



Feminists Talk Whiteness

Edited by **Leigh-Anne Francis**
and **Janet Gray**



FEMINISTS TALK WHITENESS

Feminists Talk Whiteness offers a multidimensional introduction to whiteness as an ideology and a system of institutional practices, exploring how and why whiteness is a feminist issue.

Readers will gain insights and strategies for action from the chapters and poems, which approach whiteness through multiple perspectives and disciplinary approaches. The contents are organized into sections on history, theory and self-reflection, and antiracist praxis. Each section includes suggested questions for writing or discussion, as well as varied activities—from quick research to community action.

Feminists Talk Whiteness is for college students, community groups, and book clubs studying whiteness and antiracism. It will work well as a main or companion text in courses in women's, gender, and feminist studies, as well as other courses across the humanities and social sciences.

Leigh-Anne Francis is a Black queer associate professor of women's, gender, and sexuality studies and African American studies at The College of New Jersey. Her publications examine Black women and the carceral state, queer and trans people of color, and the continuum of subaltern resistive strategies in US history.

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*“The way to right wrongs is to turn
the light of truth upon them.”*
– Ida B. Wells

*For Rustin and Langston: You are my reason.
For my Mother: my first teacher. a woman for
whom unconditional love is a life practice.
For Janine: everything always.*
– Leigh-Anne

*For my parents, Bob and Gladys Gray,
for the peculiar life their commitment
to social justice gave us,
leaving a legacy of commitment, missteps,
and open questions,
tipping whiteness off-kilter.*
– Janet



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Our discipline (or one of them), Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, has been undergoing a decades-long transformation from being dominated by white feminism to recognizing and centering the dynamic vitality of intersectional study, theory, and action: a gift of Black feminist thought, amplified by generations of BIPOC activists, writers, and scholars and the white-identified feminists who joined them.

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We are thankful for you, dear readers. We do this work together—the work of self-reflection and critical analysis of interlocking systems of power that invites us to understand the ways we are complicit in harm done to others and the ways we can use our advantages, whether they are limited or expansive, to end that harm. This is lifetime work. We do this work in the spirit of bell hooks' call to engage in education as a freedom practice. Thank you for engaging the works in this volume, all of them meditations on freedom.



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INTRODUCTION

Facing the dragon

Leigh-Anne Francis and Janet Gray

These are incredibly scary times, but incredibly inspiring times of what we are capable of together. We can only win if we stand up and fight back. Do not be silenced but speak with vigilance.

– *Noura Erakat, 2023*

At a roundtable discussion among the authors for this volume at the National Women’s Studies Association annual conference in November 2022—in Minneapolis, the same city where a white police officer murdered George Floyd two years earlier—Andrea Warmack, a Black queer feminist philosopher, spoke lovingly of her long commute from Philadelphia to the predominantly white college where she teaches. She spoke first of the safety precautions she takes in preparing her car for the drive: remove clutter, check lights, license, and tags, keep wallet and hands visible. Quoting Audre Lorde, she said, “I am not sure if white drivers know what it is like to drive ‘in the mouth of this dragon we call america’” (1980, 42). Yet she resists the anxiety that the dragon may expect of her; instead, every drive offers “a moment of joy,” revealing “something incredibly beautiful” in the landscape and the light.

Meeting with her mostly white classes, Warmack draws strength from the vulnerability of her racialized visibility and how that combination makes being present with fearfulness a way of singing out “from the mouth of the dragon, to create a song that perhaps the dragon can’t even hear, a sound of freedom,” a liberation which both is and is more than constant struggle. Writing about whiteness, for Warmack, is a “love song” to and about those everyday “risky, loving, and transformative practices of vulnerability”; it is

incidentally about white people but, more, about the possibilities for “non-white ways of being in the world” (Warmack, 2022).

This book is about facing down the dragon—a work of justice, and a work of love. Or, as Cornel West has put it, “Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public” (2010).

Beyond the “racial reckoning”

Our work on *Feminists Talk Whiteness* began during the so-called “racial reckoning” of 2020. For us—a Black non-binary queer professor and a white cisgender woman professor, colleagues at a predominantly white institution in the northeastern United States—the year 2020 felt as though the world was coming apart. The forty-fifth president—who praised and was endorsed by white nationalist groups (Haltiwanger, 2020) and had been accused of sexual abuse by two dozen women (Keneally, *ABC News*, 2020)—seemed to have taken a running jump off a cliff with the country tethered to him, and we, the people, were ensnared in an ever-accelerating plummet into an abyss of unimaginable horrors. White corporate media spotlighted and amplified what we and a great many others viewed as President Trump’s racist, misogynistic, ableist, anti-immigrant, anti-trans rhetoric, which we experienced as a daily psychological onslaught, while media companies amassed profits with every click and view. It was depressingly clear that Trump had won most white men’s votes and nearly half of white women’s votes not in spite of his enthusiastic purveying of white supremacy but because of it (Pew, 2018).

In 2020, we were in the midst of a lockdown due to the COVID-19 global pandemic that killed over 350,000 people in the United States and no less than 3 million people worldwide that year alone—a mass killing disease that ended people of colors’ lives at disproportionately high rates during a health crisis whose seriousness the then president continuously downplayed, while his blaming rhetoric about the cause of the pandemic fueled a wave of anti-Asian hate (Gawthrop, 2023; CDC; PBS News Weekend, 2020; WHO). Over 5,000 immigrant children of color wrested from their parents at the United States–Mexico border under the Trump Administration’s racist-imperialist family separation policy still had not been reunited with their parents (CAP, 2021; French, 2024; PBS News Hour, 2023; SPLC, 2022). George Floyd became yet another Black person whom a white police officer murdered in the street—Floyd’s life obliterated over and over again in social media and news broadcasts of a video recording taken at the scene (Hill et al., 2020; US Department of Justice, 2023).

The next year, feminist antiracists, unlike mainstream white media voices, were not surprised by the January 6th insurrection, a violent attack on the US Capitol that was orchestrated and carried out almost entirely by white people, the overwhelming majority of them men (Ricciardelli, 2023). We had

watched as the Trump administration rescinded environmental regulations aimed at staving off climate change, revoked the few existing federal legal protections for trans people, and appointed a third right-wing justice to the Supreme Court, who would join his two other right-wing appointees and three sitting justices in issuing the rulings that ended the constitutional right to abortion in 2022 and outlawed race-based (though not gender-based) affirmative action policies for college admission in 2023. In a single presidential term, we had watched the undoing of decades of progress that was, in part, the outcome of the grassroots activism of historically marginalized and oppressed groups. While the nation had always been fundamentally organized by white supremacy, and under President Obama (in the years leading up to Trump's election) the United States was far from equitable and just, things seemed worse than they had been in a long time.

In this turbulent and uncertain social, political, and economic context, we became coconspirators in the development of this intersectional antiracist project, *Feminists Talk Whiteness*. Antiracist feminists were among the multiracial, multi-ethnic coalition of people who analyzed and peopled the wave of racial justice protests that shook the country in the spring and summer of 2020 in the wake of the police murder of George Floyd. At the same time, a widespread outpouring of declarations from corporations and educational institutions claimed support for Black lives—a “racial reckoning” that quickly faded. But antiracism is not a set of postures, nor, as later events have made clear, is its work done in one turbulent summer. This book exists to help encourage, inform, inspire, and sustain an ongoing practice of facing down the dragon.

Today, we write this introduction in the context of ongoing backlash against positive social policy changes that resulted from feminist, immigrant rights, workers' rights, trans, and antiracist activism, such as *Roe v. Wade* (1973), *Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals* (2012), the establishment of sanctuary cities, federal protections for trans students, bail reform, federal investigations into and community oversight of police departments that engage in racist policing and violence, and successful campaigns to center BIPOC and LGBTQ histories and experiences in K-12 curricula (Beaumont, 2023; Ofer, 2022; Pauly, 2021; Perfas, 2023). White organizing against antiracist teaching and “don't say gay” movements are generating book bans and the termination of teachers in K-12 schools as well as some colleges and universities. President Joe Biden's decision to endorse and invest another 14.2 billion dollars in the Israeli government's genocidal war—which as of February 2024 has killed over 30,000 Palestinians, disabled over 69,000 more (most of them impoverished women and children), and orphaned at least 17,000 children—may discourage enough people from voting for him in the 2024 election that Trump ascends to the presidency yet again (Amer and Marsi, 2024; Batrawy, 2024; Shurafa and Magdy, 2024).

US government support for Israeli state genocide, despite much of the voting public's disapproval of the said war, is not surprising given the country's history of state genocide and settler colonialism as white supremacist capitalist projects (AP/NORC, 2024).

Studying whiteness

We want to make clear that what is meant by *whiteness* is not skin color (no one's skin is actually white), although superficial perceptions of what humans look like play an important role in how whiteness works. Race is not a natural, biological category; it is a classification system constructed to serve particular interests. *Whiteness* refers to a centuries-old, ever-adapting, humanly created process of coercion and consent by which racial power relations are established and maintained (Lund, 2022). It is rooted in the history of Europeans justifying the conquest, colonization, genocide, and enslavement of others based on notions of their own superiority. In the colonies that became the US, whiteness as a system was sealed into law in the 1670s when colonies established legal distinctions by race between white indenture and Black lifelong slavery in order to undermine interracial solidarity among laborers (Painter, 2010, pp. 104–131). In common usage, *white supremacy*, the idea that white people are superior and should dominate all other people, refers to extremists, but note that the idea of *supremacy* is built into the construct of whiteness. The idea of inferior racial “others,” created to justify exploitation and oppression, depended upon the notion of a superior white “us.”

Over the centuries, these notions have been shored up by religion, philosophy, pseudoscience, law, policy, narratives, and images. Powerful white groups have repeatedly addressed inequalities among white people based on class, gender, and national origin, and have gained the consent of subordinated white groups, by assuring them that they are better than people of color. These ways of thinking, imagining, and structuring human societies work as a conditioning force and a lure, inducting people who can be seen as white into the racial power structure. Because whiteness is positioned as normal, right, and good, it permits people identified as white to stay ignorant about the systemic violence of white supremacy, and therefore to believe in their own innocence—and to act out of fear, entitlement, and outrage when white dominance seems to be threatened. The study of whiteness aims to break this conditioning by making whiteness visible and strange, something to examine, question, and take apart.

Black and Brown people have been thinking and talking about whiteness and challenging white supremacist systems of power since the creation of the idea of whiteness (Kendi, 2016). The roots of critical whiteness studies are in the work of BIPOC intellectuals and freedom fighters, dating back hundreds

of years—social change agents who have not only theorized and examined the conceptual and structural terrain of whiteness, white racism, white privilege, white violence, and structural supremacy, but have also explored BIPOC constructions and understandings of whiteness and white people.¹ It is notable, then, that Whiteness Studies was only formally recognized as an academic discipline in the late 1980s when a critical minority of white scholars identified themselves as contributors to the long extant BIPOC tradition of inquiry into whiteness (Hurtado, 2019). From the 1980s onward, scholars of critical whiteness studies have charted the historical trajectory of whiteness. They have emphasized how white silence in the face of racism sustains systems of white domination, white people’s obliviousness to their racial privilege, and their hyperawareness of their whiteness only in relationship to people of color, particularly when they perceive people of color as a threat to their racial advantages (Hurtado, 2019, p. 91; Yancy, 2004).

Feminist interrogations of whiteness have spotlighted the impacts of white women’s racism both in their traditional roles and in movements to resist sexism, leaving a rich legacy of analysis that the authors of this volume carry forward to the present. In the 1980s and 1990s, Black and Indigenous feminists of color, having coined the term “white feminism,” identified it as the tendency of feminists who are white to fight for access to the privileges and power of wealthy white men, and thus to maintain the oppression of poor white people and people of color (Schuller 2021, pp. 3–4). bell hooks memorably demolished the notion that feminism was simply about “equality to men” with the question: “which men do women want to be equal to?” (1984). Audre Lorde admonished white feminists that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house”—that sexism cannot be defeated by methods that keep white supremacy and other oppressions in place (1979). A recent manifestation of white women who use the “master’s tools,” according to Kim Hong Nguyen in *Mean Girl Feminism* (2024), is wealthy white women in powerful corporate positions who brand themselves as feminists yet target both women of color and other white women in their employ with toxic behaviors. Maria Lugones (2003) called out white feminists’ self-centered resistance to critical self-awareness and urged them to see themselves in the “faithful mirror” of BIPOC feminists’ view of them. In the introduction to *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), a groundbreaking collection of writings by feminists of color, co-editor Cherríe Moraga called out and rejected white feminists’ color-blind politics of “sisterhood,” which demanded that women of color break off their solidarity with men of color and whitewash themselves to be acceptable to white middle-class feminists (xliv). Moraga describes the process of creating this collection as a turning away from the exhausting work of “bridging”—struggling toward coalition with racist white feminists—and toward nourishing connections and movements among feminists of color. Both Lorde and hooks unflinchingly interrogated

white feminists' racism, emphasizing how their failures to acknowledge and challenge their own white supremacy alienated and excluded feminists of color, thus fragmenting and weakening anti-sexism movements—and ultimately empowering white supremacist capitalist patriarchal systems of oppression. Today as in the past, feminist of color thinkers and activists continue to call on white women to hold themselves accountable to their social justice politics and take personal responsibility for identifying and unlearning their own racism through a lifetime of self-analysis—a meaningful consideration of their conscious and unconscious white supremacist beliefs and their roles in maintaining systemic white supremacy.

White antiracist feminist activists—most of them white cis lesbians—have taken to heart BIPOC demands for white people to contemplate whiteness as a social identity and matrix of power; they have followed women of color feminists in their critical analysis of race and patriarchy and answered their calls to work to eliminate racism in feminist spaces dominated by affluent heterocis white women, as well as in the broader society (Thompson, 2001). In the 1960s, white women like Anne Braden heeded this call as active accomplices in the movement to end legalized race segregation in the South (Gray, 2023). In the 1970s and 1980s, white antiracist feminist women continued to analyze and challenge white men's racism and racial power as well as their own. White lesbian poet Adrienne Rich, in a dialogue with Black lesbian poet Audre Lorde, explored in detail the intersection of white supremacy and heterosexism (1981). Marilyn Frye pointed out that white people are harmed by white racism but not systemically oppressed by it—a compact example of how to analyze whiteness while decentering it and why it is necessary to do so (1983, p. 14). Peggy McIntosh broke new ground with her thought piece “White Privilege: Unpacking the Knapsack,” in which she identifies women of color as an inspiration. McIntosh's widely circulated essay names white women's racism, including her own, and lists some of the countless ways in which white privilege structures her everyday life (1989). Ruth Frankenberg—a foundational thinker in whiteness studies as it took shape in the 1990s—examined “the whiteness of white women's experience,” the entanglement of whiteness and colonialism, and “antiracist forms of whiteness” (1993, pp. 7–18). Frankenberg acknowledged white privilege as a barrier to white women's ability to understand that whiteness is a manifestation of the feminist watchwords “The personal is political”—that is, something that is both outside *and* inside themselves. A commitment to undoing one's own racism, then, is a political feminist act. In more recent work, Jessie Daniels acknowledges that white women's toxic will to please—for instance, the failure to explicitly condemn the racism of other white people for fear of losing friends or an opportunity—is a white racism practice (2021).

A problem that Toni Morrison (1992) identified as *literary whiteness*—the assumption that both the author and the audience of a text are white—has

haunted the study of whiteness, and this haunting has carried over into classrooms, especially in predominantly white educational settings. We wanted to undo this pattern—although challenging it seems paradoxical: how do you shift white people out of the center of talk about whiteness? For this collection, our most basic strategy was to aim to assure that at least half of the writers of these pages were BIPOC, representing perspectives on whiteness from BIPOC social locations. At the roundtable discussion among the editors and seven of the authors at the National Women’s Studies Association 2022 annual conference, we raised the question of how to decenter whiteness in whiteness studies courses. Reanae McNeal closed the session by offering this straightforward test: While planning and presenting, ask: are we centering people of color? At the end, ask: did we center people of color? With both the panel and the book, we have partially passed Dr. McNeal’s test. And, in a way, partial success may be what is needed, at least for the present.

When whiteness studies centers on white people, a lot of time and attention can go into confronting what makes white people tick—why are we/they like that, how can we/they change, what’s at stake in staying that way or changing. This is a problem; those conversations may get into the structural factors that created whiteness *as a system* and keep it in place, but too often, they are individualized—as if the point of studying whiteness is to offer tools for distinguishing between “good” and “bad” white people, or in other ways to liberate white people from the burden of white guilt. Those conversations tend to focus on white people’s struggles, leaving the lived experiences and voices of BIPOC people in the margins—an outcome that replicates the broader racial system that whiteness studies aim to undo.

Talk about whiteness must center the goal of the liberation of BIPOC. It must give careful attention to what people of color know, from lived experience, about the structures and impacts of whiteness: the disadvantages white racial privilege confers on people of color and the damage that white people cause when they resist the undoing of their ignorance. Beyond this, for BIPOC, the study of whiteness can reveal the ways that it harms BIPOC by *internalization*—by the taking to heart of the shaming notion that being white is better, is normal, and that not being white is inferior and deviant. For BIPOC, a critical understanding of whiteness can be a tool for making liberation real.

And yet, we also recognize the need for thinking through whiteness from the point of view of people identified with it. If white supremacy is to be dismantled, white people need to confront, explore, and challenge whiteness at the level of their/our own behavior, emotions, and consciousness. We recognize too, though, that some of the concepts that have been most useful for opening those conversations—such as “white privilege” and “white fragility” (DiAngelo, 2018)—now often circulate as cryptic signals; they have met with oversimplification and backlash, neither of which recognizes their

complexity and potential value. For this book, we sought writing that revisits and re-enriches the tools we have for discerning the structures and workings of whiteness.

Alison Bailey (2023) offers a model for envisioning the worth of the “partial success” this book achieves in our aim of centering BIPOC liberation in the talk about whiteness. Speaking of her own practice in teaching about race, Dr. Bailey describes a conversation that moves among different focuses “in order to get a more complete sense of how white supremacy damages our collective humanity.” The first step is to center on, and “sit with,” the experiences of those marginalized by the racial system. Stopping there, though, she cautions, while it may awaken white people’s desire to do the right thing, too often “translates into missionary, good white person, rescuer engagements”—self-centering responses that keep white supremacy in place. Moving our attention fluidly among differing racialized perspectives allows us to “see and feel the damage collectively present in our lives” (7 July 2023).

Words matter

We want to explain some of the terms that appear throughout this volume, as well as variations in terminology and capitalization.

Central to feminist analysis of race and whiteness is the understanding that different systems of privilege and disadvantage—such as race, class, gender, and sexuality—are interconnected in ways that cannot be accounted for or addressed by viewing each system separately. Our authors use several different terms to refer to this analysis. *Intersectionality* has become popularized as the term for interconnected social identity systems since Black critical race feminist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw coined it in 1989; however, the concept of interconnected oppressions has a much longer history in BIPOC feminist thought, dating back as far as the mid-nineteenth century. The Combahee River Collective, in their still resonant 1977 Statement, used the term *interlocking systems of oppression*; in her groundbreaking book *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), Patricia Hill Collins used this term and added *matrix of domination* as a framework for recognizing how different identity categories confer or withhold privilege. *Cisheteropatriarchy* is a term that captures three oppressions that intersect in powerful ways with race and with each other: the enforcement of gender norms, homophobia, and male dominance.

