture, while race refers not only to skin color, but also to one's perceived categorical identity. Indeed, sociologist Doug Daniels (1997) conducted a study to determine if Canadian university students considered groups such as "Jewish," "Spanish," and "Arab" to be white (1997, 51). The students gave mixed and

¹ Slavery, for example, existed before the Transatlantic slave trade was established in the sixteenth century, but these slaves could buy their freedom and their children were not necessarily enslaved (see the section on "Whiteness, a History" for more information). Slavery in the New World was initially similar, but eventually developed into racial slavery—those with even "one drop" of "black blood" were enslaved in an intergenerational cycle of disenfranchisement that continues to affect their descendants today (Houston & Wood 1995, 43).

² The hyper-visibility of whiteness (i.e., the overrepresentation of whites in the media, etc.) allows them to be normalized (i.e., equated with a standard state of humanness). This normalization leads to the invisibility of their race (e.g., whites are described as "tall" or "blonde," while people of color are referred to by their "race," based on assumptions about their physical appearances). For further discussion, see the section on "Black American Authors".

often uncertain responses. This is because some groups, like the Jewish people,³ were eventually considered white based on social conditions. As another example, despite championing blue eyes and blonde hair as the ideal, Adolf Hitler called the Japanese “honorary Aryans” during WWII, for no reason other than their military allegiance to Germany (Stratman 1970, 4).

Jolanta Drzewiecka and Kathleen Wong note that white ethnicity is “a matter of personal choice, not only about whether to maintain one’s ties to ethnic ancestry but also which ties and to which ancestry” (1999, 205). No other ethnic group can freely flit between categories; people of color are implicated by their racial backgrounds in ways that whites are not. Charles Gallagher echoes this notion, stating that for whites, “ethnic identity is understood as a personal, private orientation that, like a hobby, makes those who express it feel good” (2013, 157). Only whites can opt-in and opt-out of their identities because they are not implicated by them in the ways that people of color are.

Whiteness: A History

As evidence in the previous section suggests, race is socially constructed.⁴ How, then, did the concept of whiteness develop? In *The History of White People*, Nell Irvin Painter points out that biologists postulate that all people alive today “share the same small number of ancestors living two or three thousand years ago. These circumstances make nonsense of anybody’s pretensions to find a pure racial ancestry” (2010, 2).

Painter challenges the common misconception that Greece was the birthplace of the original “white race” (ibid., 2-31). The Greeks were what we now consider “mixed race” due to the mingling of people from a variety of backgrounds. Indeed, Painter maintains that the modern “race narrative ignores early European slavery and the mixing it entailed, leading today’s readers to find the idea of white slavery far-fetched. But in the land we now call Europe, most slaves were white” (ibid., 33). The rise of racial slavery represents an historical anomaly: for the first time, skin color became the basis for enslavement (Allen 1975, 2). However, the etymology of the word “slave” indicates a different historical global reality. Painter points out that due to the increase in enslavement of people from the Balkans, the European slave coast, “the word ‘Slav’ turned into the word ‘slave’” (ibid., 39).

White slavery also contributed to many of the white beauty ideals that persist today. Painter writes: “By the nineteenth century, ‘odalisques,’ or white slave women, often appear as young, naked, beautiful, and sexually available throughout European and American art” (2010, 43). Interestingly, the diminished status of these white women seemed to only increase their desirability. For decades, “ideals of white beauty endured. They had become firmly embedded in the science of race,” (ibid., 58) which included practices such as comparing African skulls to those of apes, allowing whites to tout their racial superiority. Such “imagery inspired the obstetrician Charles White (1728-1813) to think about race as physical appearance,” (ibid., 69) a notion not considered before

³“Jewish” can refer to both members of the religion and denote the culture surrounding Judaism, rendering it an ethnicity. This ethnic identity becomes conflated with race perhaps in part due to phenotypes (i.e., physical features) shared by many Jewish people. Although Jewish people in the United States were originally identified by this religious or ethnic identity, they eventually became categorized as white, partly because there were large populations of Jewish people that were not immediately conspicuous as *Other* in the ways that darker-skinned people were. For historical specifics on the homogenization of whiteness, see the following section.