Extending intersectional analysis to systems of oppression that cross national boundaries, we use the terms *global north* and *global south* to refer to regions of the world that have historically been colonizing forces and those regions that have been subject to colonization. These terms are not quite geographically accurate—for example, in the southern hemisphere, Australia could be described as belonging to the global north, while its indigenous

people would be part of the global south. But global north and global south are preferable to older terms, such as the Cold War-era “first” and “third” worlds, or “developed” versus “underdeveloped” and “developing” nations, which centralize the cultures, technologies, and economies of colonizer regions while erasing colonial exploitation. The term *settler colonialism* appears in several essays, referring to the colonizing power’s pattern of clearing a territory of its inhabitants through forced relocation, genocide, and the destruction of cultures and communities, and replacing them with new inhabitants sent by the colonial power. We have included the term “West” sparingly to refer to the philosophical tradition (or “fantasy,” as Houda Ali and Britt Munro name it in Chapter 12) that associates colonizer nations of the global north with the values of individualism, democracy, freedom, rationality, capitalism, modernity, and white dominance, and the implied “non-West” with the lack of or opposite to these values, providing justification for their exploitation.

As editors, we chose to capitalize Black and not white, viewing the two terms as working in different ways in discussions of race. “Black” refers to a broadly shared community and identity shaped by a common history, while “white” is not a cohesive group in the same sense, but rather works as a term that makes visible the often unnamed, even unintended ways that people identified with the dominant race gain advantages. The authors of two of our chapters, however, have chosen to capitalize “White,” and we have honored their choice. Samantha Vandermeade (2023) explains that making “White” a proper noun recognizes commonalities among people identified as white: a centuries-long interest in sustaining the supremacy of their race, which offers them “common access to privilege, respectability, and power that is not easily shed (even when/should we want to shed it)” (Vandermeade, personal communication).

Throughout the volume, with one exception, the authors use the acronym BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) to refer to people who are not identified as white. We see this term as an improvement on “people of color,” because it suggests the uniqueness of Black and Indigenous experiences and the foundational place of the racializations of these communities in the construction of race as we know it today. We recognize that BIPOC remains problematic, however, because it depends upon the overgeneralized term “people of color” to include anyone who is not Black, Indigenous, or white. Christina Cavener uses the more specific and less open-ended acronym ALAANA (African, Latinx, Asian, Arab, and Native American) in Chapter 3. We hope our readers are aware that “people of color” should not be used as an evasion of more precise racial terms, and that “colored people,” a term associated with the segregation and violence of the Jim Crow era, is obsolete and offensive. We have kept “Negro” where it appears in the authors’ citations of older sources but have redacted the violent racial slur “n__r”

wherever it appeared (for example, in James Baldwin's work cited by Andrea Warmack in Chapter 8).

Terms referring to people of Latin American descent vary among chapters. While in academic settings "Latinx" has become the preferred term for eliminating gender specificity, we have not enforced consistency in this volume, but rather have honored the authors' reasons for the terms they chose. Melissa Ochoa, in Chapter 10, argues persuasively that "Latine" should be broadly adopted because it is pronounceable in Spanish (and "Latinx" is not). Samantha Vandermeade, in Chapter 14, uses "Latino/a" to honor the ways that members of the community she writes about refer to themselves. In Chapter 19 Lucy Lippard, writing in New Mexico, uses the term "Hispanx," a gender-neutral version of the term "Hispano," by which members of the Latin American community in New Mexico refer to themselves.

The chapters and poems

This volume is organized in three interconnected sections: (I) Histories and counterstories, (II) Theory and self-reflection, and (III) Feminist antiracism praxis. Each section starts with an overview and closes with pages of questions for discussion and writing, learning activities, and outside resources.

We begin the volume with histories, because the ways that whiteness shows up today have deep historical roots. Most of us, especially those identified as white, have not been educated to recognize those roots; stories about the past that we learn in schools tend to be centered on white men and a few white women, without naming whiteness, how it has worked as a system of racial domination, or how women historically have managed their agency at the intersection of gender and race. The authors for Part I uncover continuities linking the past to contemporary gendered expressions of whiteness. Ruby Hamad (Chapter 1) highlights white women's tactics for accessing their racial privilege by performing the helpless victim—a role that historically supported white supremacist colonization and today shows up as "Karens." Karla Strand (Chapter 2) unpacks ways that white women settlers in the US applied their restricted gender roles to advancing settler colonialism. Christina Cavener (Chapter 3) demonstrates that throughout US history and continuing today, white women, including feminists, have used their stereotypical supposed traits (including helplessness, goodness, and motherliness) to advance white supremacy. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 point to past and present strategies for confronting, resisting, and undoing the oppressive impacts of whiteness. Leslie K. Dunlap (Chapter 4) introduces Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, a prominent Black feminist activist of the nineteenth century, who worked to educate white women about how to resist the stereotype of white feminine fragility by engaging in social activism in

solidarity with Black women. Stephanie Andrea Allen (Chapter 5) recounts the white-centered development of both Women's Studies and Lesbian Studies in the twentieth century and contributes to the undoing of that bias. Reanae McNeal (Chapter 6) revisits work by bell hooks that captures the erasure of Indigenous and Black histories by white supremacist documentation practices, and models the recovery of those histories as a healing and transformation practice. Denise Zubizarreta's poem at the end of Part I personalizes a coming to terms with the historical roots of Latine ancestry in the context of colonialism.

The chapters in Part II offer examples of how both BIPOC and white feminists grapple with whiteness, using study, analysis, and reflection to create and hone critical tools for understanding how large systems of unequal power show up in individual lives, and how lived experiences can inform resistance to those systems. Alison Bailey (Chapter 7) revisits the concept of white racial privilege, popularized since the 1990s, and urges white readers to face the ways that white privilege causes harm to BIPOC and white people alike. Andrea Dionne Warmack (Chapter 8) coins the concept *white terror* to describe the emotionally and spiritually stunting, fear-based habits that whiteness instills in white people, and invites inspiration from Black feminist thinkers for the courage to grow beyond the destructive impacts of oppressive systems. Carolyn Tinglin (Chapter 9) reflects on the ways that white-dominant work settings routinely undermine the well-being of Black women professionals, and shares her own story of resistance and healing. Melissa Ochoa (Chapter 10) introduces the colonial roots and current manifestations of *gendered colorism*—Latine communities' preference for light skin especially in women—and proposes strategies for resisting this manifestation of white supremacy. Ann Russo (Chapter 11) focuses on how white supremacist cultural values such as individualism and competition undermine feminist organizing, urging white activists to engage in continual reflection about both social systems and their own actions and ways of thinking. Houda Ali and Britt Munro (Chapter 12) draw on their different identities to reflect together about the relationship between liberal feminism and whiteness, highlighting how feminism has promoted Islamophobia. In the three poems at the end of Part II, Rachel O'Hanlon-Rodriguez captures the drive for liberation from colonialism and white supremacy in the figure of a river; Becky Thompson grapples with the hold of white supremacy on white women, even in their antiracist practices; and Liseli Fitzpatrick centers BIPOC oppression and BIPOC knowledge in a call for justice.

Feminist talk about whiteness is incomplete without action—and more study, more analysis, more deep reflection, dialogue, and action. The authors in Part III offer guidance for translating theory into antiracist action and show that there is no one “how-to”; missteps are an unavoidable and valuable part of learning how to dismantle the oppressive forces of whiteness.

Meena Mangat (Chapter 13) describes problematic white-centric “allyship” that emerged during the months following the murder of George Floyd and the need to center antiracist practices on an understanding of the impacts of racial oppression on those most affected by it. Samantha Vandermeade (Chapter 14) analyzes a white-women-led organizing effort on behalf of Central American migrants in Arizona, showing how unreflectively wielding white privilege for charitable ends can reinforce white dominance. Ruth Alminas and Cory Pillen (Chapter 15) model the decentering of whiteness through study, dialogue, and reflection in their account of their Indigenous students’ critiques of white feminism. Dana Ahern (Chapter 16) calls for a deeper grasp of intersectionality in trans studies and a richer account of the difference that race makes in trans communities. Cameron Rasmussen (Chapter 17) focuses on the harm that white supremacist patriarchy causes not only to BIPOC, but also to white men, and describes a framework for addressing the shame that drives white male violence. Sara Blanchard and Misasha Suzuki Graham (Chapter 18) offer tips on using cyberactivism to sustain antiracist action rather than backing out when the sense of urgency passes. Peggy Diggs and Lucy Lippard (Chapter 19) share inspiration from BIPOC and white artists, scholars, and activists for reflecting deeply on the meaning and impact of whiteness. The poems that close out the volume grapple with the puzzles of allyship. Anaïs Peterson narrates the turmoil a woman of color experiences in response to superficial allyship; Ivy T. Schweitzer pushes herself beyond a “checklist” approach to white antiracism; and Becky Thompson calls for a careful end to white silence about racism, backed up by a commitment to action.

With *Feminists Talk Whiteness*, we join activists, artists, and scholars who work to uncover and understand the historical roots of white supremacist beliefs, forms of violence, and systems of power. With them, we embrace Cornel West’s wisdom about the connection between resisting oppression and cherishing life: that “justice is what love looks like in public” (2010). We add to the voices that ask: how do we disrupt, and ultimately end, the ongoing crisis of white violence and systemic racism? We aim to contribute to and newly complicate the robust body of scholarship on whiteness in order to inform, inspire, and stoke the curiosity of readers who will self-examine, dialogue, and act in ways that challenge white supremacy as an ideology, practice, and power structure. We invite you to join us in confronting the dragon and undoing its harm.

Note

- 1 Examples of BIPOC thinkers and activists who have contributed to the study of whiteness include Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass during the slavery era; Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Ida B. Wells, and W.E.B. DuBois in the

post-Civil War years; Zora Neal Hurston, James Baldwin, Evelyn Yoshimura, and Malcolm X from the early 1900s through the 1970s; Gloria Anzaldúa, Paula Gunn Allen, Angela Davis, bell hooks, Ronald Takaki, and Toni Morrison in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries; and Aida Hurtado, Noura Erakat, Lila Abu Lughod, Carolyn Anderson, Stephanie Jones Rogers, Claire Jean Kim, and George Yancy today. Many others are cited in the chapters of this book.

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PART I

Histories and counterstories

Introduction

Women, feminism, and whiteness: Histories

Feminism and whiteness as social constructs, as they manifest today in institutions, social media, and everyday interactions, are rooted in the past. The same is true of white supremacy and anti-racism. Their histories, however, have been obscured, distorted, or marginalized in school curricula that take for granted white men’s centrality to everything worth knowing about the past. In the 1960s and 1970s, scholars committed to empowering social justice movements established new academic disciplines—including African American Studies, Latino Studies, and Women’s Studies—dedicated to overcoming the ignorance, myths, and misconceptions generated by the traditional narrow focus on white men. Since then, scholarship about race and gender has flourished, and scholars’ and activists’ understanding of race and gender has become deeper, more nuanced, and more complex. This knowledge has not consistently filtered into schools—or it has done so in watered-down ways. And the new disciplines have not consistently connected with one another. For its first decades, most feminist scholarship and teaching failed to be *intersectional*. This has meant that Women’s Studies largely developed as a white-women-centered discipline, despite the availability of powerful writings by BIPOC feminists. Today the history of women and whiteness, and of feminism and whiteness, is a critical area that feminists have recognized the need to talk about.¹

Chapter 1, Strategic white womanhood: Challenging white feminist perceptions of “Karen,” tackles these histories and their connection to the

present by unpacking the “Karen” trope, which has circulated widely in social media as a satirical critique of instances of white women’s knee-jerk racism, usually in circumstances that put BIPOC in danger. Why focus on white women’s racism when white men have the greatest access to power? The author, Ruby Hamad, a Lebanese-Syrian journalist and scholar writing from Australia, offers this chapter in response to white feminists’ complaints that using “Karen” to target white women for ridicule is sexist. Hamad explains that the trope does not claim white women are worse racists than white men. Rather, the “Karen” trope marks how white womanhood shows up today as a manifestation of the longstanding historical intersections of race and gender, constructed to support both patriarchy and white supremacist colonization. Subordinated because of their gender, white women have gained power by strategically performing the role of fragile victim in need of rescue. In other words, the Karen trope highlights the ways in which white women, in the context of white supremacy, have historically weaponized their gender and race to shore up their privilege.

Chapter 2, *White women’s participation in the attempted genocide of Native American peoples*, extends Hamad’s analysis of the intersections of gender, race, and colonization, with a focus on North America. A white US scholar, Karla Strand uses carefully crafted research methods to center Indigenous scholars and oral testimonies and to undo white-centered conventions for narrating the history of settler colonialism. Gender norms traditionally confined white women to the domestic sphere, but through their participation in colonialism, they gained power and status. Strand identifies five “tools” that white women settlers wielded in their roles in the exploitation and destruction of Indigenous peoples and cultures: gaining Native women’s trust to undermine Native gender roles; acting as mother figures to impose white standards of domesticity and give settler colonialism a moral face; treating Native people as uncivilized children in need of guidance; positioning themselves as fragile creatures who needed protection from Native men; and organizing associations to advance actions for solving the “Indian problem.” Among those actions were the establishment of boarding schools where Native children were stripped of their language and culture. Strand gives examples of how Native students and their families continue to resist the violence and cultural erasure perpetuated in the boarding school system. Following the lead of Indigenous scholars, Strand emphasizes Native American “survivance”—meaning active repudiation of the centuries-old myth of the “vanishing Indian,” a people who once occupied the continent but have supposedly disappeared because of the supposed inevitability of white control of the continent. Not so; settler colonialism attempts genocide, but Indigenous people endure.

Chapter 3, “White women as white supremacist political actors: From the Suffragists to the Karens,” continues the theme of white supremacy’s impacts

on white women's political action in the United States, offering examples from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. Christina Cavener, a white community organizer and scholar, points out that racism has shaped feminist movements as well as movements that are overtly white supremacist, and that even white women engaged in white nationalist activism have claimed to be feminists. The chapter begins with an analysis of racism in the women's suffrage movement, then turns to white women's contributions to the dismantling of the racial equity policies enacted during Reconstruction, after the abolition of slavery. After gaining voting rights in 1920—rights that women of color could rarely access—white women used their new political influence to strengthen Jim Crow segregation. In the 1960s and 1970s, progressive white feminist leaders of the women's movement also reinforced white supremacy by insisting that sexism was the foundation of all oppression—a position that BIPOC feminists vehemently critiqued because it neglected the vast differences that race, class, ethnicity, and other intersecting identities make in women's lived experience. Further unpacking the Karen trope, Cavener shows how Karens' exaggerated claims of victimization repeat the false claims that white women historically perpetrated to justify the lynching of Black people. She concludes with an examination of white women's use of social media to build the white nationalist movement, demonstrating how white women have repeatedly leveraged their presumed innocence, goodness, and motherliness to reproduce white supremacy.

Chapter 4, "The good, the bad, and the indifferent": The political pedagogy of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, introduces a prominent Black feminist activist of the late nineteenth century whose astute advice on interracial coalitions in women's movements remains relevant today. White historian Leslie K. Dunlap focuses on Harper's leadership, writings, and speeches for the temperance movement, a movement premised on the idea that social ills, such as poverty and violence, both caused and were made worse by men's excessive alcohol consumption. In an era when white backlash against the emancipation of Black people from slavery was escalating, Harper warned white women that the white men in their lives might be prone to commit sexual and racial violence and presented activism for structural change through the temperance movement as an opportunity for white women to reform both themselves and white men. Serving as a bridge between Black and white communities and organizations, she urged coalition-building, offered practical strategies, and emphasized the value for white women of organizing with Black women as equal contributors and leaders. She saw the temperance movement as a place to educate white women on their whiteness, and called on them to reject white gender and racial ideals that implicated them in rising white supremacy. Rather than performing feminine fragility, white women could push back against racism by using their influence within their families and communities, as well as with business, religious, and political leaders.

Chapter 5, The unbearable whiteness of lesbian studies, turns to literary history to build on the theme of white-centrism in white feminists' efforts to build new bodies of knowledge during the late twentieth century. Stephanie Andrea Allen, a Black poet, fiction writer, and scholar, focuses on efforts to undo multiple marginalizations—not just because of sexism, but also because of heterosexism and racism. Women's Studies, a new academic field launched in the 1970s, aimed to find and spread the work of women, which had long been ignored—but, by the end of the decade, lesbian and queer women's work remained marginalized in the field. To counter the heterosexism of Women's Studies, activists and scholars created lesbian studies starting in the late 1970s, but this new academic field gave no more than token attention to the works of lesbians of color. Black lesbian writers responded to this marginalization with creative, theoretical, and scholarly writing that laid bare the particularities of their experiences. Allen contributes to the work of undoing the whiteness of lesbian studies by offering close readings of fiction by Black lesbian writer Becky Birtha, whose short stories explore the politics of personal life in Black lesbians' experiences of loss, family, motherhood, acceptance, and interracial relationships.

Chapter 6, bell hooks: Black indigeneity, ancestral memory, and lessons on resistance, continues the theme of recovering suppressed knowledge by “re-citing”—bringing forward into the present—a chapter by one of the most significant Black feminist thinkers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Reanae McNeal, an Afro-Indigenous scholar, professor, and spiritual activist, turns to bell hooks' work for insight about how remembering and reconnecting with the past can be a form of activism, creating spaces of healing for communities that have suffered generations of harm through white supremacist colonization and oppression. For African Americans, Native Americans, and those with both ancestries (including hooks and the author of this chapter), recovering knowledge of the past means confronting the ways that white supremacist institutions have worked systematically to obliterate ancestral memories, cultural traditions, and lived realities; how white supremacist culture has circulated images, stories, and practices that reduce them to subhuman caricatures; and how members of both communities internalize damaging stereotypes about themselves and each other. McNeal highlights hooks' emphasis on uncovering historic solidarities between people of African descent and Indigenous Americans. While white documentation practices and racial ideologies have obscured or distorted these histories as part of the colonization process, hooks models their recovery by retelling the oral histories she learned from the elders in her own family. Building on hooks' call to resist white-centered domination, McNeal invites readers to reimagine a world where healing and social transformation can take place.

Part I closes with a poem that captures the historical roots of Latine mixed ancestry in the context of colonialism. In *La sangre llama*, Denise

Zubizarreta, a Puerto Rican and Cuban American poet and artist, attends to the voices of her ancestors calling for recognition. When the speaker asks them to help her understand who she is, they urge her to recognize that both sides of the story of colonialism—both the oppressor and the oppressed—are “burned” into her DNA.

Note

- 1 Recent studies of the history of whiteness, feminism, and women include Kyla Schuller’s *The trouble with white women: A counterhistory of feminism* (Bold Type Books, 2023); Koa Beck’s *White Feminism: From the suffragettes to influencers and who they leave behind* (Atria, 2021); Ruby Hamad’s *White tears, brown scars: How white feminism betrays women of color* (Catapult, 2020); and Rafia Zakaria’s *Against white feminism: Notes on disruption* (W. W. Norton, 2021). Note: With gratitude to Georgianna Abdelmoety, Ogooluwa Oluwatola, and Starlin Regalado Nuñez for their insights on these chapters.

1

STRATEGIC WHITE WOMANHOOD

Challenging white feminist perceptions of “Karen”

Ruby Hamad

Introduction: Who is Karen?

The “Karen” archetype is one of the more ubiquitous terms associated with antiracist discourse to gain mainstream currency in recent years. It is also among the most contested, as its meaning “continues to evolve” (Bhasin et al. 2020, 929). Public white feminists point to Karen’s disputed origins as evidence of the trope’s sexism (Freeman, *The Guardian* 2020; Lewis, *The Atlantic* 2020; Ditum, *Unherd* 2020; Baird, *Sydney Morning Herald* 2020; Murphy, *Feminist Current* 2020). They argue that its emergence on misogynistic internet forums overshadows concurrent social media use on Black Twitter, where Karen became a signifier for entitled white women before gaining traction among people of color more broadly. This is how *NPR* co-host Shereen Marisol Meraji introduced the trope: “You know Karen. She wants to speak to your manager... She tells you to go back to where you came from. She calls the police on you for just about anything” (Demby & Medji 2020).

Karen’s status is at once pervasive yet subjective and ill-defined, something or someone who epitomizes the expression “we know it when we see it.” Sociolinguist Robin Queen (*The Conversation* 2020) identifies “two separate threads of meaning [that] converged to make Karen the label for an officious, entitled, white woman.” First is the proliferation of generic-sounding first names used by African Americans as stand-ins for nosy or dangerous white women. These have a long lineage, originating in antebellum slavery where “Miss Ann” contained coded warnings to avoid a certain white mistress. The most famous of Karen’s predecessors is “Becky,” popularized by 1990s rapper Sir-Mix-A-Lot in his hit song “Baby Got Back,” and revisited in 2016 on Beyoncé’s album *Lemonade*. Then there was BBQ Becky, a white

woman who, in April 2018, called the police on a Black family picnicking in Oakland, California, on the pretext they were using the wrong type of grill for that zone (Williams 2020). Instantly, the viral BBQ Becky meme was born, flooding the internet with images depicting the woman policing everyone from Rosa Parks to the Duchess of Sussex. The second thread named by Queen is Karen's contentious use by white males. Comedian Dane Cook used the name to describe that "douche" friend "nobody likes," and in 2017, Karen appeared on Reddit "as a parody of a Reddit user who had ranted about his ex-wife named Karen who received custody of their children and possession of the family home. That's likely the point at which Karen became linked to pushy behaviors like 'wanting to speak to the manager'" (Queen, *The Conversation* 2020).

According to Queen, the two strands came together in the perfect storm that was the Central Park Karen. In May 2020, a confrontation between a Black male birdwatcher and a white woman regarding her refusal to leash her dog culminated in the woman placing a call to police urging them to "hurry" because an "African-American man" was threatening her and her dog. Central Park Karen would become the most notorious of the numerous white women caught calling the police on Black people for "living while Black" (Williams 2020, 2). Gaining cultural currency from 2018 onward, these clips were usually assigned names that highlighted both the woman's actions and her race. Permit Patty called 911 because her neighbor's nine-year-old daughter was selling water "without a permit." Cornerstore Caroline claimed a 12-year-old Black boy had sexually assaulted her in a convenience store. Surveillance footage, however, showed his backpack had merely brushed against her as he walked by. Cornerstore Caroline seemingly channeled Carolyn Bryant, whose similar accusations against 14-year-old Emmett Till, in 1954, led to his lynching by a group of white men that included Bryant's husband.

Karen in history: From Miss Ann to Becky to CAREN

Had BBQ Becky achieved notoriety a couple of years later, she would almost certainly have been dubbed "Karen" rather than "Becky": she is middle-aged, she issues orders to Black people, she calls the police for reinforcement—all hallmarks of Karen. Becky more commonly denoted a younger white woman, one likely to perform white racial innocence or even aspire to Blackness only to respond with distress when treated with suspicion (Negra & Layda 2021). An early use of Becky to describe a white woman who encroaches on Black spaces appears in Harlem Renaissance author Jean Toomer's *Cane* ([1923] 2019), as an outcast living with her two Black sons on the wrong side of the tracks. This theme of a white woman positioning herself within or adjacent to a Black community echoes in Sir Mix-A-Lot's Becky, where she and her unnamed companion mock the size of a Black woman's posterior and

the sexual tastes of “rap guys” (Black men). The difference between these two iterations of Becky and Karen is that, whereas Becky inserts herself into Blackness, Karen seeks to destroy it and leverages her proximity to authority to do so.

The Becky meme resembles “Miss Anne,” a generic name used by Black locals during the Harlem Renaissance to describe a fixture on their cultural scene: white American women, some of them wealthy and famous, who flocked to Harlem (Kaplan 2013). In *Glossary of Harlem Slang*, Zora Neale Hurston (n.d.) defines “Miss Anne” as simply “a white woman.” Directly below that entry is “Mr Charlie: A white man.” This indicates that terms denoting white women throughout history *have* had male equivalents, albeit without the same degree of cultural impact. (The reasons for this will be discussed later in this chapter.) Perhaps confusingly, Miss Anne of Harlem is closer to the contemporary Becky than she is to the original, punitive Miss Ann, who, to bring us full circle, is a dead ringer for Karen.

The Karen archetype, then, may well be exaggerated and her use by white men “tinged with sexism” (Bhasin et al. 2020, 931), but she did not emerge from a cultural void. Similar memes include “Bus Berater Brenda,” “Pool Patrol Paula,” “Burrito Bill,” “Jogger Joe,” “Airline Amy,” and “Road Raging Randy” (Williams 2020, 2). In 2020, actions perpetrated by these figures were so numerous that the city of San Francisco implemented the CAREN—Caution Against Racial and Exploitative Non-Emergencies—Act to deter white people from making racially motivated calls to police, bringing Karen into legal as well as popular discourse (Associated Press 2020).

White feminist responses to Karen

White feminist antipathy to Karen is not limited to a particular expression of white feminism, though it does appear more prominent among those outside the United States. British Liberal feminist Hadley Freeman (*The Guardian* 2020) argues that Karen is “mired in sexism” since (white) women cannot complain about the trope “without being accused of being humourless old shrews,” so it does not merely describe women’s behavior but controls it: “No wonder so many men enjoy it.” Freeman has a point about the glee with which some (white) men have taken up the term. However, this should not negate its racial significance. Karen signifies *whiteness* but Freeman neglects that distinction, questioning why signifiers using men’s names “have never gained the popularity of ones about Becky ... let alone Karen.” Freeman’s argument highlights a preoccupation of white feminists since the days of the suffragettes: that white women’s status is measured only and always by direct comparison with white men.

Sarah Ditum (*Unherd* 2020) also scoffs at Karen as “a cherished piece of racial justice rhetoric,” claiming (without data) that its use by Black women

is “vastly” outnumbered by its popularity among “angry white men.” She concludes, “[Karen] is and *always has been* a way to spit out a generalized contempt at women ... by casting her as the privileged one” (emphasis added). To Ditum, it also appears that Karen signifies all women. These sentiments are echoed by Canadian radical feminist Meghan Murphy (*Feminist Current* 2020), who sees Karen as a way for faux progressives to “virtue signal their ‘intersectional’ cred.” Murphy’s use of scare quotes around the term “intersectional,” coined by a Black woman (Crenshaw 1989), should not be overlooked. There are few such terms that have not been similarly corrupted and disparaged once they have reached widespread usage, and there is a certain irony in mocking one term used by people of color in order to disprove another.¹ Murphy has even less patience for Karen’s racial meaning: “Of course ‘Karen’ is a sex-based meme, and of course it exists to mock and dismiss women.” Australian white feminist Julia Baird (*Sydney Morning Herald* 2020) confusingly defines “Karen” as a “woman who challenges authority.” Seemingly unaware that Karen isn’t complaining *about* authority but *to* authority, she laments, “Women are told to resign, not to rage. To be compliant; defiance is not the norm ... to parody women who complain only adds to the sense they’d be foolish to speak up.” She questions the absence of “an entitled Ken,” citing a series of studies that men are more likely than women to complain about retail service: “Why, as with slut, whore, bimbo, is there no real male equivalent?”

Finally, Helen Lewis (*The Atlantic* 2020) tackles what she calls the “mythology of Karen.” She does highlight Karen’s racialization, though this does not soften her perception of the archetype’s perceived sexism. Lewis subverts key critiques of white womanhood made by women of color—without actually crediting women of color—to argue that Karen embodies the complicated status of white women who, from her perspective, are unfairly seen as both oppressor and oppressed and “may be using their apparent disadvantage – being a woman – as a weapon.” In directing her anger at racial minorities or working-class individuals of any race, Karen executes “a covert maneuver: using her femininity to present herself as a victim, when she is really an aggressor.” Lewis’ decision not to cite women of color not only signals a disagreement with this thesis but also is meant to render it absurd. In this way, Lewis executes a covert maneuver of her own: appropriating the work of women of color in order to mock and dismiss that very work. Accadapadi (2007), for example, wrote of white women’s one-up/one-down identities; bell hooks (1984) pointed out their dual roles as oppressor and oppressed, and this author is one of many who has tackled the weaponization of white femininity and emotionality—i.e. “white women’s tears”—as strategic devices deployed against people of color (Hamad, *Guardian Australia* 2018, 2020; Ajayi, *Awesomely Luvvie* 2018; Cooper 2018). Though conceding Karen embodies elements of U.S. history, Lewis denies its

applicability elsewhere, locating the key to Karen's sexism in her perceived faux victimhood: "Call the Karen meme sexist though, and you will stumble into the middle of a Venn diagram, where progressive activists and anti-feminists can agree with each other: when white women say they've been raped, we should doubt them because we know that white women lie." Lewis minimizes the significant history of the brutalization of Black and brown men on the pretext that they victimized white women (Stoler 1989, 2002), including the lynching of Black men during segregation as Black journalist Ida B. Wells (1892) first brought to light, and she ignores the feminists of color who have critiqued this very history (Davis 2001; Hamad 2020). To Lewis, Karen represents only "witches, harridans, harpies: women who dare to keep existing, speaking, and asking to see the manager, after their reproductive peak." The target of Karen's ire is rendered invisible, as if the outrage is merely that a white woman is speaking and not that she is using speech to threaten and endanger others.

This assumption that since *they* don't find Karen's use in antiracist rhetoric compelling then no one should demonstrates Adrienne Rich's concept of "white solipsism," the tendency "to think, imagine, and speak as if whiteness described the world. [White solipsism] is not the consciously held belief that one race is inherently superior to all others, but a tunnel-vision which simply does not see nonwhite experience or existence as precious or significant, unless in spasmodic, impotent guilt-reflexes, which have little or no long-term, continuing momentum or political usefulness" (Rich quoted in Spelman 2001, 75). It is true that terminology signifying the maleness of white racists such as Ken and Chad have not caught on to anything resembling the same degree, and white feminists are not alone in pointing this out (Young, *The Root* 2020). However, rather than signal inherent misogyny, this chapter argues that these traits and behaviors indicate Karen is read as female not because she is viewed as more loathsome or culpable than white men, but because she typifies the traditional role of white women in a white society: a lesser member of the dominant class who appeals to those above her by sacrificing those below her. This is a role that many white feminists clearly have yet to reconcile with their perception of universal female oppression. Although Lewis touches on this, she does so to exonerate rather than critique white womanhood and so buries this history once again.

White feminist criticism in context

Before examining this history, it is useful to place the white feminist response to Karen in the context of white feminist criticism, which has historically attempted to sever gender from race (Schuller 2018) and class (Yuval-Davis 1997). Sara Salem (2018, n.p.) uses the term "white feminist shock" to describe the performance of innocence that "demonstrates a detachment

from the ways in which race and gender constitute one another.” White feminist shock characterizes not only much of their responses to Karen but that of many white feminists going back decades who have been challenged by women of color. In 1984, bell hooks noted that “the white women who dominate feminist discourse today rarely question whether or not their perspective on women’s reality is true to the lived experiences of women as a collective group” (hooks 2001, 34). Their insistence on the “common oppression” of womanhood, she argues, signaled not a global sisterhood but an appropriation of feminist principles to promote their bourgeois class interests.

This is evident in Catherine MacKinnon’s lamentation of the “trivialization of white women’s subordination.” Skin privilege, she writes—avoiding the term white privilege—“has never insulated white women from the brutality and misogyny of men, mostly but not exclusively white men” (1991, 20). In this example of the “cultural and racial myopia” of white feminism (Amos & Parmar 2001, 28), MacKinnon neglects the active role played by white women since colonial times, who have not been restricted to passive receptors of privilege conferred by white men, but have been active enforcers of white domination (Hamad 2020). She also derides women of color who form alliances with men from their racial group to isolate “the useless white woman” (MacKinnon 1991, 21). Here, she rather spectacularly misses the point that women and men of color unite to resist racial oppression, a form of solidarity for which white women and men have no need (Lorde 1984, 118). Similarly, in her critique of Susan Brownmiller, Angela Davis notes that, despite claiming to defend all women from sexual assault by all men, Brownmiller “sometimes boxes herself into the position of defending the particular cause of *white* women” (Davis 2001, 61, emphasis original). Regarding the Scottsboro Nine case in which nine Black men were wrongly charged and convicted of the rape of two white women in 1930s Alabama, Brownmiller sympathizes with the women whom she sees as “corralled by a posse of white men who already believed a rape had taken place. Confused and fearful they fell into line.” To Brownmiller, the two white women were victims and the nine innocent Black men “a handful of pathetic, semi-illiterate fellows” transformed into “bewildered heroes” (quoted in Davis 2001, 61). By describing the women as “innocent pawns,” Davis argues, Brownmiller rejects the possibility they may have been willing collaborators: “In choosing to take sides with the white women, regardless of the circumstances, Brownmiller herself capitulates to racism” (Davis 2001, 61–62).

A final point here is the propensity for white feminist arguments to use the existence of marginalized white women—mostly poor, working-class, and victims of gendered violence—to negate the privilege of other white women, including themselves. Yet, white feminism would balk at the suggestion that the existence of white working-class men renders sexism obsolete.

In this (mis)usage, class functions as a euphemism for a white identity politics (Bhambra 2017, S227), in this case, a bourgeois feminist identity. As Alison Phipps points out, the strategic device of white women's tears, based on the archetype of colonial purity invoked to rationalize deadly disciplinary and retributive state power, is less likely to be accessed by white working-class women, "who are often figures of classed disgust" (Phipps 2021, 85, citing Imogen Tyler). Characteristically, white feminists seem unwilling to apply feminist concepts to critiques of white women's role in racism, even appearing to forget a cornerstone of the second wave: that the personal is political. Rather, to their own and exclusive advantage, they demand to be treated individually and as if they "exist outside racialised structures and power relations even as [their] actions perpetuate them" (Phipps 2021, 85). White women's tears have been utilized for this purpose by everyone from former British Prime Minister Theresa May who wept outside 10 Downing St as she resigned her position to deflect from months of criticism of her performance (Phipps 2021), to renowned historian Mary Beard who "cried" when challenged by women of color for using the archaic term "uncivilized" to refer to Haiti (Hamad 2020).

Here, I propose another factor that can account for Karen's potency: the meme emerged amid an explosion of unprecedented public criticism of white feminism. Returning briefly to MacKinnon (1991), in response to her essay, Yale published an open letter containing critical replies from its students, all of which were softened with reassurances reminding MacKinnon of her "valuable insight" (Powell 1991, 183), their "deep appreciation of [her] teaching and scholarship" (187), and "great deal of respect" for her (189). MacKinnon had not felt similarly compelled to spare the feelings of women of color. This unreciprocated prioritization of the emotional comfort of white women has long characterized their relationship to women of color (Hamad 2020, 4). Karen upends this relationship. As Apryl Williams explains, Karen memes do more than simply parody white entitlement. They represent a subversion of traditional western power dynamics, "police[ing] White supremacy and explicitly call[ing] for consequences, providing Black communities with a form of agency" (2020, 1). A similar subversion was also taking place within public feminism. The term "white women's tears" goes at least as far back as 2007 in academic discourse (Accapadi 2007), although studies on white feminist weaponizing of emotionality are even older (Srivastava 2005). In media and popular feminist discourse, however, its tipping point was 2018, when "Karen" was unapologetically deconstructed in several prominent critiques demanding changes in white women's treatment of women of color (Ajayi, *Awesomely Luvvie* 2018; Hamad, *Guardian Australia* 2018; Cooper 2018). That was the year of BBQ Becky, when Black Lives Matter was gaining momentum, football player Colin Kaepernick's silent protests were heard around the world, and Trumpism was in full flight. Against this

transformative backdrop, women of color were publicly “talking up to the white woman” (Moreton-Robinson 2000) more than ever before.

White women in history: from damsels in distress to damsels in defense

Of course, vigorous counter-discourse from feminists of color already existed but was marginalized by mainstream white feminism (Schuller 2021). In the United States, this includes one of the earliest such critiques from Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1866) in her speech at the Eleventh National Women’s Rights Convention in New York City. Before a crowd that included Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, she shared anecdotes of white women’s refusal to ride the same streetcars as Black women: “You white women speak of rights. I speak of wrongs ... We are all bound up in one great bundle of humanity and society can’t trample on the weakest and feeblest among its members without receiving the curse in its own soul.” Today, we would consider Harper’s critique an intersectional one.

In European imperial settings, the presence of white women was used to maintain and patrol racial boundaries (McCulloch 2000; Stoler 2002; Ghose 2007). Regarded as a vulnerable class in need of protection from the colonized populations, white women were theoretically marginalized from the more visible role played by white men (Inglis 1975; Stoler 1989; Kaladelfos 2012). This emphasis placed on the public/private dichotomy by colonial discourse, however, has obscured women’s crucial role in the advancement and consolidation of empire (Chaudhuri 1988). It was, for instance, with “the arrival of the memsahibs [white British women] in the late eighteenth century that British society firmly put down its roots in Indian soil” (517–518). European settler women had a deep investment in imperialism (Ghose 2007, 108) and many participated enthusiastically within the limits of their female status. Historians and critical theorists have demonstrated how global imperial discourse overwhelmingly positioned white women as both ignorant to and innocent of the violence of white men (see for example hooks 1985; Gray White 1985; Stoler 1989, 2002; McCulloch 2000; Moreton-Robinson 2000; Jacobs 2005; Ghose 2007; Jones-Rogers 2019). Some feminist scholars have added to this (mis)conception by further distancing female colonialists from their male contemporaries. Jane Haggis (1990, 110) argues that “colonialism is men’s business; women do the best they can within it,” and Helen Callaway (1987, 5) goes even further, describing white women as mere “pawns in imperial politics.”