⁴For further discussion of race as a social construct, see Kramarae, Cheris. 1995. “Classified Information: Race, Class, and (Always) Gender.” In *Gendered Relationships*, edited by Julia T. Wood. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing.

this time. Racial science culminated with the work of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, who added skin color when classifying humans into “species.” Indeed, “such meticulous measurement endowed the ‘Caucasian’ variety with an unimpeachable scientific pedigree,” (ibid., 75) a birthright cited by racists like Hitler, who facilitated the genocide of people we now primarily consider white.

The global conception of race parallels the development of racial consciousness in the United States. Scholar Theodore Allen’s comprehensive research culminates in *The Invention of the White Race*, a volume on whiteness in the Americas. After investigating hundreds of cases, Allen declares he was not able to find “any instance in which European-American bond-laborers expressed a desire to dissociate their sufferings and struggles from those of the African-American bond-laborers” (Allen 1994, 162) between 1650 and 1703. He therefore concludes that the “white race” as we currently conceive of it “did not and could not have then existed” (ibid.). In support of his claim, Allen references “the solidarity of ‘the English and Negros in Armes’ [sic] in Bacon’s Rebellion” (ibid., 240) of 1676.⁵ Historian David Roediger’s observations align with this assertion. He writes that between 1607 and 1800, “the ‘lower sorts’ of whites appear to have been pleasantly lacking in racial consciousness. Perhaps they had never fully imbibed the white supremacist attitudes of the larger society” (Roediger 1991, 24).

However, the growing number of Africans captured and brought to the Americas alarmed what Allen calls the “plantation bourgeoisie”—whites whose wealth set

them at a distance from poor whites (1994, 253). To prevent indentured servants and other lower-class whites from allying with African Americans against the elite, the bourgeoisie began to enlist them to protect their property. Indeed, in 1727, “poor whites when on patrol duty were to receive pay... [and] for what?—to crush plots and rebellions such as their own grandfathers may have taken part in along with black bond-servants fifty years before” (Allen 1975, 12). This tragic irony represents a shift in cultural attitudes towards Black Americans and a privileging of race above class among whites.

History reinforces that slavery and dark skin were not always associated. It was only when light skin became a marker of status that new terminology was developed to set whites apart from Blacks. For example, “hireling” replaced “servant” when describing working whites. In the early 1800s, David Roediger writes,

The white hireling had the possibility of social mobility as the Black slave did not. The white hireling was usually a political freeman, as the slave, and with very few exceptions, the free Blacks were not.... [This reassured] wage workers that they belonged to the ranks of ‘free white labor.’ (1991, 46-7)

Similarly, the phrase working man “suggests a racial identity, and identification of whiteness and work so strong that it need not even be spoken.... [The category is] seen as ‘naturally’ white, and Black workers become ‘intruders’” (ibid., 19). This represents one justification for the racist opinions that developed during this period.

⁵ Antiquated terms such as “negro” often appear in primary source material, as well as many secondary sources from before the late twentieth century. Modern scholars often elect to use “Black,” although this label is rather vague. When describing race, I attempt to use the most accurate descriptors available.

While all European-American groups were eventually construed as “white,” regardless of class identity, this change did not happen overnight.⁶ The stigmatization of the Irish in North America is an example of this phenomenon. Because they were Celts, a group considered “inferior” Europeans, “the poor Irish could also be judged racially different enough to be oppressed, ugly enough to be compared to apes, and poor enough to be paired with black people” (Painter 2010, 133). During the Great Railroad Uprising of 1877, Roediger notes that there was “an Irish-American worker blaming ‘naygurs’ [sic] for the strike, and of an increasing desire among white strike leaders to distance themselves from Black [sic] participation and to redefine the struggle as one of ‘white labor’” (1991, 167). Labeling the labor struggle as “white” was paramount to cementing white identity as disparate from those of Blacks and other people of color within the working class.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, anti-Irish sentiment had largely disappeared. Roediger attributes this to the fact that “the United States had black people and slavery to contend with, issues so huge that they blunted anti-Irish sentiment as a source of political conflict, but not before a decade of turmoil” (1991, 146-7). This turmoil was also due to the emerging North American sense of national identity; while the white Irish could blend in, Black Americans stood out by virtue of their darkness (ibid., 147). And it was the whiteness of their skin that provided the Irish with a way out of discrimination. Roediger notes, “Irish immigrants quickly recognized how to use the American color line to elevate white—no

matter how wretched—over black. Seeking fortune on the white side of the color line, Irish voters stoutly supported the proslavery Democratic Party” (ibid., 143). Their actions were a definitive betrayal of Black Americans, representing the disintegration of any cross-racial class solidarity that had once existed.