However, scholarship over the past two decades has revealed the extent to which white women were not only cognizant of but actively endorsed and participated in the imperial project. Deconstructing the memsahib in Anglo-India, Indira Ghose (2007, 123) argues that the discourse of

“disclaiming authority” and the “denial of imperial privilege” was a “crucial strategy for women in the Raj.” Memsahibs regarded Indian women with pity and contempt, thus reinforcing “the self-image of the Englishwoman as more enlightened” (2007, 113). In defining their womanhood in opposition to Indian women, memsahibs participated in the construction of imperial ideology that created a hierarchical binary between white women and nonwhite women (Ghose 2007, 112–113). In his analysis of sexual moral panic in colonial Southern Rhodesia, historian Jock McCulloch refers to white women as “subordinate members of a dominant race” (McCulloch 2000, 85). Legally and socially subservient to white men, they were nonetheless elevated above the colonized Black population through their status as wives and roles in education, health, or missions. Although white “men made the rules of hierarchy and exclusion, women were anything but passive; voluntary bodies such as the Federation of Women’s Institutes and the Loyal Women’s Guild entered vigorously into public debate” (85–86). This status was reflected in Black Peril laws, which rendered rape and attempted rape of white women by African men a capital offense but excused the rampant abuses of African women by white men. White women’s groups leveraged these laws, petitioning not to repeal Black Peril laws but to widen them to encompass white men, and so strike a blow against what they perceived as male sexual privilege. These attempts were unsuccessful. Rather than condemn white men, such enthusiasm for the disciplinary state only helped to entrench white domination (McCulloch 2000, 86).

In the American West and colonial/federation-era Australia, white women played an active role in the removal of Indigenous children. Margaret Jacobs (2005) coined the term “maternal colonialists” to describe this role. Challenging white women’s image as selfless pioneers in the cultural imaginary of both countries, Jacobs outlines how they both confounded and collaborated with the colonial regimes to advance their own gender equality at the direct expense of Indigenous women. It was white men who implemented colonial laws, but from 1880 to 1940, the removal and institutionalization of Indigenous children was “largely a feminine domain, defined primarily around mothering, particularly targeted at Indigenous women, and implemented largely by white women.” To overcome hostility to white women working in the public sphere, maternal colonialists convinced male authorities that this was “women’s work for women,” and necessary to absorb the Indigenous population into white civilization (Jacobs 2005, 456).

Also debunking myths about white women’s innocence, Stephanie Jones-Rogers (2019) uncovered evidence of Southern women’s extensive direct ownership of enslaved Black people. Corroborating the testimony of the formerly enslaved gathered in the 1920s and 1930s with archival documents, Jones-Rogers excavates a history, not of benevolent or blithe mistresses, but of slave owners heavily invested in their human property. Despite

their legally inferior status, white women navigated the system to safeguard this property through such means as premarital contracts determining “sole and separate use” of their slaves, and successful court challenges against their husbands’ encroachment on their rights as slave owners. According to Jones-Rogers, “slavery and the ownership of human beings constituted core elements of their identities” for white Southern women (2019, 183). In other words, a mistress was the equivalent of a master. Indeed, this was a key theme in Harriet Jacobs’ autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). As the young Harriet attempted to break in a new pair of shoes provided by her grandmother, their loud creaking on the floor so enraged her mistress that she was forced to walk barefoot in the freezing cold: “As I went through the snow, my bare feet tingled. That night I was very hoarse; and I went to bed thinking the next day would find me sick, perhaps dead. What was my grief on waking to find myself quite well! I had imagined if I died, or was laid up for some time, that my mistress would feel a twinge of remorse that she had so hated ‘the little imp,’ as she styled me. It was my ignorance of that mistress that gave rise to such extravagant imaginings” (32).

These are only a handful of examples of white women clarifying racial boundaries in order to resist gendered ones. European colonial discourse constructed a binary between white women and all other women, designating white women a protected class and exiling racialized women from womanhood. Not only is this binary still with us, if in a more muted form, it is the seed from which white supremacy—and white feminism—were cultivated (Hamad 2020, 30).² As such, it is unsurprising that so many white feminists can see Karen only as a victim of sexism and not as a perpetrator of racism.

Conclusion: Karen’s strategic white womanhood

Rudyard Kipling’s “White Man’s Burden” (1899) was not an all-masculine ambition. The colonial construction of white women as innocent, peaceful, and a virtuous force not only sustained their own individual power, it furthered white supremacy by deflecting from the brutality of the colonizing process. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson surmises, “White women civilized while white men brutalized” (2000, 172). This symbiosis is also key to Alison Phipps’ concept of “political whiteness,” developed in response to white feminist positions on sexual violence. Political whiteness merges DiAngelo’s “white fragility” —“an ontological state and mode of interpersonal behavior” (Phipps 2019, 17) in which white people’s inability to handle racial stress leads them to further harm people of color—with Wendy Brown’s notion of “wounded identities”—“a symbolic position rooted in historical structures and dynamics” (Phipps 2019, 17). This preoccupation with the wounds of marginalization and “deep investments in victimization, pain, and suffering” (4) leads to a “politics of recrimination and rancor” (Brown quoted in

Phipps 2019, 4). Both Karen and white feminism foreground the victimization of white women, as both look to authority to redress this perceived pain and injury. When the state complies, its own role in the perpetuation of harm and marginalization is masked, and so political whiteness, embodied both in the “angry brittleness of hegemonic masculinity” and the delicacy of white bourgeois femininity (84), acts as a continuation of colonial values (Phipps 2019, 4).³

What I refer to as ‘strategic white womanhood’ is a will to power, cloaked in the sanctioned victim status of white womanhood, that masks power as powerlessness through the tactical adoption of the qualities and behaviors associated with the colonial archetype of the virtuous white woman (Hamad 2020). Karen typifies this archetype’s status: a lesser power that asserts its position in the racial and gendered hierarchy by appealing to (and thus reinforcing) authority. If Karen is calling the cops, then the figurative cops are white men: “This ‘damsel in distress’ evokes a protective response: and simultaneously, colonial archetypes of people of color as aggressive and frightening come into play. This is the pretext on which white men, enraged, *tear the place apart*” (Phipps 2021, 84, emphasis original).

This chapter has built on a long body of feminist criticism that rejects feminist analyses which erase the investment white women placed in race and empire (Burton 1994; Procida 2002). The strategic performances of powerlessness that characterized the memsahib in India (Ghose 2007) have aftereffects both in the white feminist critiques of Karen and in Karen herself. Just as memsahibs denied their power over Indian women even as they flaunted it, so too does the white feminist defense of Karen elide their own agency “and concomitantly, their complicity” (Ghose 2007, 108). This ongoing denial of white women’s will to power both drives the cycle of memes that attempts to penetrate this denial by highlighting white women’s investment in white supremacy, and prompts white feminist shock at the existence of such memes. Although it is increasingly common for white feminists to acknowledge their whiteness, the significance of such an admission is undermined by the continued prioritization of their own vulnerability to sexism and violence (MacKinnon 1991; Phipps 2021). White feminism’s insistence on gender as the master oppression (Salem 2018) enables white women to temporarily distance themselves from the same white power structures that they helped build and that they repeatedly invoke to safeguard them. Outside this tunnel-vision is the role white women play in perpetuating this very sexism by reinforcing racism in a society that constructed the two simultaneously and interdependently (Schuller 2018). Strategic white womanhood permits white women to freely oscillate from the helpless damsel in distress in need of white male protection to the enforcer of whiteness: the damsel in defense (Hamad 2020, 236). Karen personifies this history as a limited but essential power, an accomplice without whom whiteness could not succeed.

Confronting this history need not obscure or excuse the abuses of white men but can bring the complicity of white women out of the darkness in which white feminism prefers to sequester it. White solipsism inhibits white feminists from coming to terms with the duality of white womanhood, leaving them clinging to their wounded attachment to female victimization by men but ignoring their own significant victimization of racialized persons. This is not so for feminists of color: we know what white male power looks like, and if we know Karen when we see her it is because, in one form or another, we have witnessed her by his side.

Notes

- 1 Other such terms include “woke,” “identity politics,” and “women of color.” This author, a non-black Arab woman of color, wishes to emphasize that these terms are primarily the work of Black women, and this likely propels much of the disdain with which they are treated.
- 2 This is not to argue that all racialized women occupy the same position in this hierarchy nor to deny that they too can and do aspire to whiteness. Anti-Blackness and colorism cuts across all racial groups. The woman dubbed “SoHo Karen,” who accused a Black teenager of stealing her phone from a hotel lobby, failed in her attempt to use her Puerto Rican identity to deflect from allegations she had racially profiled the boy (Rennex, *Junkee* 2021). Rather, whatever their race, women of color are positioned as inferior to all white people and to men of their own race.
- 3 This is currently playing out in Australia, where prominent white feminists including *See What You Made Me Do* (2019) author Jess Hill are driving the push for the criminalization of coercive control. This is being resisted by Aboriginal women who argue that it will further marginalize Aboriginal people, already overrepresented in the criminal justice system (McGlade et al. 2020).

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2

WHITE WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE ATTEMPTED GENOCIDE OF NATIVE AMERICAN PEOPLES

Karla J. Strand

While investigations of the effects of colonization on Indigenous peoples at first contact in what is now known as the United States are numerous, most are focused on European white men as primary actors. With only a few exceptions, scholars have mostly ignored the unique roles of European white women. Most existing investigations exhibit anti-Indigenous assumptions, adhere to the global north's oppressive norms of research, or are passively voiced and apologist in tone, excusing white women from accountability as they center white people's accounts instead of Native perspectives. None of them address the complicity of white women in what I and others argue was the attempted genocide of Native Americans.

This chapter introduces the distinct and deliberate roles white women played in the attempted genocide of Native Americans, focusing primarily on boarding schools. Under the insidious guise of benevolence, white women fully participated in attempts to eliminate Indigenous people and their cultures using tools of maternalism, infantilization, organization, and victimhood to invade the intimate spheres of Native lives. While their participation was necessary for colonization to succeed, white women also used the opportunity to increase their power, influence, and stature within the white public sphere at the expense of Native people (Hamad 2020; Jones-Rogers 2019). Considering this, we can no longer dismiss white women's roles in the oppression of Native Americans (and others) as well-meaning, passive, or unintentional. I aim to add to the remapping of colonialist intentions and impacts to understand better the participation of white women in attempted Native American genocide (Smith 2012). I hope that this framework can be an "intervention for change" (Strega and Brown 2015, 26) and inspire other scholars to adopt anticolonial and anti-oppressive research designs.

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Equally important, I share examples of continuous Native refusal and resistance to colonization and genocide (Simpson 2014). While not the focus of this study, it is crucial to counter the stereotypes of Native victimhood and vanishing that have grown from normative narratives of colonialist history (Ralstin-Lewis 2005; Strega and Brown 2015; Emery 2017; Stovall 2021). Europeans and their descendants have failed in their endeavor to annihilate all Native peoples on this land (Simpson 2017) because “Indians endure” (Allen 1992, 2); they have resisted colonization, assimilation, and annihilation at every turn (Archuleta et al. 2000; Child 2000; Carpio 2011). I use the term “attempted” before genocide to remind readers of this fact. The stories of Native Americans attest to what White Earth Chippewa writer Gerald Vizenor (2008) refers to as “survivance” (Smith 2012). Survivance is the practice of actively repudiating the dominant and damaging narratives of destruction and victimhood surrounding Native American peoples in the white imaginary (Vizenor 2008). Honoring narratives of resistance, I privilege Native perspectives to critically examine white women’s roles in Native American oppression and genocide. I hope to add to “a comprehensive telling of the truth” (Shelton oral history 2016) that must take place for white people to understand the scope of our responsibility and to aid in Native American healing (Klein 2019).

Research practices and theoretical roots

Past explorations of Native American genocide using mainstream paradigms have all but ignored the roles of white women and fallen short of telling the whole story of their actions, goals, and tactics and have often perpetuated harmful stereotypes and power structures (Miller and Riding In 2011; Macoun and Strakosch 2013). In this chapter, I seek to fill this gap and focus specifically on white women’s intentional participation in genocide via the boarding school system. I also respond to the call Native (and non-Native) scholars have made for white settlers to participate in disrupting problematic Eurocentric, colonial research methods and practices in favor of egalitarian, Indigenous-centered, anticolonial ones (Nader 1972; Simpson 2004; Carlson 2016). Mainstream research methods often valorize discovery, individuality, detachment, neutrality, extraction, profitability, reproducibility, and quantifiability. In so doing, these methods replicate structures of power and dominance at play in colonial white supremacist cisheteropatriarchal¹ societies. As a white woman settler scholar², I use anti-oppressive and anticolonial³ research frameworks (Macoun and Strakosch 2013; Strega and Brown 2015; Carlson 2016), participatory action methods, critical theory, and feminist theories. To counter the history of whiteness and elitism in feminism and feminist theory, I look to critical race theory as well as Indigenous and Black queer feminist paradigms, epistemologies, and frameworks that encourage

critical analyses of colonialism, dispossession, and suppression with an eye on reclamation, justice, and empowerment (hooks 1984; Allen 1992; Maracle 1996; Collins 2000; Mihsuah 2003; Miller and Riding In 2011; Smith 2012; Arvin et al. 2013; Simpson 2014; Anderson and O'Brien 2017; Barker 2017; Green 2017; Simpson 2017; Carruthers 2018; Nickel and Fehr 2020; Kovach 2021; Moreton-Robinson 2021).

As a non-Native scholar dedicated to liberation, I seek to disrupt colonial research processes by incorporating principles of anti-oppressive, anticolonial, and Indigenous research, including (1) clearly stating and continuously reflecting on my positionality, standpoint, privileges, and biases; (2) abandoning neutrality; (3) practicing reciprocity and accountability with/to Indigenous peoples; (4) learning about Indigenous experiences and knowledges from Indigenous peoples; (5) being led by community need and creating egalitarian collaborations; (6) considering relationality to land, humans and non-human beings, and the natural world; (7) challenging writing conventions and writing in non-linear and non-chronological formats; (8) applying a wholistic (Absolon 2022) lens that considers mind, body, spirit, history, emotions; (9) resisting settler colonialism and committing to the sovereignty, autonomy, and self-determination of Indigenous peoples; and (10) centering Indigenous voices, stories, and testimonials as vital and valid sources (Miller and Riding In 2011; Macoun and Strakosch 2013; Strega and Brown 2015; Carlson 2016; Simpson 2017; Kovach 2021).⁴ I reframe the research “problem” from one of Indigenous cultures to one of the colonial white supremacist cisheteropatriarchal system to which they were subjected (Smith 2012), by attempting to “reverse the gaze” (Strega and Brown 2015, 6), study the colonizer instead of the colonized (Nader 1972), and offer counternarratives to recenter Native American cultures as the norm by which to compare pathological European worldviews.⁵

Positionality

I am a white, queer, cisgender woman, a descendant of Norwegian homesteaders, and a settler on traditional Ho-Chunk and Potawatomi lands. I chose to research white women's roles (instead of telling Native American women's stories, as those are theirs to tell), but did so by learning from primarily Native American perspectives. I privilege the monographs, recorded oral histories and stories, written testimonies, letters, remembrances, poems, and other accounts created by Native people (Allen 1992; Smith 2012; Simpson 2017). I recognize that being unable to speak any Native languages and not being of Native American descent myself limit my understanding of the Native experience throughout history and the resources I can use. I read colonial resources with a critical lens, knowing that their intended audiences are primarily other white people.⁶ Some white colonial writers took an apologist

tone regarding the roles white people played in the oppression of Native people, excusing women's actions in particular as "well-meaning" and "not all white women." I challenge hiding behind good intentions and ignoring the bad ones to excuse destructive impacts (Simpson 2017). I acknowledge that I am a non-Native person doing work that may impact Native communities or researchers; I approach this work with compassion and humility, in no way seeking to exploit the pain of Native American people. As a white person born and raised in the United States, no part of my life is untouched by participation in (settler) colonialism; I intentionally work on challenging this influence daily.

Scope and terminology

I focused this work on Native peoples of the United States, but I acknowledge that First Nations people of Canada and Aboriginal people in Australia, as well as other colonized peoples around the world, have experienced similar treatment from white women. While there is no consensus on the best terminology to use, in this chapter, I prioritize specific tribal affiliations when possible but use the term "Native American," "Indigenous," or "Native peoples" to refer generally to the people who have called this land home from time immemorial. I use the words "European" and "white" to indicate colonizers and their descendants. I use the terms man/men and woman/women for clarity only and do not adhere to the cisheteropatriarchal notion of a fixed gender binary.

Genocide. Historians and other scholars have long debated whether the violence and destruction imposed upon Native Americans can be accurately categorized as "genocide." Some have argued that after initial attempts at complete physical extermination failed, European settlers turned to "cultural genocide" (Archuleta et al. 2000; Wolfe 2006) or "ethnocide" (Perry 2002; Grinde 2004; Pitner 2021), referring to assimilation tactics that aimed to erase Native lifeways, traditions, culture. Space constraints do not allow for a full summary of this debate, but in this chapter, I refer to many Native scholars, the United Nations Genocide Convention, and Article VII of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in my use of "genocide" to describe the systematic attempts to destroy Native American peoples and cultures in the United States (United Nations 1948, 2007; Trudell 1989; Allen 1992; Brave Heart and DeBruyn 1998; Ralstin-Lewis 2005; Lajimodiere and Carmen 2014; Simpson 2017). The United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention defines genocide as committing any of several acts "with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group" (United Nations Office n.d.). These acts include killing or causing serious mental or physical harm to group members, deliberately causing conditions to bring about the group's demise, preventing births, and forcibly

transferring children from one group to another. By this definition, I contend that settler colonialism and child removal to boarding schools was an act of genocide, and because white women participated in these acts, they are complicit in the attempted genocide of Native American peoples.⁷ I use boarding schools as an example here, but white women also took part in removing Native children to foster homes and in the forced and coerced sterilizations of thousands of Native women and girls throughout the twentieth century (Carpio 2004; Ralstin-Lewis 2005; Lajimodiere and Carmen 2014). I use the term “attempted” before “genocide” to indicate that, as hard as white people have tried, Native American peoples persist. Through community, resistance, humor, compassion, and resilience, they still exist on this land, and have rights, humanity, and sovereignty that must be honored.

Indigenous worldviews. Beliefs and norms among Native American communities are varied and nuanced, but there are common elements in many Indigenous worldviews (Crow Dog 1991; Allen 1992; Miller and Riding In 2011; Simpson 2017). Central is a community within a living cosmos of Earth (Mother), the sky (Father), human and non-human beings (family or relatives), and powerful spirits (ancestors). There is a “deep reciprocity” with the land (Simpson 2017, 75). People do not “own” the land but are “bound to [it] in an intimate and committed relationship equivalent to that of a mother and child” (Miller 2011, 11). Because the land, sky, people, non-human beings, and spirits are all interconnected, when one is threatened, they are all threatened. Community, relationality, and collectivity are valued over individualism, and “family” includes extended ties, friends, and the entire cosmos (Crow Dog 1991; Brave Heart and DeBruyn 1998; Miller 2011; Simpson 2017). Many Indigenous societies are woman-focused, and gender roles are often complementary. Women are valued and honored for their influential roles as mothers, spiritual guides, leaders, land and water protectors, and food providers (Allen 1992; Ralstin-Lewis 2005). Not everyone uses Paula Gunn Allen’s term “gynocracy” to describe traditional tribal social systems, but most will agree that “they are never patriarchal” (1992, 2) and that they allow for a greater diversity of expressions of sexuality and gender than colonial systems. Elders, children, women, and nonbinary individuals are highly respected, as are traditional languages and Indigenous ways of knowing.