The perplexing history of the formation of race both globally and in the United States reflects whites’ desire to retain wealth and power. Empirical support of racist ideas allowed Europeans and those of European stock in the Americas to justify their exploitation of darker people. Similarly, as Clifford Leek maintains, “Whiteness is not a monolithic formation—it is constantly made and remade through its participation in other unequal social relations” (2014, 220). This plurality is exemplified in Irish immigrants who were originally lumped in with Black Americans. Along with the Irish, other Europeans, such as the Italian, German, and Polish people, became homogenized into a single white group in similar fashion.⁷ By discriminating against people of color, the white ruling class offered supremacy to all whites, regardless of their class.

Original Theorists: Black American Perspectives

Due to these historic concentrations of power, much of the North American literary canon was written by white, often wealthy men who offer a largely singular perspective. Fighting unjust systems and overwhelming discrimination, Black American thinkers

⁶ As this paper strives to make clear, racial categories are still messy. See the above-referenced study by Doug Daniels (1997) for a discussion of the confusion surrounding the identification of certain “slightly tanner” European groups such as Italians. For further reading, see Houston, Marsha and Julia Wood. 1995. “Difficult Dialogues, Expanded Horizons: Communicating Across Race and Class.” In *Gendered Relationships*, edited by Julia T. Wood. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing.

⁷ For further explanation, see Newman, Louis. 2009. “The Strange Career of Whiteness: Miscegenation, Assimilation, Abdication.” In *Re-Orienting Whiteness: A New Agenda for the Field*, edited by Jane Carey, Leigh Boucher, and Katherine Ellinghaus. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

were constantly aware of their position as *Other*, in perpetual contrast to the normalized experience of white Americans. Consequently, Black Americans were the first to write prolifically about the condition of whiteness, which was abundantly clear to them as outsiders to the experience. Thus, these Black American theorists are considered pioneers in the field of whiteness studies.

In 1829, an African American journalist named David Walker wrote “An Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World,” which excoriated “whites’ and, indeed, ‘Christian America’ for its inhumanity and hypocrisy” (quoted in Painter 2010, 119). In the treatise, Walker traces global racial history, beginning with the Egyptians’ central contribution to ancient civilization. In response to the whitewashing of Egyptian history from other historians of the era, Walker points out that Egypt was in Africa, and its people were markedly Black.⁸ Their legacy, one of Black strength and success, is embodied in modern populations such as Haitians, who overthrew their white oppressors during the Haitian Revolution and established their own republic. Walker maintains that “colored” people such as Haitians and Black Americans stand in contrast with whites, who were “cradled in bloody, deceitful ancient Greece” (ibid.).⁹ Up until his own era of history, Walker argues, murder “remains the central feature of whiteness” (ibid., 120). Unsurprisingly, Walker’s indictments outraged and frightened upper-class whites already fearful of slave insurrections.

In 1920, W.E.B. Du Bois published *Darkwater*, a narrative work that confronts whiteness long before whites recognized

it. Du Bois reflects on WWI and the devastation it caused: “This is not Europe gone mad; this is not aberration nor insanity; this is Europe; this seeming Terrible is the real soul of white culture—back of all culture,—stripped and visible today” ([1920] 1969, 39). Like Walker, Du Bois argues that violence is an inherent quality of whites, the only explanation for the horrors they unleashed upon the world. In addition, he counters the assumption that the insanity of war is relegated to a small section of the population by arguing that it is fundamental to white culture. He concludes, “As wild and awful as this shameful war was, it is nothing to compare with that fight for freedom which black and brown and yellow men must and will make unless their oppression and humiliation and insult at the hands of the White World cease” (ibid. 129, original emphasis). Placing the war in this context, Du Bois reminds his readers about the struggles of people of color that go largely unrecognized, suggesting that a pan-African revolution is not out of the question if the mistreatment continues.