Spiritual beliefs, including ceremonies and rituals, are imbued into every part of Indigenous life. According to Allen, “Indians and spirits are always found together” (1992, 2). Significant moments in life are honored ceremoniously, such as births, moon (menstrual) cycles, marriages, and deaths. Conceptions of time and space are cyclical and multidimensional. Indigenous people orally pass on beliefs, origin stories, and family histories, and storytelling is vital to many Indigenous cultures (Allen 1992). Creation and expression are integral parts of Indigenous life, as seen in storytelling, arts

and crafts, dancing and music, and body adornment. Because of centuries of attempted genocide, extraction, and assimilation, Indigenous people have developed deep traditions of refusal, resistance, and radical resurgence (Trudell 1989; Simpson 2014; Dunbar-Ortiz 2015; Simpson 2017;). Today, sovereignty, self-determination, healing, and decolonization are priorities for most Indigenous communities, as are community-based efforts to revitalize traditional languages, repatriate land and Indigenous artifacts, recover traditional ways of living, and save Earth (Lajimodiere and Carmen 2014; LaDuke 2016, 2017; Shelton oral history 2016; Simpson 2017)⁸.

European/white worldviews. For Europeans, Christianity dominated and reinforced cultural norms, encouraging piety, domesticity, and submissiveness by white women, who were considered guardians of morality and purity. Christian missionaries, including women, were a vital part of colonial expansion and formed the first boarding schools on this land in the seventeenth century to encourage Native Americans to adopt Christianity and more “civilized”—meaning white and cisheteropatriarchal—ways of living (Archuleta et al. 2000; Soldier 2001; Reed 2010). While touting their godliness, Europeans accepted sexual and gender-based violence as effective tools of colonization (Simpson 2017). Gender and sexuality fell along a strict binary, and anything outside of a monogamous relationship between a man and a woman was prohibited (Simpson 2017). The standard for Europeans was a small nuclear family, with men as heads of households and women as mothers relegated to the sphere of domesticity. Europeans valued what Haunani Kay Trask labeled “predatory individualism” (1999 4, 5) above the collective (Smith 2012). Extraction and hierarchy were prioritized above reciprocity (Simpson 2017). Symbolizing morality and civilization, the broad conception of “home” was the central point of the European family and included a permanent structure, cleanliness, capitalism, labor, strict linear timetables, and consumerism (Allen 1992).

Because of their limited lens within the cult of true womanhood (Newman 1999), white women saw Native American women as “drudges” and victims of mistreatment and Native men as barbarians prone to violence or idleness (Archuleta et al. 2000). White colonizers were unwilling to acknowledge the variety, nuance, and value of Native norms. Against their rigid standards, white colonizers judged Native American social structures, collectivism, extended family models, traditional wisdom, complementary egalitarian gender roles, and relationships to the land as “inferior” and the people in need of “civilization” (Crow Dog 1991; Simpson 2017). This white supremacist cisheteropatriarchal worldview was the foundation on which racial and gender constructions and “racialized womanhood” would grow and evolve (McRae 2018).

Settler colonialism. European colonization was about wealth, power, and land. The earliest colonial activities focused on extracting resources

from the land, including fur and minerals. To maintain control of land and resources over time, Europeans shifted to the structure of settler colonialism, which focuses squarely on land acquisition and requires permanent settlements (Simpson 2017). Emboldened by the Doctrine of Discovery (Dunbar-Ortiz 2015), colonizers set out to claim any land not already held by other Christian empires through any means necessary (Wolfe 2006; Simpson 2017). These means often included war, mass murder, abductions, rape, body part bounties, and removal of communities from their homelands. Domination, disappearance, and dispossession frame settler colonialism, and a settler-colonial relationship is one “where power—in this case, interrelated, discursive and non-discursive facets of economic, gendered, racial, and state power—has been structured into a relatively secure or sedimented set of hierarchical social relations that continue to facilitate the dispossession of Indigenous peoples of their lands and self-determining authority” (Coulthard 2014, 6–7). As Rachel Flowers points out, “the settler colony is founded on disappearing peoples” (2015, 42).⁹ Colonizers also turned to assimilation and what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson calls “expansive dispossession,” or the “gendered removal of [Native] bodies and minds from [their] nation and place-based grounded normativities” (2017, 43). Successful assimilation promised an alternative way of erasing Indigenous peoples when immediate physical annihilation was unsuccessful; because, as Kantrowitz asserts, “Either way, their cultural and territorial disappearance was essential to the future of the US settler state” (2020, 31). Because “settler colonizers come to stay” (Wolfe 2006, 388), European women started to accompany European men to the colonies in greater numbers to grow their populations and participate in the civilizing process as model women, wives, and mothers (Stovall 2021). Through their literal population of the colonies and their reproduction of white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy, white women proved they were imperative to settler colonialism and the building of an empire (Jacobs 2009).

Colonizers believed that Native Americans could be “civilized” if cut off from their traditions and exposed to white ways (Attneave and Dill 1980; Crow Dog 1991; Newman 1999; Renville 2001). Because they considered themselves to be the epitome of civility, grace, and morality, elite white women felt sanctioned by God to participate in colonization by using their unique qualities to “uplift” those they deemed inferior. While customarily relegated to the domestic sphere, white women knew that participation in colonization would increase their standing in the public sphere, a domain usually limited to white men (Jacobs 2009). They deliberately prioritized their race over their gender by aligning with white men instead of Native women because they understood the importance of proximity to formal power (Hamad 2020). By establishing “gendered authority” over matters of morality, home, and family, white women gained legitimacy without pushing

the limits of white patriarchy too far (McRae 2018). As Ruby Hamad points out, “It is true to say white women were subordinated in settler-colonial society. It is not true to say they were bystanders to the colonial enterprise, and it is certainly not accurate to imply they were victims of comparable standing to the colonized populations” (2020, 140–141). White women benefited from their collaboration with the white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy and continue to benefit today (McRae 2018; Hamad 2020).

The mistresses’ tools

Audre Lorde famously reminded us that “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (2007). What about the mistresses’ tools? In this case, white women settlers are the mistresses, and they certainly did not utilize their tools and skills to help dismantle the master’s house, even though it would have been in their best interest. Instead, they used intimacy and trust, maternalism, infantilization, victimhood, and strength in numbers to help the master build the house of settler colonialism, assimilation, and ultimately, genocide. While the previous section of this chapter provided brief explanations of the concepts of genocide and settler colonialism as well as broad introductions to the differences between Indigenous and European worldviews, this section will introduce the mistresses’ tools. These tools were used by white women throughout history—and are still used today—but after a brief explanation here, I will focus on how they were of particular value in boarding schools.

Intimacy and trust. To do their part in “civilizing” Native peoples, white women invaded the most intimate of spheres, including sexuality, embodiment, motherhood, and the family (Newman 1999; Stoler 2001; Simpson 2017; McRae 2018). Europeans interpreted Indigenous women and egalitarian gender roles as direct threats to their way of life and their colonization efforts (Simpson 2017). To address this, settlers used what Anne Laura Stoler refers to as the “intimacies of empire” or imposition of imperialist norms into private Indigenous lives (2001, 831). Native gender roles were particularly disrupted by heteropatriarchy (Allen 1992; Child 2000; Ralstin-Lewis 2005; Denetdale 2011; Smith 2012; Simpson 2017). Uniquely equipped for this work, white women employed “tactical intimate associations with [I]ndigenous families, to be abandoned when their aims had been achieved” (Jacobs 2009, 194). Through participation in “woman’s work for woman” (Bannan 2015, 242), white women gained influence and power over Native women’s spheres despite their active resistance. Refusing to consult Native women about their own needs, white women continued to betray their intimacy, confidence, and trust (Crow Dog 1991; Simpson 2017; Lajimodiere 2019).

Maternalism White women used the convention of (white) motherhood to justify the “rescue” of those they deemed in need of protection (Hamad 2020).

Maternalism allowed white women to pass judgment on Native women's homes and bodies as dirty or unclean (Simpson 2017) and portray them as unfit mothers who neglected their children. Since the colonial era, white women have used maternalist rhetoric to coerce Native people into abandoning their traditional lifeways and assimilating into white society, while playing the role of the "white savior" (Hamad 2020). The white women who idealized motherhood and domesticity for themselves were the same ones who denigrated Native women's mothering and housekeeping; this was not a coincidence but deliberate participation in colonization to improve their status under the guise of benevolence. As Ruby Hamad (2020) aptly puts it: "White Womanhood has functioned as the maternal arm of empire" (235) and served as "a moral justification for [colonialism's] existence" (243).

Infantilization. White women reformers also framed Native Americans as children who needed guidance to make their way in the civilized world (Jacobson 2015). Stemming from false "race science," the "child-savage trope" (Wesseling in Stovall 2021, 55) combined this infantilization with portrayals of Indians as savages—the men as violent and lazy, the women as unclean chattel. These stereotypes stripped Indigenous peoples of their humanity, their intelligence, and their autonomy (Newman 1999). As the "Great White Mother" (Hamad 2020), white women thought they knew what was best for Native peoples and could lead them to civilization. This infantilization was another way for white women to increase their standing in the colonial world, exert control over Native Americans, and prove their worth in the business of colonization (Newman 1999).

Victimhood. One of the most successful tactics white women used was victimhood. Early on, white women leveraged patriarchal gender roles and the "savage Indian" trope to position themselves as fragile and in need of protection against Native peoples, especially Native men (Hamad 2020). White womanhood, framed as a goddess/victim duality, meant that white women could push the boundaries of their traditional roles while remaining safely under patriarchy's protection (Blee 2003). Instead of fighting against the subordination of all women, white women aligned themselves with the white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy to exert control over Native women and others with less power and status (Hamad 2020). The popularity of white women's captivity narratives, the ubiquity of lynching violence against Black men throughout history, and today's "Karen" epidemic all speak to the lasting power of white women's tears.

Strength in numbers. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, white women in the United States formed hundreds of clubs and organizations focused on improving life for the downtrodden. Founded in 1879, the Women's National Indian Association (WNIA) was an evangelical Christian maternalist organization that exerted significant influence over policies and actions that addressed the "Indian problem" of this time (Newman 1999; Smith 2012).

The WNIA's goal was to use its power to "save" Indigenous women from themselves, helping them learn "white" parenting and homemaking skills, all without including them in the creation of these programs (Jacobson 2015). Like most reform organizations, the WNIA actively spread propaganda about Native women via petitions, brochures, speaking engagements, and their newsletter, *The Indian's Friend* (Cahill 2011; Simpson 2017). They also supported the boarding school system and white women's work within it.

White women's participation in US boarding schools

Many white women colonizers felt that removing children from Native homes and placing them in boarding schools (or, later, foster homes) was the best thing because Indigenous families could not provide "proper" training, homes, and education for them (Crow Dog 1991). Precedents for the extraction of children had already been set throughout the nineteenth century when white Christian reformers and the state removed children they deemed "at-risk" from impoverished, European immigrant, or racialized families, claiming that these parents were too ignorant, poor, or primitive to care for their children correctly (Crow Dog 1991; Jacobs 2009). Despite many white women's views that assimilation techniques would be less violent than outright annihilation, practices of child removal and forced assimilation in boarding schools would prove to be just as damaging, if not more so, for generations to come (Brave Heart and DeBruyn 1998).

After experimentation with mission and reservation schools, the first federal off-reservation boarding school system for Native children in the United States began in 1879 when army officer Richard Henry Pratt, a white man, opened Carlisle Institute in Pennsylvania. Pratt based this system on his philosophy that it was necessary to "Kill the Indian to save the man" (Crow Dog 1991; Archuleta et al. 2000; White 2016). The same military and removal techniques used to successfully "rehabilitate" Native prisoners of war incarcerated at Fort Marion in St. Augustine, Florida, were used at Carlisle. As Lajimodiere (2014) explains, "Boarding schools were established for the sole purpose of severing the Indian child's physical, cultural and spiritual connection to his or her tribe" (257). Military regimentation, including marching, bugle calls, uniforms, demerits, and white glove inspections, was the primary way students were "civilized" (Lomawaima 1995).

White women were complicit in all aspects of the Native American boarding school experience, serving as teachers, nuns, matrons, nurses, and administrators. By regulating "intimate matters with the legitimacy of state sanction" (McRae 2018, 7), they further reinforced their power in the public sphere. White women were especially adept at recruiting new students from families to meet enrollment quotas, often by manipulation, threats of withholding rations, or offering bribes (Child 2000; Jacobs 2009). Native children were put on buses by their families or forcibly removed from their homes by

school officials or police; Sicangu Lakota activist Mary Crow Dog (1991) refers to it as “kidnapping” (29). Once at boarding school, contact between children and their families was rare; school officials worried about Native children “returning to the blanket” (Newman 1999; King 2005) and losing all they had learned or not returning to school at all (Child 2000). Because of this, schools were far away from children’s homes (Child 2000). As Isabella Strong (Red Lake Ojibwe) wrote when requesting her daughter be allowed a short visit home from Flandreau school: “It seems it would be much easier to get her out of prison than out of your school” (Child 2000, 47).

Conditions at boarding schools were unsanitary, overcrowded, and dangerous (Institute 1928)—and meant to obliterate any of the children’s connections with their tribal traditions and identities. During the intake process, white matrons or teachers washed the children with lye soap, doused their hair with kerosene or DDT powder, and shaved their heads to kill any lice and to eliminate the spiritual connection many Indigenous people had to their hair (Crow Dog 1991; Archuleta et al. 2000; Lajimodiere 2019). To further remove links to their traditional cultures (Archuleta et al. 2000; Child 2000), students ate an unfamiliar European diet (Lajimodiere 2019), were given uniforms and new Anglo names or just an inmate number (Plante 2019), and were not allowed to speak their Native languages for fear of punishment (North Dakota 2018; Lajimodiere 2019). Strict rules severely limited their time outside, and because of the importance of Native peoples’ relationship with the land, this was akin to losing a family member (Jacobs 2009). The quality of education was low because the teachers—primarily single white women—were underpaid and underqualified (Charles 2005). One Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate woman said, “The teachers made me feel ashamed of being Indian, and that is still with me to this day” (Cecelia 2019, 67).

Until the 1930s, students worked at least half of each day to the detriment of their education (Archuleta et al. 2000; Elm 2005; Skenandore 2005). To instill capitalist values and reinforce strict gender roles, Native girls sewed and laundered uniforms and cleaned the facilities. During the summer months, they participated in outing programs (Archuleta et al. 2000; Child 2000) and worked in white homes (Elm 2005). White women were both matrons in charge of outing programs and beneficiaries of students’ domestic labor. Native boys participated in long hours of tending and harvesting crops that made up most of the food consumed by the children at the boarding schools (Child 2000). Because of underfunding, student labor was essential to keep schools running and students fed and clothed (Archuleta et al. 2000; Child 2000; King 2005; Lajimodiere 2014).

Matrons, supposed models of white womanhood and directly responsible for instilling cisheteropatriarchal norms, were in charge of dormitory living, where students were segregated by sex. They tracked girls’ menstrual cycles and nailed windows shut to deter promiscuity (Child 2000). Tuberculosis, trachoma, malnutrition, and accidents were common in boarding schools, and

many times, children did not receive appropriate medical care (Anonymous No. 1 2005; Skenandore 2005). Hundreds of children died at the schools, sometimes without their families knowing they were ill (Archuleta et al. 2000; Child 2000; St. John 2019).

Aligning with the idea that discipline was critical to Native assimilation (Williams 2021), white nuns, matrons, and teachers used corporal punishment on children who misbehaved, making them kneel on broomsticks, rapping their knuckles with rulers, or beating them with leather straps (Crow Dog 1991; Davis 2019; St. John 2019; Cecelia 2019; Josephine 2019). As Turtle Mountain Chippewa woman Ramona Klein (2019) recalled: “one [matron] in particular, would take out the ‘board of education,’ a green board.... I’d have to get out of bed, kneel on a broomstick...and I would get paddled” (124). Humiliation and shame were also popular techniques when changing Native names or dealing with bedwetters (Josephine 2019). At Oneida Boarding School, one white laundry matron became so angry at a Native boy for wetting the bed that “she took all his clothes off and put him in the washer, closed it up, and even turned on the steam a little and turned the washer by hand” (Skenandore 2005, 305). One Turtle Mountain Chippewa man recalls getting out of the shower and “[t]hese female matrons would inspect us. They would check over your hair, your ears, check out your private parts, and make you turn around... [and] there’s ten, fifteen kids behind you watching” (Decoteau 2019, 78). Teachers would often lock children away in isolation as punishment (Josephine 2019) for misbehaving or running away, which many of them did (Child 2000). One Turtle Mountain Chippewa woman remarked: “Yeah, those nuns were mean. They’d just pull your hair, slap you in the face...beat you with a belt across your bare butt and your back, and--they were *mean*” (Josephine 2019, 24, emphasis in original).

Perhaps most egregiously, Native students were sexually molested by white male priests, teachers, or other students; white women nuns, matrons, and teachers often did nothing to stop this and, at times, were guilty of it themselves (Crow Dog 1991; Archuleta et al. 2000; Hopkins 2013; Smith oral history 2016; Josephine 2019; Kathryn 2019). Ramona Klein (Turtle Mountain Chippewa) is a survivor of boarding school sexual abuse and remarked, “I wonder how someone could not have known” (2019, 128). Because of understaffing, most white women working for boarding schools answered to no one when making decisions about punishments, practices, or policymaking (Child 2000).

Native resistance

For the first few decades of boarding school operations, when conditions were the worst, Native American people found many ways to resist their colonizers’ violence. Many families hid their children or said they were ill

when officials would come for them (Child 2000; Soldier 2001; St. John 2019). Native women fought back so intensely that white school officials often cited Indigenous resistance as evidence of their “savagery” (Jacobs 2009; Hamad 2020). Often, bonds grew among the students, and outsmarting the matrons and teachers became a group activity. At Chilocco School in Oklahoma, girls forced to wear bloomers under their dresses would ditch them in the bushes after the matron checked they were wearing them; they would put them back on before returning to the dormitories (Lomawaima 1995). In time, some found ways to adapt or accommodate boarding school rules (Lomawaima 1995). Children stole food and hid supplies as acts of resistance (Lomawaima 1995; Genevieve 2019). Some spoke their native languages secretly, created codes, and passed notes (Archuleta et al. 2000), while others physically fought back against corporal punishment or ran away from the schools (Crow Dog 1991; Lomawaima 1995; Archuleta et al. 2000; Genevieve 2019; McDonald 2019). Families never stopped advocating for their children and protesting their mistreatment (Child 2000; Cecelia 2019). Some would encourage the children to continue speaking Native languages and practicing the traditional ways, but to hide it from the school. In resistance, Native students altered oppressive boarding school environments and took measures, intentional or not, to remember, practice, pass on, and preserve their cultures.

Conditions at some schools began to improve between the 1930s and the 1960s and some students had good experiences (Attneave and Dill 1980; Archuleta et al. 2000; Child 2000). Brett Shelton attributes this to individual students’ strength, but adds, “the fact that they were able to thrive in that situation doesn’t erase the fact that the intent of the school was still a cultural genocide” (oral history 2016). Some students attended intending to leave better equipped to take on injustice and oppression against their people (Child 2000; Emery 2017). In fact, by incarcerating Native children from a variety of backgrounds under terrifying circumstances, boarding schools were unknowingly encouraging unity across tribal identities (Lomawaima 1995; Child 2000; King 2005), to create what Kiowa writer N. Scott Momaday (2016) describes as “the mere matrix of survival” (46). Native families didn’t resist education; they opposed the separation of their families and the intention to disconnect children from their cultures (Archuleta et al. 2000). If the United States government was interested in educating Native Americans to improve their lives, it could have done so in nonviolent, humane ways (Jacobs 2009). While Indigenous peoples point to lasting, intergenerational trauma caused by them, boarding schools ultimately failed in their attempts to annihilate Native American people and cultures (Attneave and Dill 1980; Renville 2001). As musician Mitch Walking Elk (Southern Cheyenne/Arapaho) stated, “They put me in the boarding school, and they cut off all my hair, gave me an education, but the Apache’s still there” (Child 2000, 8).

Educational systems for Native Americans changed over time, and experiences varied. Ojibwe historian Brenda Child (2018) reminds us that “the history of Indian education [is] far more multifaceted and untidy than a simple story of federal policy and assimilationist practice” (40). Still, the trauma from human rights violations is lasting for many who had negative experiences in boarding schools (Lajimodiere and Carmen 2014). Perhaps worse than the physical abuse was the emotional toll the separation, loneliness, disconnection, and shame had on the students throughout their lives that is passed on through generations as historical unresolved grief (Brave Heart and DeBruyn 1998; Simpson 2017; Klein 2019). Strong friendships and cherished private time, even under watchful white supervision, offered students some semblance of safety, intimacy, and control that was denied to them in boarding schools. Among one another, they were able to replicate familiar ties and offer support to one another. “It is clear,” as Lomawaima (1995) points out, “that student solidarity was the most influential and enduring social relationship embedded in the structure of school societies” (131). Many who were forced to attend boarding schools are now working to heal themselves and their communities of the trauma caused by the legacy of attempted genocide (Brave Heart and DeBruyn 1998; Lajimodiere 2014, 2019; Lajimodiere and Carmen 2014; Shelton oral history 2016).¹⁰

Conclusion

While white women played significant and intentional roles in the attempted genocide of Native Americans, few written examinations of their participation exist. Here I have briefly introduced how white women collaborated with white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy to ensure the success of settler colonialism in the United States, through their work in Native American boarding schools. Over time, they assisted in annihilation, removal, expansive dispossession, and assimilation to ensure the seizure of Native land. Whether they silently complied or actively harmed children, white women must reckon with our ancestors’ roles in creating and perpetuating the harmful stereotypes, violent treatment, and oppressive indignities of Native Americans that continue to this day. I’ve attempted to challenge the “well-intentioned” white woman trope and disrupt normative research designs by using anticolonial and anti-oppressive frameworks and centering Native American voices and experiences. It’s time to reinvestigate and reframe this history to reflect white women’s intentionality and active roles in the oppression and attempted genocide of Native American peoples from the start of European colonization to the present day. The legacies of colonization and attempted genocide have been devastating to Native American communities, but through community, solidarity, and resistance, they have persisted and flourished (Ralstin-Lewis 2005).

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I want to express my gratitude for the groundbreaking work of Indigenous scholars and community members and those settler scholars who have laid the foundation for my experimentation with anticolonial, Indigenist research practices. I also want to thank the numerous Native and non-Native colleagues who took their time to talk with me and read this chapter before publication; I accomplish nothing without community, and I can only hope my accomplishments benefit the community.

Notes

- 1 The term “cisheteropatriarchy” is used to describe an oppressive system based on rigid definitions of gender and sexuality, wherein bodies that conform to the binary sex and gender norms they were assigned at birth (“cis,” “cisgender,” or “cisheteropatriarchy”) and those who are straight (“het,” “heterosexual,” or “heteronormative”) are privileged over those who are gender diverse and/or queer. Patriarchy describes a system in which men, maleness, and masculinity are privileged over women, femmes, femaleness, and femininity. Scholar bell hooks often referred to the “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” to name the interlocking oppressions under which we live; she would later add “hetero” before “patriarchy.” Actress and activist Laverne Cox put them all together as “cisheteropatriarchy.” For more information see: “Black Feminist” (2021); Cox (2015); hooks (1984, 2006); Kong (2022).
- 2 I use the term “settler scholar” to describe myself based on the work of Flowers (2015) and Regan (2010). While a full explanation of the use of the term “settler” is beyond the scope of this paper, I use it to not only indicate that I am non-Native but also, and more importantly, to remind myself of the unearned power and privilege I benefit from due to my ancestors’ appropriation of land and perpetuation of structures of domination and erasure. I do not use the term to neutralize this legacy of violence or for recognition but instead to center the “set of responsibilities and action[s]” (Flowers 2015, 33) incumbent upon me in my long-term commitment to decolonization and structural change.
- 3 I use “anticolonial” and not “postcolonial” or “decolonial” because of the inference of the latter two that colonialism is something that happened in the past. “Anti-colonial” makes clear the “reality and current presence of the structures and practices of (settler) colonialism” (Carlson 2016, 5). See also: Tuck and Yang (2012).
- 4 For books that go into more detail on Indigenous research methods and practices, see Absolon 2022, Andersen and O’Brien 2017, Smith 2012, Strega and Brown 2015, and Wilson 2008.
- 5 Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I could not access in-person archives or conduct a community-based project, often the preferred method in Indigenous research (Smith 2012), so instead I focused on primary and secondary sources created by Native American people that were available in print and online. Please note that there are more resources on Native American boarding schools available than are included in this chapter. I chose to center those by Native people and only include those by a handful of white scholars.
- 6 I want to acknowledge that while the scholar Andrea Smith has done work that may align with my own, I chose to not cite her work here because of

the controversy over her unwillingness to clarify that she is not Native. I followed the lead of Robert Warrior (Osage) and other Native scholars in making this decision. For more information, see A Public Affair's interview with Robert Warrior and "Open Letter from Indigenous Women Scholars Regarding Discussions of Andrea Smith."

- 7 In this chapter, I necessarily group a wide variety of tribal communities together, but it is essential to remember that Native American peoples are not a monolith; there are over 550 federally recognized tribes in the United States. I make broad statements here and regarding genocide, Madley (2017) rightfully warns against this. He suggests and models examining individual tribal histories for evidence of genocide (or not) as opposed to considering tribal nations across multiple centuries and places as one. I agree that it is more practical, powerful, accurate, and useful to study individual cases to fight colonial narratives of race and Native genocide denial.
- 8 There are many organizations contributing to this work, including: The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition at <https://boardingschoolhealing.org/>, Coalition to Stop Violence Against Native Women at <https://www.csvanw.org/>, Honor the Earth at <https://www.honorearth.net/>, Indigenous Environmental Network at <https://www.ienearth.org/>, LandBack at <https://landback.org/>, the National Indigenous Women's Resource Center at <https://www.niwrc.org/>, Native American Rights Fund at <https://www.narf.org/>, NDN Collection at <https://ndncollective.org/>, and Seeding Sovereignty at <https://linktr.ee/seedingsovereignty>, to name a few.
- 9 The colonial story of disappearance begins at European invasion and continues today in the high numbers of missing and murdered Indigenous women (MMIW) throughout the United States and Canada (Flowers 2015). Disappearance and the violence that accompanies it has lasting consequences for the individual and causes intergenerational trauma and legacies of harm within families and communities. Yet, as Flowers points out, "there is little to no acknowledgement that the violence of the residential school system is connected to the forms of violence that Indigenous women continue to experience throughout their lives" (Flowers 2015, 42).
- 10 In July of 2021, the Secretary Deb Haaland (Laguna Pueblo) announced that the US Department of Interior would undertake an investigation of hundreds of boarding schools across the country. For more information, see <https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/secretary-haaland-announces-federal-indian-boarding-school-initiative>.

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3

WHITE WOMEN AS WHITE SUPREMACIST POLITICAL ACTORS

From the suffragists to the Karens

Christina Cavener

Introducing white women and their white supremacist politics

The resurgence of unadulterated white supremacy has increased the urgency for naming white women’s historical contributions to sustaining racist politics. Unsurprisingly, the mainstream narrative has excluded women, leaving some whites perplexed as to why numerous white women reinforce white supremacy today. However, a closer examination of US history reveals how white women have been the consistent daily hum of racist politics for centuries. Across generations, they have repeatedly leveraged their privileged standing as white women—presumed to be motherly, innocent, and good—to advocate for a racist society. White women suffragists promised to uphold “supremacy to the white race” if granted the right to vote (Giddings, 1984, p. 26). White segregationist women leveraged their role in politics to buttress challenges that posed threats to the racial hierarchy (McRae, 2018a). During the 1960s and 1970s, the women’s movement largely reproduced a politics of white supremacy in their adoption of a color-blind rhetoric that excluded women of color. Today, white Karens and Beckys weaponize their white woman positionality by calling the police on Black people for existing in public space, knowingly subjecting them to a violent and racist criminal punishment system.¹ They also employ their social media to galvanize white nationalism. Thus, I argue that white supremacy is a dominant operating force in white women’s political engagement, with the hope of raising white women’s consciousness about the racist ideologies that may lie within and inform their own politics.

White supremacy within the suffrage movement

White women—in the North and South—used racist rhetoric both to exclude Black women from suffrage and to secure their advantaged position as white. In fact, white women often became Black women’s most formidable adversary in the suffrage movement, arguing that white women’s enfranchisement would strengthen the power of whites over all non-whites—both Black people and immigrants (Giddings, 1984). White women either “acquiesced to, or took advantage of, the anti-Black sentiment in the period” (Giddings, 1984, p. 123). Nineteenth-century women suffragists including Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Carrie Catt rhetorically espoused differences between white women and non-whites (or immigrants of all races) to claim their privileged position within the US racial hierarchy (Schloesser, 2002). White women deserved suffrage, they argued, as educated and civilized whites who had a higher morality than the primitive, uneducated people of color or “foreigners” they wished to exclude (Schloesser, 2002). In a letter announcing her candidacy for Congress in 1866, Stanton claimed that white women were more entitled to the vote than immigrants and African American men when she warned that most of the

Freedman of the South and the millions of foreigners now crowding our shores...represent neither property, education, or civilization, [but] are all in the progress of events to be enfranchised, the best interests of the nation demand that we outweigh this incoming pauperism, ignorance, and degradation, with the wealth, education, and refinement of the women of the republic.

(Davis, 2008, p. 144)

White women, Stanton claimed, were the civilized sex who would protect the “wealth, education, and refinement” of whites with their vote. Frances Willard, the national president of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, repeatedly slandered Black women as a strategy to obtain suffrage for white women (Fields-White, 2011). She, too, argued that it would be unfair for an illiterate Black person to be “entrusted with the ballot” over white women (Fields-White, 2011). Willard’s argument—akin to those of other white suffragists—was to advocate for the “educated ballot,” to ensure white supremacy and eliminate the votes of African American people and immigrants (Giddings, 1984). On having been denied formal education by the white ruling class, Black women argued that character, not education, should be the criterion for suffrage (Giddings, 1984). In front of an audience and with Willard at her side, the famed Black woman journalist and indefatigable anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells shamed Willard for her remarks and asked how prominent white women could repeatedly look the other way

when white mobs butcher Black people (Fields-White, 2011). Yet to achieve suffrage, white women repeatedly leveraged presumptions about their positionality as civil and educated, espoused racist rhetoric about Black people and immigrants, and promised to uphold white supremacy with their vote; they were largely successful.

White women achieved suffrage under a racist banner. In 1920, white men in Congress granted women the right to vote but only gave full access to white women with an intent to legally secure white supremacy in both the North and South (Giddings, 1984). In the words of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, “White women’s vote would give supremacy to the white race” (Giddings, 1984, p. 125). Scores of Black women resisted white women’s appeals to white supremacist ideology (Gilmore, 1996). For instance, in 1920, Anna Clemmons wrote to the National Woman’s Party (NWP) to report that she had been refused at the polls and asked how she might register as an absentee voter (Gilmore, 1996). The NWP’s secretary, Emma Wold, replied that she was surprised at how Clemmons had been treated in North Carolina and promised that help was on the way (Gilmore, 1996). NWP, Wold explained, planned to sponsor voting rights legislation to remedy the situation. Instead, dissension ensued about Black women’s right to vote (Gilmore, 1996). Shocked by reports from the South about Black women being turned away at the polls, Mary White Ovington—cofounder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)—appealed to the NWP president, Alice Paul, but she refused to consider Black women’s concerns and disparaged them at the party’s convention (Gilmore, 1996). Clemmons never received a response after that. To maintain their dominance, white women made certain that Black women would be disenfranchised for another generation through political violence and exclusion. Black women did not receive full access to voting until the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965. Thus, the suffrage movement demonstrated white women’s fierce dedication to uphold white supremacy at the expense of Black women, men, immigrants, and other women of color.

The United Daughters of the Confederacy: Proponents of a white supremacist education

The United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) largely contributed to keeping alive the legacy of white supremacist practice and ideology. Founded in 1894 as a reaction to abolition, the UDC evolved into one of the biggest and most far-reaching women’s organizations in the South, gaining nearly 100,000 members by World War I (Cox, 1997). They erected numerous statues and monuments dedicated to the Confederacy throughout the South. The UDC was a leading proponent of what historians deemed a “Lost Cause celebration” that espoused a false narrative about the Civil

War (Cox, 1997; Janney, 2016). The six tenets of the Lost Cause state that (1) secession caused the Civil War; (2) African Americans were faithful and loyal slaves and unprepared for freedom; (3) the Confederacy was defeated militarily only because of the Union's overwhelming advantages in men and resources; (4) Confederate soldiers were heroic and saintly; (5) the most heroic and saintly of all Confederates was Robert E. Lee; and (6) southern women were loyal to the Confederate cause (Janney, 2016). Contrary to the Lost Cause tale, enslavement—not state secession—was the cause of the war; Black people resisted enslavement; Confederate soldiers violently defended the institution of slavery; and Robert E. Lee was a slaveholder who brutally punished runaways and fought in court to retain enslaved people beyond the five-year limit in his father's will (Reeves, 2018). The UDC's fervent advancement of the Lost Cause—based on falsities—demonstrated their determination to do everything in their power to guarantee that the white supremacist ideology of enslavement lived on and held a privileged position for future generations.

Mildred Lewis Rutherford, a UDC proponent of the Lost Cause, asserted in 1919 that her “last political crusade” would be to share “the truths of history” (McRae, 2018b, p. 41). A former Historian General of the UDC and the daughter of a Georgia slaveholder, she encouraged various organizations to endorse her cause. Rutherford and other white women identified statewide purview over schools as a way to strengthen Jim Crow and a whites-only American education, allowing the formal institutionalization of white supremacy through public teaching (McRae, 2018b). Rutherford proposed a loyalty test for school officials to determine whether they knew the South's “authentic” history (McRae, 2018b). She summoned white women to ensure that school curricula and teachers advanced white superiority, supremacy, and racial segregation. Rutherford mobilized white women to work twice as hard to oversee public education and combat white indifference to segregation by emphasizing the important role mothers play in their children's education in countering integration and maintaining white supremacy (McRae, 2018b).

In agreement with Rutherford, the UDC wanted children to become “living monuments”—the future bastions of white supremacist ideology (McRae, 2018b, p. 42). McRae explains, “Rutherford's efforts to sustain racial segregation through schooling and a broad citizenship education dovetailed with the national anti-radical impetus to make sure that schools bolstered patriotic education, 100 percent Americanism, anti-immigration sentiment, and nativist-based politics” (McRae, 2018b, p. 42). At the same time Rutherford was advocating this whites-only American ideology, white male race scientists across the United States were attempting to solidify racial classifications that claimed scientific proof of white superiority. She stood aligned with this white racial purity in her crusade to oversee public schooling and

the content of textbooks (McRae, 2018b). Under her leadership, the UDC equipped public schools with the tools necessary to teach and maintain a Jim Crow citizenship education. The textbooks romanticized a racist history and spread the mythology of white superiority and Black inferiority across the nation, reinforcing the “naturalness of white over black” in both Black and white schools (McRae, 2018b, p. 60). Many white segregationist women like Rutherford became involved with schools because they positioned themselves as motherly protectors who had the jurisdiction to manage children’s education, for their white babies would become the ambassadors of white supremacy.

White segregationist women

During the 1920s to 1950s, white segregationist women justified their political involvement as part of their maternal role in an attempt to maintain respectability at a time when their domestic role was heavily enforced (Brückmann, 2021). To overcome this limited sphere of influence, they capitalized on their housewife status to justify actions that would have otherwise been deemed inappropriate by leaning into their socially ascribed role as mothers to advocate for the segregation of schoolchildren (Brückmann, 2021). Their gender-specific maternalism served to mask their involvement in the public sphere and was used as an inroad to oppose racial equality for women of color who held less power (Brückmann, 2021). Regardless of their class position, white women of varying socioeconomic backgrounds were able to leverage their maternalism to rationalize their political actions, ranging from voting to public protests (Brückmann, 2021). That being said, segregationist white women did not always confine themselves to maternalist politics and, instead, expanded their activism to comprise a variety of social issues to advance the cause of white supremacy.

White women, invigorated by suffrage, substantially expanded the voting electorate in the South and fulfilled their promise to uphold white supremacy (McRae, 2018b). Electoral politics allowed them a platform to push their organizations to campaign for specific policies, to stir white women’s passion for voting, and to persuade male politicians to embrace an issue-centered politics that would largely shape the segregated South (McRae, 2018b). White segregationist women leveraged electoral politics to suppress challenges that posed threats to maintaining the white racial order of Jim Crow by strategizing multiple paths available to secure a nationwide network of conservatives (McRae, 2018b). These connections allowed the agency to engage in early iterations of a color-blind political rhetoric that offered broader political platforms centered on anti-immigrant policies, states’ rights, reforming the electorate, and refusing the New Deal—a program implemented by President Franklin D. Roosevelt that provided financial recovery during the Great

Depression from 1933 to 1939 (McRae, 2018b; History, 2021). Without directly invoking the white supremacist political order that their policies supported, white women stood in opposition to anti-lynching laws, ensured that New Deal funding benefited more whites than Black people, discouraged states from accepting pathways toward social welfare, and excluded African Americans from the Republican party in the South (McRae, 2018b). Until this political maneuver, white Republicans had been considered liberal because they advocated for abolishing enslavement. However, white women segregationists did all they could to ensure that their communities' racial segregation would not be subjected to shifting politics and would be prepared to maintain the divisive white racial order (McRae, 2018b).