Theorist Frantz Fanon published *Black Skin, White Masks* in 1952. Born in Martinique, Fanon completed part of his education in France, the country that colonized his homeland. As a Black intellectual, Fanon contends with his dual identity by writing about the situation of the white man. Fanon declares,

The soul of the white man was corrupted...; the presence of the Negroes beside the whites is in a way an insurance policy on humanness. When the whites feel that they have become too mechanized, they turn to the men

⁸ Today, racism continues to taint our conceptions of history. Some still believe that Egyptians could not have been both Black and developed the advanced technology that made the Great Pyramids possible. However, significant archeological evidence and Africanist scholarship have contributed to the fight against the whitewashing of history.

⁹ Haitian use of violence against whites during the Revolution remains controversial. However, like Walker, historian C.L.R. James argues that their methods of resistance were never as inhumane as oppression tactics used by their white masters ([1938] 1963).

of color and ask them for a little human sustenance. ([1952] 1967, 129)

His statement highlights stereotypes of people of color as being closer to nature, more “wild” than civilized whites. As a result, they are perceived as being more in touch with their emotions. By holding a dark *Other* as a point of reference, whites can remain in contact with their humanness. Such appropriation of non-white culture further subjects black and brown people to the desires of whites.

In 1992, novelist Toni Morrison published *Playing in the Dark*, a work like *Darkwater* that reads like a narrative, but contains important observations on whiteness nonetheless. Morrison addresses the prejudice experienced by people of color: “Among Europeans and the Europeanized, [the] shared process of exclusion—of assigning designation and value—has led to the popular and academic notion that racism is a ‘natural,’ if irritating, phenomenon” (1992, 7). Given the compulsive human need to categorize others, “color-blindness” is an absurd concept. Moreover, “the act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourse is itself a racial act” (ibid., 46). Morrison goes on to argue that the racialized nature of American society, and resulting exclusion of people of color, makes it impossible for any race to be truly neutral. Race is so deeply engrained in society that individuals often fail to recognize how it affects all relationships.

Each of these authors’ works are rich with outlooks on race and its impact on North American society. Modern scholars must recognize Black authors as the original theorists of whiteness. Indeed, many of these publications can be considered the foundation for what would become “critical whiteness studies.”

Theoretical Frameworks

To accurately assess critical whiteness studies, scholars must utilize theoretical structures. Although many of these theories were developed to address other topics such as gender, their critiques are nonetheless helpful when deconstructing whiteness.

Cheris Kramarae addresses the labels individuals assign to each other, maintaining that they are “intimately involved in the ideas we have about ourselves and thus about our relationships.... [Emotions] are expressed in part through selective addressing and labeling. Language is not a substitute for action, but is itself action” (1995, 21-2). She explains how people create racial labels through language, which supports Morrison’s assertion that individuals must not enforce racelessness in scholarship. Kramarae cites Judy Scales-Trent, who argues that for white women, race is an invisible category. By extension, “The dominant group (of race, class, and gender) has fewer labels (because they do much of the labeling, but often do not consider themselves a group—they just are)” (quoted in Kramarae 1995, 29). This explains why white men are not only the most privileged, but also the least aware of the existence of their privilege. Their identity is built upon labeling and thereby discriminating against all other groups.

Marsha Houston and Julia Wood apply Sandra Harding’s concept of standpoint theory, which is used to examine dialogues across race and gender. The theory “implies that all understandings are socially constructed, which reminds us there is no single right perspective, but a range of standpoints crafted by particular social locations” (quoted in Houston & Wood 1995, 42). Because every human is biased according to her background, she must work

to be aware of the inherent tendencies that others hold unconsciously. Houston and Wood illustrate this phenomenon through the Western media, which “impose[s] a white standard of beauty and admire[s] only individuals who approximate Anglo appearance” (ibid., 50). Media act as vehicles by which the standpoint of many whites is expanded to represent the views of not only Western nations, but of the entire globe.

Deborah Borisoff and James Chesebro discuss how power is distributed within social relationships. Michel Foucault’s principle of “dividing practices” determines who becomes a subject of power, and who is objected to this power. These practices “are modes of manipulation that combine the mediation of a science (or pseudo-science) and the practice of exclusion” (Borisoff & Chesebro 2011, 105). Exclusion is legitimized by racist and misguided science that seemingly proves the inferiority of non-white races. White supremacists use this science to uphold their twisted conclusions, allowing whites to manipulate social strata for their own benefit.

Borisoff and Chesebro also provide potential solutions to avoid manipulation. They explain that we must eliminate self-formation practices “by which we all turn ourselves into subjects, and eventually into victims” (2011, 106) by questioning societal assumptions and challenging “the ways in which dividing practices erect power discrepancies.... We need to examine our use of the binary terms themselves” (ibid.). In modern society, the binary is “white” and “non-white.” Because using language to describe non-whiteness is much more common, the invisibility of whiteness must

be acknowledged by using “white” more often, and other racial labels less.¹⁰

Critical Whiteness Studies: Cases of Privilege

Emerging in the final decade of the twentieth century, whiteness studies is now a legitimate, albeit underdeveloped, area of study. By extension, “for many, if not all, scholars of critical whiteness studies, the social reality of white skin privilege, is now an underlying research assumption” (Rasmussen et al. 2001, 3).

Peggy McIntosh investigates ways in which whites exercise their privilege. She believes that “whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work that will allow ‘them’ to be more like ‘us’” (McIntosh [1988] 2007, 346). This arrogance is displayed even by those who believe themselves to be nonracist. Such a phenomenon is connected to what McIntosh calls “meritocracy,” which is “the myth that democratic choice is equally available to all. Keeping most people unaware that freedom of confident action is there for just a small number of people props up those in power” (ibid., 351). The wealth gap in the United States is significant, and continues to widen. In addition, people of color suffer from disproportionately high rates of incarceration, poverty, and other ills (Kristof 2014, 11). The myth of meritocracy is one way in which a country as wealthy as America can maintain such inequality without rebellion.

Ronald Jackson II conducted a study on white identity at Howard University. His primary research question was “whether

¹⁰ For example, when describing people, I always use the adjective “white” when discussing whites. By contrast, I describe people of color without racial terms, focusing rather on other features, which highlights the fact that we consider whites as “normal” humans, and all others as defined primarily by race. This is one small way to try to balance skewed power dynamics.

Whites [sic] feel the need to negotiate (or behaviorally code switch) their identities or if identity negotiation is viewed as only a marginalized group phenomenon” (Jackson 1999, 38). Code switching is a survival tactic used by people of color: one operates in her own culture when comfortable, but switches into “acting white” in the presence of the dominant culture. This switch is necessary if she hopes to succeed in white institutions, such as schools or workplaces. Jackson wonders if whites act similarly as “minorities” at a historically Black college.¹¹ Jackson challenges scholars to “rethink whether blankness is really substance disguised,” (ibid.) meaning that whiteness cannot be neutral, as it is generally assumed.

Jackson begins by applying Foucault’s “I-Other dialectic,” the idea that “as one increasingly becomes conscious of the Self, then s/he also becomes dependent on the appearance and recognition of the Other” (ibid., 41). This act of exteriority allows one to become oblivious to her own interior, including self-definition. Therefore, it is through reversal that we return attention back to the white individual’s sense of self. Within the I-Other dialectic, “the ‘White’ identity is often typified as being voluntarily refractory (the quintessence), while the ‘Black’ identity remains involuntarily plastic, pliable, and mobile (the epitome of deviancy)” (ibid., 41-2). These categories of being reveal why people of color remain marginalized, even when they are numerically the “majority” in certain situations.

When white students at Howard were asked if they thought Black students had to make behavioral changes when interacting with whites, the white students expressed doubt. When asked if they themselves had to code-

switch, the white students “implied not only that there were no apparent changes in the way they behaved or communicated, but also were *appalled* that that would even be an expectation of them [my emphasis]” (ibid., 47). However, people of color are subjected to these expectations every day. Privilege is surely at play; it explains how reality is hidden from white students. Jackson calls this “uninterrogatable space” regardless of whether whites are the numerical minority, white identity remains unchallenged (ibid., 48).

Jackson continues that the white “does not necessarily negotiate anything since her identity is already the norm, even in a different-race context” (ibid., 48). Such an advantage carries over into nearly every aspect of a white’s life. For example, an older white student who is also a mother declares that she is too busy to think about race, and therefore “exempts herself from being preoccupied with issues of cultural identity” (ibid., 49). Her attitude is the epitome of privilege. Jackson concludes, “Not having to negotiate a White cultural identity relaxes the obligation to respond to Others who alter their identities daily. Of course, White cultural identity negotiation may ultimately result in the sacrifice of white privilege” (ibid., 50), an optimistic assertion.