Although white segregationist women participated in elections, voting, and state and federal legislation, this was only a slice of their white supremacist agenda; they knew that their white dominance would be felt in the everydayness of Jim Crow segregation (McRae, 2018b). With conservative white women taking the lead, they galvanized a massive resistance by translating policies into the white control of ordinary daily life that was under threat (McRae, 2018b). White segregationist women argued that because the Democratic Party's support of segregation was weakening, children would be seduced by communism, young white women would suffer from Black men's wandering eyes at work, Black soldiers' voting would lessen state's control over elections, and the military's integrated entertainment would lead to school integration (McRae, 2018b). By the end of World War II in 1945, white segregationist women had solidified the connection between civil rights and communism in the minds of segregationists. They ensured that white supremacy would remain in Southerners' homes, churches, schools, and voting booths by critiquing any political agenda that might compromise white power and control (McRae, 2018b). White segregationist women additionally framed the Democrats' withdrawal of support for segregation as a minimization of states' rights and a federal overreach of power, appealing to organizations that were not solely dedicated toward pushing the Jim Crow ideology (McRae, 2018b). These strategies—translating policies into the daily ordinariness of white over Black and framing the Democrats' action as a threat to states' rights—gained traction, garnering broad support from conservative organizations across the United States.

During the 1950s and 1960s, upper and middle-class white women like Charleston's Cornelia Dabney Tucker cast a wide network, organizational influence, and the resources to leverage segregationist politics (Brückmann, 2021). A Charleston southern belle, Tucker, and others in her circle, used maternal rhetoric and a strict adherence to white supremacist ideology to mobilize their agenda, establishing connections with white conservatives nationwide and participating in lobbying to promote segregation (Brückmann, 2021). Due to her older age and societal standing, Tucker and

other elitist segregationist women were readily accepted by white politicians and grassroots organizers. Their massive resistance against racial integration was understood as linked to their membership in UDC or Daughters of the American Revolution (Brückmann, 2021). They used the media and theatrics to increase their influence as elite white women. Tucker initiated a personal letter-writing and petition campaign in which she gathered signatures in support of segregation; she sent copies of the petitions to every US Senator and the letters were published (Henderson, 2016). Tucker later became the publicity chair for the South Carolina Republican Party as a prominent white southern lady—her pictures and stories were regularly printed in South Carolina newspapers (Henderson, 2016). Brückmann (2021) explains, “in Charleston, hardline white supremacy was easily promoted in chiffon robes” (p. 150). Thus, the white women of Charleston leveraged their racialized class status and maternalist politics to create long-lasting inroads to preserve segregation and a white racial order.

Tucker’s influence was far-reaching across the United States. However, in 1954, the Supreme Court declared the “separate but equal” policies of school segregation to be unconstitutional in the case known as *Brown v. Board of Education*. After the federal ruling, she continued her engagement with public discourse and organizations to promote segregation, connecting it with states’ rights, white supremacy, anticommunism, and the antidote to the threat of impending socialism (Brückmann, 2021). Tucker assigned the label “communist” to Black civil rights activists and kept the public narrative of segregationist activism alive and well throughout the 1950s and 1960s, stretching her campaign beyond the bounds of Charleston (Brückmann, 2021). She annually marched from Charleston to Washington, D.C., to advance her white supremacist causes, which included antiradicalism and the preservation of white middle-class privilege (Brückmann, 2021). Tucker also campaigned to reform education with the aim to equip students with the political acumen to combat the influence of communism (Brückmann, 2021). In 1947, the South Carolina Board of Education accepted her suggestions to require citizenship and government classes in high schools and colleges, and to develop a high school citizenship textbook (Brückmann, 2021). She was later praised in 1959 by the Charleston Superintendent of Schools for working hard to screen textbooks for their subversive material, saving students from exposure to content that might have undermined the US government through “pernicious propaganda” (Brückmann, 2021, p. 161). Therefore, although the ideals of southern white womanhood intended to confine women to domesticity, Tucker and other white women segregationists escaped those constraints; they carved a space for their public activism by framing integration as a communist attack on “constitutional government” and on the white advantages that every white person and child needed to protect (Brückmann, 2021, p. 162).

White supremacy of the women's movement

Removed from conservatism, the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s also reinforced a politics of white supremacy. As a result, it became fraught with increasing tensions between white and Black women during these decades. White women were organizing for women's rights around the notion that sexism was the quintessential foundation of all oppression—the “primary contradiction” that had to be addressed before attending to racism or classism (hooks, 1984, p. 36). The question of race challenged a simplistic formula that situated gender as the primary social category in which oppression manifests (Rudy, 2001). Many of the shared characteristics and the bonds of sisterhood that white feminists assumed were exclusively associated with white middle-class women; they distilled and rejected differences among groups of women to advance a narrow agenda that would solely meet their needs (Rudy, 2001). Thus, it was painfully clear that white women's generalizations did not hold across other vectors of identity, such as race, class, or ethnicity. As stated by Rudy (2001),

the [white] feminist dream of a new world of women simply reproduces the demand that women of color (and women more generally) abandon their history, the histories of their communities, their complex locations and selves, in the name of a unity that barely masks its white, middle-class cultural reference/referent.

(pp. 202–203)

This white woman “dream” of feminism was an unrealistic fantasy in which all women could fit neatly into the singular category of “woman” by siphoning off parts of themselves—race, ethnicity, class, sexuality—to prioritize gender.

Black women and other women of color challenged white feminists' exclusionary practices that reinforced a politics of white supremacy. Black activist Frances Beal (1995) asked whether the women's movement had any correlation whatsoever to Black women's struggle, explaining that although women live amidst the same oppressive system, there are clear differences among them. Beal (1995) critiqued feminist activists for neglecting to examine their own whiteness and class status by stating, “any white group that does not have an anti-imperialist and antiracist ideology has absolutely nothing in common with the black woman's struggle”; Black people are in a “life-and-death struggle,” so their focus has to be on the racist capitalist exploitation of people of color (p. 153). Black women, she argued, experience “double jeopardy” in their identity as both Black and female and do not have the luxury to privilege one identity over the other (Beal, 1995, p. 146). Audre Lorde (1984) argued that white feminists' denial of difference inhibited necessary

collective action. Difference, Lorde (1984) posited, must be embraced and become the foundation upon which women act together. bell hooks (1984) explained that describing sexism as the root of all isms creates a “hierarchy of oppression” (p. 36). By focusing on gender and ignoring race, white women created a framework that did not resemble the experiences of women of color at all (hooks, 1984). In 1969, ALAANA (African, Latinx, Asian, Arab, Native American) feminists created the Third World Women’s Alliance (TWWA) that focused on children’s day care, workplace discrimination, social welfare programs, reproductive justice, sexual assault, and sexuality (Breines, 2006). Like Frances Beal, TWWA asserted that feminists who did not practice antiracism or contest imperialism shared nothing with their struggle (Breines, 2006). Beal (1995) concluded, “if the white groups do not realize that they are in fact fighting capitalism and racism, we do not have common bonds” (p. 153). Thus, the women’s movement became yet another demonstration of how white women collectively practiced the exclusion of ALAANA, reinforcing white supremacy.

White tears and the hysteria of Karens

Today, one may witness white women bursting into tears in cross-racial settings or calling the police on ALAANA for existing in public space—another iteration of white supremacy that harkens a longstanding history of white women’s intentional cries and hysteria that subject Black people to a racist criminal punishment system. As early as 1900, Ida B. Wells described how the fictitious narrative of Black criminality was strategically wielded by white women to falsely accuse Black men of rape, knowing that the power of their hysteria could sentence them to a brutal lynching death. This hysteria was prompted by white southern rage (Anderson, 2016) in response to the emancipation of Black people during and after the Civil War (1861–1865). Although white southern Confederate women had fears of insurrections and being sexually assaulted by enslaved people, there were no documented reports of Black men raping white women during the time in which elite white women were left in charge of enslaved Black people during the Civil War (Feimster, 2009). Nonetheless, this fictitious narrative of Black men’s criminality was employed by white women as a common justification for their lynching.

Rape symbolized the ultimate insult to white men’s duties and the ownership of white women; it represented the “loss of virtue” and a “failure of southern manhood” (Feimster, 2009, p. 36). Their sexual victimization meant that white men could not fulfill their duty to protect white women. Although rape was largely committed by white men against Black women, white men constructed the racist fiction of the Black male rapist as a method to instill fear, justify lynching, and maintain their power. During the Civil

War, white male Union soldiers routinely sexually terrorized Black women as well as white women to demonstrate their power:

these public acts of sexual violence also served to mark southern defeat. Just as the rape of white women implied that [white] southern men were unable to protect their mothers, wives, and daughters, the rape of [Black] slave women meant... [white male slaveowners] could no longer protect their property.

(Feimster, 2009, p. 22)

The notion that rape was a challenge to white men's power became a primary driving force for lynching Black men (Feimster, 2009), and white women were more than willing to play the role of victim to help maintain the violent racial order. Their tears and hysteria are intimately connected to the recorded lynching of over 4,400 Black people (likely a vast undercount) in the United States between 1877 and 1950 (Lynching in America, 2020).

White women's crying in cross-racial settings is deeply tied with this history of lynching violence and functions as yet another weapon to reproduce white dominance and control. Their tears are a destructive form of white supremacy that reinforces white women's perpetual innocence through their performance as victims; when a white woman is confronted for her racism, she may claim hurt feelings and an attack on her goodness, positioning herself as faultless. Consequently, all attention is diverted to consoling the white woman rather than to the ALAANA who was likely harmed by the white woman's actions; they are positioned as the victim instead of the perpetrator of a racist action (Accapadi, 2007; DiAngelo, 2018). ALAANA describe the experience of white women expecting and waiting for their assurance that they are not bad people; "in a common but particularly subversive move, racism becomes about white distress, white suffering, and white victimization" (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 134). For a Black man, alleviating white women's tears—having to comfort them rather than another ALAANA—could be experienced as a strategy of survival. Thus, white women reproduce white supremacy by rehearsing their theatrical performance of innocent victim as a reaction to any racial challenge whatsoever.

Akin to their tears, white women have weaponized their innocent privileged positionality by calling the police on Black people for simply existing in public space. #Karen has become popular to signify white women who strategically leverage their "white woman" privilege to threaten Black lives. For instance, white woman Amy Cooper was taking her unleashed dog through Central Park against park policy in May 2020, and when a Black man named Christian Cooper (no relation to Amy) asked her to adhere to the rules, Amy weaponized the white woman innocence construct by warning Christian that she would call the police and tell them that a Black man was threatening her

life. Amy then proceeded to dial 911 and said, “There is an African American man threatening me...Please send the cops immediately!” She positioned herself as a white woman victim to exert her power and control, knowingly subjecting Christian to the racist criminal punishment system. There are infinite examples of these #Karen occurrences being recorded across the United States, their visibility increasing with the ease of recording on cell phones and posting videos on social media. These acts are linked to the lynchings of history and are nothing short of violence perpetrated by white women against Black and brown bodies, a political act that knowingly reinscribes white supremacy through a reclamation of their white woman victimhood and ALAANA criminality (Lang, 2020).

The hidden movers of white nationalism

White women serve as the backbone of white nationalism, a movement driven by whites who believe in the alleged inferiority of ALAANA, the existence of anti-white persecution, and that whiteness should be the “organizing principle” of Western civilizations (SPLC, 2021). White nationalist women veil their racism with coded language by espousing color-blind ideologies and values to legitimize “white identity politics” that conservative and alt-right white women make use of to reproduce white supremacy across the United States (Anderson, 2021, p. 5). Digital platforms have allowed these white women a far-reaching audience to reify whiteness and code racism within online spaces, influencing conservatives’ political views. To make their racist ideology palatable, they employ terms such as “American,” “diversity,” and “freedom of speech” that appropriate civil rights terminology, mask their racism, and reinforce white identity politics (Anderson, 2021, pp. 14–18). White women have also leveraged their community service roles as a cover for their white supremacy by organizing church social events, Klan picnics, fundraisers for charity, and white nationalist dating sites (Anderson, 2021). Thus, white women have largely fueled the white nationalist movement in these insidious and not-so-subtle ways.

White nationalist women constructed a form of “maternal feminism” that centers their womanhood on the procreation of white children. They employ the term “feminism” to assert their individual choice to confine themselves to a domestic role with limited power (Anderson, 2021). In 2017, President Donald Trump’s Senior Counselor Kellyanne Conway said, “I look at myself as a product of my choices not a victim of my circumstances. And that really to me is what conservative feminism, if you will, is really about” (Anderson, 2021, p. 134). Through the guise of feminism, white men grant these token white women limited agency and promise protection, but structural oppression is ignored; they have the *choice* to accept their subjugation (Anderson, 2021). White men are the knight in shining armor and white women are

the “maiden shields”—auxiliaries with limited power—that serve to palliate white supremacy (Love, 2020; Anderson, 2021, p. 19). This individualized “feminism” does not actually dismantle systems of power and oppression—it is leveraged to filter white privilege through motherhood and internalized sexism as a strategy to reproduce white supremacy. Alt-right white women are endowed with “control” over the domestic sphere by dedicating themselves to the preservation of whiteness by choosing the right white man and having white biological children (Anderson, 2021). Marrying and procreating are their ultimate goal and purpose—a life choice that solidifies them as “mothers of the movement” (Anderson, 2021, p. 112).

Some white nationalist women are rebranding as traditionalists who distance themselves from feminism and claim to find their power in traditionalism, another iteration of limited power that they propagate (Anderson, 2021). In 2018, traditionalist Lauren Southern identified “socialism, feminism, Black Lives Matter, the free love movement from the sixties, and globalism” as ‘branches of the tree of Marxist thought’ and ‘politics of envy,’ which ‘deconstruct the family’” (Anderson, 2021, p. 115). Over the past few years, these young white women mommy vloggers and #tradwives have cropped up on social media to venerate the idea of being a good housewife: staying home, submitting to their husbands, having lots of kids—the “traditional wife” (Kelly, 2018). Alongside their pics in heels and red lipstick, beauty tips, and recipes are strains of white nationalism. The TradWives intentionally appear ultra-feminine to cover their authoritarian ideology (Kelly, 2018); “[they] give women a purpose and attach a friendly face to white nationalism” (Christou, 2020). Ayla Stewart called herself “Wife With a Purpose” and made headlines when she issued “the white baby challenge” (Kelly, 2018). She urged her followers to procreate, noting the decline in white birth rates. Stewart’s politics equate ideal womanhood with performing whiteness and she firmly believes that white, straight Christians represent the epitome of Americanness, an ideal that is threatened by queer people, feminists, immigrants, and liberals (Darby, 2020). Stewart is proud of her views and critiques anyone who does not subscribe to her “tradelife” and model their lives after it (Darby, 2020). Although “Wife With a Purpose” may have been the most famous and openly white supremacist of the TradWives, she is certainly not an aberration (Kelly, 2018).

Two more white nationalist women stand out for their previous online presence: Corinna Olsen and Lana Lokteff (Darby, 2020). Corinna Olsen is a former white nationalist who found community in the hate movement. One of her first posts on Stormfront said, “Is there something wrong with being a white supremacist?... What is wrong with seeing our race as superior to that of the blacks? Don’t we all?” (Darby, 2020, p. 26). She, along with many others, found a social bond that was solidified by the hatred of ALAANA. Lana Lokteff founded a solo radio show on Red Ice called Radio 3 Fourteen

that aired in 2012 (Darby, 2020). Founded in 2003, Red Ice was one of the most popular video news outlets for white nationalists on YouTube. It was taken down in 2019 but continues to operate on a different site (SPLC, 2019). On her show, Lokteff said that it was common “to be labeled a racist if you do not approve of mass third world immigration” or if you want to preserve your European culture (Darby, 2020, p. 208). Lokteff then focused on how white women have been victimized:

Muslim men raping them in Europe, black men raping them in South Africa...And we're supposed to sit back and be thrilled and say, 'Come on in,' while us whites have to deal with being called a racist because we disapprove of those who are actively destroying what our ancestors have worked so hard to create.

(Darby, 2020, p. 208)

To defend southern heritage, Lokteff cited the UDC and proclaimed that slavery was not that bad because enslaved Black people could marry and have children (Darby, 2020). (She is incorrect. In the US slavery South, the marriages of enslaved Black people were not legally recognized.) In alignment with the white right-wing separatists, she said, “I wish the South would secede again” (Darby, 2020, p. 209). Along with numerous others, these white women leverage their white woman positionality to propagate the false narratives of white nationalism to sustain white supremacy, doing their part to influence the politics of white conservatism.

Conclusion: A call to deconstruct the white supremacy that lies within

North or South, liberal or conservative, white women have a dominant organizing strategy: white supremacy. White women have been incredibly effective in their persistent organizing to ensure that white dominance and control are here to stay. This is not confined to the South, segregationists, or conservatives; it infiltrated suffrage and the women's movement and continues to show up in liberal white women's tears and fragility. White women's white supremacy saturates all areas of political life: from social media to political office. McRae (2018a) explains,

it is easy to denounce the racist pronouncements and white-supremacist politics of a George Wallace or a Roy Moore. But what white women teach us is that white-supremacist politics is sustained at a much more grass-roots level by our [white] neighbors, school boards and even friends. White women have made white supremacy a much more formidable and long-lasting force in American society.

White women, white supremacy lives in the everydayness of our daily encounters; this history should serve as a reminder that we must be hypervigilant in our commitment to deconstruct the white supremacy that lies within. If white feminists who aspire to antiracism recognize the power and effectiveness of their organizing, we may become better equipped to challenge white supremacist politics.

Note

- 1 See Ruby Hamad, “Strategic White Womanhood: Challenging White Feminist Perceptions of ‘Karen,’” chapter 1 in this volume, for a discussion of “Karen” and “Becky” as representations of white women’s roles in perpetuating white supremacy.

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4

“THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE INDIFFERENT”

The political pedagogy of Frances Ellen
Watkins Harper

Leslie K. Dunlap

“I do not believe that white women are dew-drops just exhaled from the skies,” Black woman author, abolitionist, and suffragist Frances Ellen Watkins Harper observed to an 1866 audience of white suffragists. “I think that like men they may be divided into three classes, the good, the bad and the indifferent” (Harper 1866). In this speech and throughout her life (1825–1911), Harper carefully studied the dynamics of alliances with white women and the character of white women as potential advocates or antagonists (Collier-Thomas 1997). According to Harper, participating in reform movements provided a political education, “and the white women of this country need it.” After the Civil War, dominant white opinion held that newly emancipated Black men and women required education in citizenship. Harper reversed that equation: “I tell you that if there is any class of people who need to be lifted out of their airy nothings and selfishness, it is the white women of America” (Harper 1866).