Scholars Rhunette Diggs and Kathleen Clark consider the difficulties of interracial friendships in a case study of their own relationship. Rhunette is a Black scholar who was mentored by Kate, who is white. Kate emphasizes that her goal is “making visible and intentionally problematizing her Whiteness” (Diggs & Clark 2002, 368). While at a party with Rhunette, Kate makes the mistake of calling Rhunette “obedient” in front of a friend. The two discuss the effects

¹¹“Minority” has been placed in parenthesis because it suggests inferior status not only numerically, but also socially. Even when non-whites outnumber whites, remain socially dominant.

of Kate's unintentional use of racialized language. Because they were "in a social context infected by racism, Kate's whiteness meant the comment was interpreted as rudeness, an intimation of White's privileged position over a Black" (ibid., 382). Although Kate's gaffe was not malicious, she was nonetheless "ashamed and defensive about her Whiteness with its connection to racism" (ibid., 380). Kate apologized and the two were able to continue their friendship. They conclude that "even though Kate felt tension about being the only White person at the party, her ability to move 'freely' at the academic institution" (ibid., 383) represents a right that is not awarded to people of color.

Finally, to investigate white privilege, Ewa Urban and Mark Orbe interviewed immigrants to the United States. They note that "immigrants vicariously function in two social worlds," (Urban & Orbe 2010, 304) which parallels the code-switching tactic described by Jackson. The interviewees describe their attempts to integrate into American culture; however, "their skin color or their nonnative accent automatically defined them as foreign and different" (ibid., 310-1). Yet not all immigrants have the same experience. A male German immigrant confided that he was not "enamored with the attitude of the Latinos who think they can run their own country here!" (ibid., 309). He then gives examples of the Irish and other white groups who integrated quickly. This statement is both historically inaccurate and, in fact, "most male participants, particularly those whose light skin color allowed them to be perceived as Caucasian," (ibid., 316) expressed more conservative views on immigrants, notwithstanding the fact that they themselves were immigrants who eventually benefited from white privilege.

Intersections: Gender

For European men who can pass as white, gender also factors into discussions on whiteness. Jewel Woods is the author of "The Black Male Privileges Checklist," which provides a list of privileges Black men hold over women, and Black women in particular. Woods explains that during civil rights, black men "were suspicious—to say the least—of the motives of white men requesting that black men give up the privileges they never felt they had," (2014, 36) an understandable sentiment. Despite their history, Woods maintains that Black men must join white men in recognizing the ways in which their privilege harms women.

Michael Kimmel addresses both race and gender in *Angry White Men* (2013), which explores American white males' feelings of being short-changed by women and minorities. Even though white men make significantly more money than any other group, Kimmel notes that they are angrier than ever. He explains that since the playing field was always skewed in the favor of white men, "maybe actually having to play evenly matched, on a level playing field, is too frightening for a gender that stakes its entire identity on making sure it wins every time" (Kimmel 2013, 8-9). Kimmel summarizes many white men's fears: "Women have become more like guys, thanks to the hags in the women's movement, and the white race is dying. That's why they won't reproduce, because the women want to be men" (ibid., 42). This oversimplified explanation nonetheless captures the anxiety men experience when considering their place in modern society.

Kimmel concludes that white men's enemy is not women or people of color, but rather "an ideology of masculinity that we inherited from our fathers, and

their fathers before them, an ideology that promises unparalleled acquisition coupled with a tragically impoverished emotional intelligence” (2013, 9). Aggression paired with the inability to express one’s feelings is not healthy for a man, nor for those around him. To address this anger, Kimmel exhorts us to “empower’ men to embrace a new definition of masculinity, decoupled from that false sense of entitlement” (ibid., 284).

Bethany Coston assists Kimmel with re-defining masculinity among marginalized groups. They maintain that “gay, working-class, or disabled men are seen as ‘not-men’ in the popular discourse of their marginalization” (Coston & Kimmel 2014, 126) because they do not adhere to stereotypical masculinity. Gay men often eschew toxic masculinity, working-class men are often not able to fulfill the role of “provider” due to economic difficulties, and disabled men do not always embody the physical strength and/or sexuality expected of able-bodied men. The authors cite the culprit: the solidarity that “men have constructed and maintained, that promotes and perpetuates racism, sexism, and homophobia—the nexus of beliefs that all men are supposed to value” (ibid., 140). If a man opposes one of these harmful ideologies, his very manhood is questioned.

White Authors Respond

Particularly since the 1990s, white writers have begun to address whiteness from both academic and popular standpoints. Part of this work entails addressing biases and shortcomings within the field of whiteness studies.

Wendy Ryden and Ian Marshal critique previous scholarship, noting, “North

American traditions of critical/radical pedagogy have privileged a rhetoric of logos (and, to some extent, ethos) while giving short-shrift to what Aristotle referred to as ‘those feelings which so change men as to affect their judgments:’ emotions” (2012, 120). Uncovering the harm rendered by racism and systemic oppression involves addressing complex emotions. However, Ryden and Marshal hope to unravel the mystery of whiteness, which will “provide a mean for rhetorical ‘restructuring,’ as we take into account the political dimensions of our emotional responses” (ibid., 122). Separating politics, academics, and emotion can detract from the full meaning of complex topics like whiteness. However, authors increasingly favor holistic approaches that recognize the humanness of both subjects and audiences.¹²

Nicholas Kristof addresses arguments against the existence of white privilege with facts and anecdotes. He points out that “the United States now has a greater wealth gap by race than South Africa did during apartheid. (Whites in America on average own almost 18 times as much as blacks; in South Africa in 1970, the ratio was about 15 times)” (Kristof 2014, 11). These numbers are staggering for a country that champions equality. There are reasons for our current asperity: the United States was “plagued by formal white supremacy for over 350 years, going back to the colonial period: it was a system of racial fascism. I know we don’t like that kind of talk” (ibid., 22). Kristof, however, challenges white Americans to acknowledge inequality.

When white readers fought back by stating that they “worked hard” to overcome difficulty, Kristof retorts, “You probably also owe your success to parents who read to you, to decent schools, to social expectations

¹² See also: Segrest, Mab. 1920. “The Souls of White Folks.” In *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*, edited by Birgit Brander Rasmussen, Eric Klinenberg, Irene J. Nexica, and Matt Wray (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).

that you would end up in college rather than prison. So count your blessings for winning the lottery of birth” (ibid., 12). Benefits accrued not by one’s own efforts, but by merit of birth are central features of white privilege. Regardless, whites continue to insist that people of color take “personal responsibility” for their actions, “never noting the irony that to point at someone else while speaking of taking personal responsibility for oneself is the ultimate contradiction” (ibid., 23). Kristof concludes that whites must be introspective about our own privilege and faults “before casting about for black and brown folks on whom to place blame” (ibid., 24). It is only when whites take personal responsibility that society can begin to address systemic issues.

Truly Progressive? The Problems with Modern Racial Discourse

In a “post-colonial” world, some whites wonder why race remains a major point of contention in modern society. However, what appears to be modern progressivism is often paternalism and racism in disguise. Many well-intentioned whites buy into seemingly progressivist paradigms that ultimately damage people of color through silencing and whitewashing. This section seeks to identify these tendencies.

Addressing systemic issues such as colonialism requires a historical understanding of its origins. Ruth Frankenberg reminds us that whiteness “is positioned asymmetrically in relation to all other racial and cultural terms, again for reasons whose origins are colonial... [Whites have] mainly named themselves in order to say ‘I am not that Other’” (2001, 75). Asymmetrical power dynamics

color each white/non-white interaction. Whiteness is the default identity; as a result, self-generated labels have arisen to differentiate whites from undesirable *Others*. Frankenberg explains that there has been an effort on the behalf of scholarship to move toward “remarking on cultural practices previously labeled ‘national’ rather than ‘white’” (ibid., 83). Movements to define white collectivist identities have paraded as “national,” even when they fail to incorporate the entire population. Naming these campaigns for what they are helps us unmask whiteness and grant non-white traditions similar status.¹³

The end of colonialism did not eradicate racist attitudes; rather, it forced racism to morph into new forms. Howard Winant discusses decolonialization which, through “ferocious armed struggles,” allowed many nations to challenge “the neocolonial arrangements put into place by the new worldwide hegemonic power, the United States, which had sought to impose a new [imperial Western] order...” (2001, 99). Under the label of “imperialism,” colonial attitudes solidified into neoliberalism. The United States’ “benevolence” toward under-resourced countries was shaped by racialized attitudes. Many whites supported “color-blind” ideologies, which allowed them to dismiss race under the guise of progressivist egalitarianism. These ideas made their way into white middle-class American culture. Whites sample from various cultures with impunity, and their “‘cosmopolitan’ attitude is based on the privileged assumption that ‘we are all people and that all cultures are interesting and have something to offer’” (Drzewiecka & Wong 1999, 206). However, this sentiment fails to capture the influential

¹³ For further reading, see Wander, Philip C. Judith N. Martin, and Thomas K. Nakayama. 1999. “Whiteness and Beyond.” In *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity*, edited by Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishers.

control that whites retain over the cultures they appropriate.

William Aal maintains that people generally perceive themselves to be antiracist, yet “middle-class norms that preclude them from admitting mistakes or showing ignorance make it nearly impossible for them to address these issues. When antiracism is addressed, conversations become focused on intentions rather than the impact” (2001, 304). To create genuine discourse around race, one must shift the conversation away from white feelings and toward the tangible ways in which people of color are affected by racism. Otherwise, whites who “are very good at using antiracist language to allow themselves to feel good about themselves without actually having to change” (ibid., 305) will stall the conversation. Whites need to be reminded that discussions about racism are ultimately not about them.

Along with Aal’s exposition of white intentions, Dreama Moon describes:

[a] kind of ‘white code’ that permits them to talk about race-related matters in ways that ‘render the status quo as ‘natural,’ remove ourselves from complicity, and secure approval from other whites.’ This coded speech, which I call Whitespeak, can be understood as a racialized form of euphemistic language in which what is not said—or the absences in languages...—is often far more revealing than what is said. (1999, 188)

Moon provides examples of “Whitespeak,” including using the passive voice (“Africans were brought to the United States”) and hyperpoliteness (whites don’t use the “n-word” because it’s unseemly, not because they care about the heavily racist

connotations behind the derogatory term). Often, whites make decisions concerning race not out of an understanding of people of color’s needs, but out of a desire to protect themselves from the guilt induced by conversations about race (Aal 2001, 295-305).

Steps Forward & Conclusions

In response to the pitfalls surrounding racial discourse outlined in the previous section, what follows are potential solutions that may help scholars, and whites in general, to engage in constructive racial discourse. Note that these solutions are often partial, might overlap with other strategies, and may shift depending on social context.

In her article “Toward a New Vision,” Patricia Hill Collins examines America’s current racial situation and presents practical steps that whites can take. She cites Black radical feminist Audre Lorde, who declares that there is a “piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us.” (Collins 2014, 241).¹⁴ Collins responds that we “need to change our daily behavior. Currently, we are all enmeshed in a complex web of problematic relationships that grant our mirror images full human subjectivity while stereotyping and objectifying those most different from us” (ibid.). She uncovers the dangers of dichotomous thinking, encouraging her readers to consider those different from themselves in comprehensive, rather than reductive, ways.

Similarly, Mark Warren contends that “rather than dichotomizing the world into good and bad and simply blaming others, all white Americans have to take a close look at their own beliefs and behaviors” (2014, 264). Introspection is one of the main ways to induce change. Warren concludes that,

¹⁴ This is a central tenant of Lorde’s 1984 work *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press Feminist Series).

because of their pervasive ignorance to their color, whites cannot be forced to care about racism. Instead, “Whites become concerned about racism because it affects real people they know. Rather than working for people of color, they begin to work with them, their commitment nurtured by an ethic of care and a growing sense of shared fate” (ibid., 259). Therefore, as Rhunette and Kate discovered, a genuine, mutually respectful relationship is the only viable way to involve whites in the work of racial justice.

Since the 1700s, women and people of color have made several gains in the area of civil rights. However, the United States’ turbulent history of race relations belies the assumption that the status of minority groups has been steadily improving since whites first came to the Americas. The freedoms won by various minority groups oscillate depending on historical circumstances. Through the perplexing historical formation of whiteness, a new white North American identity emerged as the dominant culture, entangled with the legacy of colonialism and imperialism. Black American authors, struggling to contend with white supremacy, were the first to name whiteness and describe the ways it affected other marginalized groups. Thus, critical whiteness studies was born, a field that gained legitimacy in the 1990s. Today, racism is still a central enforcer of inequality, a reality that authors, both white and non-white, continue to confront. Contemporary scholarship widely acknowledges the impacts of white privilege, entreating whites to surrender their entitlement and support people of color in their fight for justice.

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