In this speech Harper compared political activism to a “normal school,” the nineteenth-century term for a school that trained teachers. One such school of politics was the National Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), the mass movement which Harper helped lead for decades as a local and national organizer, lecturer, and executive board member. She believed that by participating in this movement to reform (primarily men’s) drinking, which these reformers thought contributed to (or even caused) social problems, such as domestic violence and poverty, women could do far more than win specific reforms, such as the right to vote. They could transform thinking and entire social systems in the process (Palmer-Mehta 2007; McDanel 2015). Just as Harper shifted from identifying problem drinking as an individual failure in order to understand its social sources and consequences, she

considered activism, and voting, as collective and educative efforts (Brown 1997). Harper practiced this political pedagogy in the WCTU. In that pursuit, she elaborated on methods of work and a reform vision that might connect Black and white women through strategic coalitions (2012). As organizer of a division known by the organization as “Work Among Colored People,” Harper advised Black activists on community and movement building and counseled Black women on how (and whether) to engage the range of white women they might encounter. She simultaneously pursued work among white women. In reports on her work, she assessed the qualities of good and unreliable allies, pointed out white women’s privilege and power, called white women to conscience and action, and proposed channels for cooperation. In the process, Harper challenged white gender myths, including white feminists’ representation of themselves as outside of politics and not responsible for rising white supremacy. In particular, she called on white temperance women to examine their relationship with other white women and especially to white men—their own fathers, husbands, sons, and associates—and to reform *them*. In her broad effort to transform the world, she made a pointed effort to raise white women’s political awareness of themselves and their relation to racial injustice or, she hoped, justice.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was part of a nineteenth-century vanguard of Black activists who established fundamental tenets of twentieth-century Black feminism (Guy-Sheftall 1995; Combahee 1977; Jones 2007). Harper, one of the most prominent activists in her time, was “positioned at the helm of black feminist politics,” writes Harper’s biographer Melba Joyce Boyd, where she “profoundly affected the ideological perspective of emerging national black feminist organizations” (1994, 222). For over sixty-five years Harper “had her finger on the pulse of the activist movements of the era,” including abolition, education, voting rights, temperance, anti-lynching, and peace. She also wrote in multiple genres, including poetry, fiction, addresses, and organizational reports. “Few nineteenth-century speakers and writers were as committed to—or as successful at—reaching the broadest possible audience as Harper was,” literature scholar P. Gabrielle Foreman explains (Foreman 2009, 73–74). Harper moved between constituents and movements, acting as what sociologist Belinda Robnett calls a “bridge leader” by building institutional and interpersonal networks and framing issues in ways that articulated, connected, and then (hopefully) transformed the interests of multiple groups (1996). According to Shirley Wilson Logan (1997), scholar of Black women’s persuasive discourse in the nineteenth century, Harper appealed to a “community of interests” as a starting point for collective action and bridge building. Harper negotiated points of “convergence and divergence” between “women’s rights and the rights of newly-enfranchised black men; between white women and black women; between black men

and black women; and between middle-class blacks and the masses of poor and enslaved blacks concentrated in the South” (Wilson Logan, 45). Harper’s leadership in multiple national organizations “allowed her to see the internal operations of the organizations and penetrate their inner circles” (Collier-Thomas 1997, 57). There, she not only saw, but deepened her analysis of the internal operations of white women’s racism as well.

From the beginning of her antebellum activism as a radical abolitionist and traveling antislavery lecturer on a circuit that included Black and white speakers and audiences, Harper called on white abolitionists and northern audiences to recognize their own role in slavery and racial injustice (Washington 2015; Fielder 2021). For over three decades after the Civil War, she continued speaking and organizing almost constantly on tours throughout the country, where she conducted mothers’ meetings in private homes, mass meetings in churches and schools, and lectures to educational, religious, and political bodies, including in legislative chambers in South Carolina and Louisiana. On these tours, she paid attention to the “social details” and affective dimensions of her interactions with white organizers (Foster 1990, 13). In this practice, Harper drew on a tradition of Black women’s close reading of white women, including what white women hid or left unstated. She dramatized this dynamic in her 1892b novel *Iola Leroy* when an enslaved Black woman “reads the face of her [white] mistress like an open book” for news of the outcome of Civil War battles (Boyd 1994, 174). As the character Aunt Linda puts it, “ole Missus’s face is newspaper nuff for me” (Harper 1892b, 9).

The temperance movement, which addressed the impact of alcoholism on families, especially women and children, was an integral part of Harper’s writings and reform vision. In the twentieth century, Prohibition came to be more associated with racism and sexual conservatism, policing, and the second Ku Klux Klan. But for Harper and other nineteenth-century reformers, temperance overlapped with social justice movements of the time (Herd 1985; Herd 1991). She considered slavery and intemperance “twin evils,” and the temperance movement an extension of antislavery reform (Harper 1888b; Harper 1891a). After the war, she connected “three great evils”: intemperance, “the social evil” (rape and sex work), and “lawlessness” (lynching) (Harper 1894). Organized in 1874, the WCTU became one of the most popular and powerful women’s movements in the nation. Hundreds of thousands of women joined the movement out of concern about alcohol abuse and the interpersonal and organized violence that could accompany it. Although a suffragist, Harper chose to organize primarily through the WCTU and later the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), not national suffrage associations, perhaps because the WCTU and NACW activated and involved a wider range of women and attention to broader social issues other than women’s suffrage.¹ For example, in the 1880s, the WCTU organized a mass campaign to support a national education bill that would expand and

protect funding for public schools (especially Black schools in the South), an important coalitional project for Harper as educator and activist (Harper 1894; Crofts 1971).

"Into the hands of the sisters of this Union God has placed one of the grandest opportunities that was ever put before the womanhood of any age or nation," Harper announced in her first report to the national organization (Harper 1884a). "Believing, as I do, in human solidarity, I hold that the WCTU has in its hands one of the grandest opportunities that God ever pressed into the hands of the womanhood of any country," she later explained. "Its conflict is not the contest of a social club, but a moral warfare for an imperiled civilization" (Harper 1888b). For Harper, then, the WCTU was both a site for organizing Black women and a place for instructing white women on Black women's perspectives and priorities. Moreover, Harper envisioned the WCTU as a school where white women could learn about their whiteness, which would prompt them to take up the fight against the racism that she understood to be imperiling the nation.

Advice to Black women

Harper planned to bring Black women "into close affiliation with the methods and plans of work as adopted by the WCTU and to enlist their cooperation in our common cause" (Harper 1884d). To this end, she provided detailed information on exactly how the organization (and white women in it) worked, and what Black women could expect when they joined. She recalled her own apprehension when she first learned of the group, as she "was not sure that colored comradeship was very desirable" to white women (Harper 1888b). When she attended a meeting in Philadelphia, she discovered white women who kindled her optimism with an invitation to join, and soon lead, local, state, and eventually national offices. Harper explained the structure of the organization in telling detail to potential Black members. She recorded when white women invited or voted to admit Black members (and whether the vote was unanimous or not), when Black women organized their own chapters when white women did not respond to invitations or communications, which unions had Black representatives on powerful committees, which white leaders sat with Black colleagues at conventions, and when Black women refused segregated seating at conventions (Harper, *Reports of Work*). She made particular note of an interracial Alabama state union led by Black women, with white members (Harper 1888a). For Harper, this exceptional (and short lived) case was notable for the possibility it simultaneously presented of Black leadership and interracial organizing. It wasn't a success story in her account; it was one possible model. Harper named those white women who opened their churches and chapters (and "hearts") to Black organizers and members, as well as those who accepted invitations to organize in

Black schools and churches. Practically, she was creating a detailed directory of white associates for Black (and white) organizers that she shared in the WCTU newspaper and meeting minutes. In these ways, Harper encouraged strategic coalitions with specific white women.

Harper's primary goal was not to work with white women, though; it was to work for Black women, families, and communities (Mitchell 2018; Mitchell 2020). She prioritized community projects, such as community centers (as counter-attractions to saloons and gambling establishments), reading rooms, and "mothers' meetings" to teach child rearing and sex education (known as "social purity" at the time). When Harper proposed "that as a general rule" Black women "work better in unions of their own," she indicated Black women's priorities, including the determination to work away from unsympathetic or outright antagonistic white women (Harper 1886c). Harper recurrently sounded this theme of Black women's "self-reliance" and "self-respect." Although she hoped to move white women (see below), she didn't expect to depend on them (Carby 1987b, 93). Black temperance women signaled their own self-organization, history, and politics by naming their chapters after women abolitionists such as Sojourner Truth and Lucretia Mott and Black women WCTU leaders, such as Harper, Lucy Simpson Thurman, and Sarah J. Wilson Early, and by reporting their work to Black newspapers and churches. In this work, Harper considered community-centered projects a piece of a sweeping mission:

To lift up the banner of the Christian religion from the mire and dust into which slavery and pride of caste had trailed it, and to hold it up as an ensign of hope and deliverance to other races of the world, of whom the greater portion were not white people.

(Harper 1888–1889, 241–242)

In the WCTU, Harper held, Black women could simultaneously forge race pride and interracial connections.

Those interracial connections had to be built, at a crucial crisis moment when white people began to institutionalize racial segregation through "Jim Crow" laws and social practices. For Harper, the WCTU remained a possible space (for a time) where Black women might find allies. "We do not need *sympathy*—but *recognition of our womanhood!*" she explained in 1883 (Harper 1883). Therefore, Harper articulated interests and identities Black women shared with white women—as citizens, Christians, and mothers—as the basis for coalition. Black and white temperance women shared a "common cause" (her constant keyword), and a "common foe." This shared enemy was intemperance, an "evil which debauches politics, defiles the home and demoralizes man and woman" of "every kindred, tribe and race which falls beneath its influence" (Harper 1891a). In her writings and lectures, Harper

dramatized the distressing intimate impact of alcohol abuse on individual men and families and connected these to the systematic economic and political workings of the "liquor traffic." In this analysis of the personal effects of political systems, she presented an analysis of white men's social (sexual and racial) power that Black women might share with the white women Harper regularly called "sisters and co-workers in a common cause."

Whether white women would recognize those powerful grounds for coalition was open to question. As Harper explained white temperance women to Black women,

Some of the members of different Unions have met the [race] question in a liberal and Christian manner; others have not seemed to have so fully outgrown the old shards and shells of the past as to make the distinction between Christian affiliation and social equality, but still the leaven of more liberal sentiments has been at work in the Union and produced some hopeful results.

Here, Harper distinguished between social affinities (friendship), and alliance based on shared political and religious commitments. Harper explained white women's persistent (and rising) racism in dynamic, historical terms. As "vast disparities" in status, suffrage, education, and wealth disappeared with Emancipation and Reconstruction, certain white women held even harder to the "one relic [that] remains from the dead past, 'Our social customs.'" Others seemed open to change. "Whether or not members of the farther South will subordinate the spirit of caste to the spirit of Christ, time will show," she averred (Harper 1888b).

Harper anticipated the reception Black women might meet from white women (not just southerners) including "hostility of enemies or failures of friends" (Harper 1875). Although she wished for mutual sympathy and support, she certainly did not assume it. "Inviting you to this work I do not promise you fair sailing and unclouded skies," she warned Black women at the movement's outset. "You may meet with coolness where you expect sympathy; disappointment where you feel sure of success; isolation and loneliness instead of heart-support and cooperation" (Harper 1875). Given both long-standing and intensifying white "prejudice and pride of race," she forewarned that Black women might face "social contempt" as well as social slights (now known as micro-aggressions) from women in the organization. "I do not think the majority of the WCTU will say to you: 'Stand by thyself, come not near me: I am either holier or whiter than thou,'" she responded to Black women inquiring about their status in the organization. In the next sentence, she turned to white women at the convention to confirm this, in both a query and a challenge for them, asking, "Am I right?" (Harper 1890, 214). Would white women live up to Harper's expectations and their

own ideals, she wondered? She did not, that is, assume white women's support. She advised Black women to steel themselves for occasions when "scorn may curl her haughty lip, and fashion gather up her dainty robes from social contact" (Harper 1888b). "Agitate," Harper typically urged Black churchwomen,

clasp hands with the best women in the land, North and South. If you meet in any part of the country, women lacking breadth of soul, so that they wish to draw the color-line, when they draw the line at color, draw your line at self-respect and fight without them.

(Harper 1891)

Harper found white women's indifference or unconcern even more common, though, and practically more demoralizing. "As much as she worked for everyone's rights," concludes literature scholar Koritha Mitchell, she "saw that her white counterparts would seldom operate with black women's concerns in mind" (Mitchell 2018, 18). Or as scholar Frances Smith Foster explains in her edited collection of Harper's writings, Harper learned that many white feminists "did not include black women in their visions," despite her efforts (1990, 216). Harper plumbed (and challenged) those limits, including "among those of purported good will" (Wilson Logan 1997, 69).

Advice to white women

At the outset of Reconstruction, Harper articulated her organizing principle:

I hold that between the white people and the colored there is a community of interests, and the sooner they find it out, the better it will be for both parties; but that community of interests does not consist in increasing the privileges of one class and curtailing the rights of the other, but in getting every citizen interested in the welfare, progress and durability of the state.

(Harper 1866)

The WCTU was one ground to discern and cultivate those interests. Harper hoped to educate and reform well-meaning white women, as a counterbalance to rising white supremacy. In her many reports, she advised white "sisters and co-workers" to unite with Black women,

to do what you can to win the confidence, awaken the interest and enlist the cooperation of the colored women of your locality to affiliate with you, not as objects of charity, but as helpers and auxiliaries in a great and glorious cause. Let no lines of race circumscribe your efforts.

(Harper 1885a)

Yet lines of race assuredly did, as Harper officially requested “more hearty cooperation and courtesy toward the colored unions,” from the executive board, suggesting the absence of those qualities (*Union Signal*, November 14, 1889). Indeed, in 1889, she moved the organization to formally resolve “that Christian courtesy be shown which is due one woman to another” (Harper 1889b). In contrast to this were white women who exhibited “spasmodic excitement,” when “patient continuance in earnest, Christly work” was what Harper prescribed (Harper 1884b). She distinguished between what she called “grand enthusiasms” and “moral earnestness,” or what we might call performative allyship versus “showing up.” Harper appealed for “Christly sympathy, for Christian cooperation, and the respect which is due from one human to another” (Harper 1886a). Along with cooperation and respect, Harper asked for “recognition” of Black women’s efforts and interests at many points.

At a moment when white segregationists were publicly calling for social and physical distance between white and Black people, Harper called for closer contact, referring often to open, clasped, and helping hands and doors. White women might begin by asking themselves:

How would Christ have acted to those people who have been enslaved in the south, and regarded as social pariahs in the north. Would He have put them afar off, and worked for them? or have brought them near to Him and enclosing them in His loving heart, worked with them?

(Harper 1886a)

“Come near enough to lay your hands on their hearts,” she requested white women (Harper 1885a). This was an invitation to connection, as well as a challenge to white women to live up not just to the courtesies but also the deeper commitments of Christian fellowship. “Give to this work, not simply your gold or silver, but give yourselves,” she urged (Harper 1886a).

Harper was not asking for white saviors, though. Organizing with Black women stood to benefit white women in her accounts. “And is there not a blessing in this work for you?” she asked, on the idea that “he who waters shall be watered, and if the reflex of good must ever come back into your own lives” (Harper 1885a). She recommended that white women “take this work as one of your God given opportunities,” that they “may find a broadening of their lives” (Harper 1884b, lxxxiii). White women might work on themselves, she suggested, urging white women “to examine your hearts and see if you are prepared to do this work, if you have learned to subordinate the spirit of caste, to the spirit of Christ” (Harper 1886a).

In her analysis, white women’s active participation in temperance had transformative personal potential for them (a process later feminists named “consciousness-raising”). Social change demanded an overhaul of white

women's thinking (Palmer-Mehta 2007). She thus presented collaboration with Black women as an opportunity for white women to deepen their relationship with God and broaden their view of humanity. It was an opportunity to help themselves, she considered, since racism distorted and diminished white women's lives and souls, and, importantly, those of their children.² In an 1892 poem entitled "A Fairer Hope, a Brighter Morn," for example, Harper analyzed the impact of enslaving on white people's souls and probed the sexual and familial psychodynamics of white supremacy and white guilt ("phantasms of dread and pain," and paranoia about interracial sex) (Harper 1892a). Harper examined how racism misshaped the relationships between white husbands and wives and parents and children. While motherhood might be the basis of interracial coalition, Harper knew it was also historically the basis of white supremacy and that white women organized around motherhood to assert racial dominance as readily as to resist racism. Harper emphasized home as a training ground where mothers could teach children temperance as well as political ideals. White women taught their children racism, and they could teach differently if they would.

White women were in fact capable of enacting their stated gender ideals of kindness and compassion, in Harper's estimation, if they were willing. In a poem of appreciation to co-workers in Maine who hosted her ("a stranger sister") with warmth and generosity, she commended those

Who say not to a comrade,
With sun caressed and darker brow
"Stand by thyself, come not thou near
I am holier than thou."

This reception was not always the case, Harper more than suggested, as she hoped others would learn from this "rare" example (Harper 1890c). In her reports, Harper walked a fine line between appreciatively acknowledging white women's efforts, and pointedly noting their absence. Harper identified white women's power and, importantly, their financial resources, as necessary for interracial cooperation: she prompted white women to lend support with "pocket-books" as well as "prayers" (Harper 1890a, 157). In almost every report, she cited financial neglect by white chapters and especially the National Union as a significant obstacle to organizing Black women, who had the will but not the means. "The trouble is that we have not money enough," she often reported. "I do not know how to make bricks without straw," she said (Harper 1885b). In verse, Harper had thanked Maine women for presenting her with personal gifts (a warm shawl and a gold watch). In the annual report, she recorded that they had funded her work "more than all the other unions combined" (Harper 1890b, 213). In other words, while she

appreciated and was genuinely moved by their personal care, effective work required sustained resources.

When she described the WCTU to various audiences, Harper presented white women as capable and powerful, in contrast to dominant constructions of weepy or fragile white women. Harper argued that white women's privileges afforded them opportunities, responsibilities, and resources to act. Most simply, white women should use their status and privilege: "If your lines have fallen in pleasanter places let your richer heritage be one of the ampler means that God has given you for larger service," she urged (Harper 1885a). In her last official report to white women, Harper called on white women to marshal their strength and claim their talents to defy racism:

To this nation, God has given the talent of a glorious opportunity. May it never be said of any of us, 'I was afraid and hid thy talent in the earth.' Afraid of the world's 'dread laugh,' afraid of Christless prejudices and hid thy talent in the dust of selfishness and worldly prudence.

(Harper 1890b, 221)

Harper meant to equip white women to consider injustice (and hopefully justice) on an intimate, interpersonal level.

Harper encouraged white women to shed the pretense of feminine fragility and wield the influence they did have over white children, husbands, neighbors, and other white women, as well as white businessmen, ministers, and legislators, and to use that influence to push back against racism. She connected white women's individual and group responsibility for justice (and injustice) to larger political and economic systems. Harper located white women's "advantages and social position in direct relation to a system of exploitation" (Carby 1987b, 89). For example, in a debate by WCTU delegates over whether to support the national education bill that would fund public schools, Harper contrasted white women's access to education and wealth to Black women's:

I belong to a race having suffered ages of oppression, you belong to a race having ages of education, domination, civilization, and I simply ask this body to really indorse the aims of this educational bill for the people of my race.

(Harper 1887a)

Harper identified differences between Black and white women as rooted in history and as questions of power. These could be sources of division, or their recognition could be the basis of collective action. She was pointing out the structural dimensions that conditioned women's interpersonal and political relationships.

If Christian sympathy and moral supplication could not move white women, perhaps political calculations would. Harper was practical about that, willing to consider organizing “from a political or Christian standpoint” (Harper 1884d). Across the country temperance organizations were initiating “local option” elections that would ban the sale of alcohol by town, county, or state. The WCTU dispatched scores of organizers to assist in these campaigns in the 1880s and 1890s, including Harper. In her reports on these efforts, Harper made a simple point: in places where the WCTU reached out to Black voters, the temperance measures passed, whereas in places where the organization ignored Black voters, the measures met defeat. As Harper described the political stakes, “Working for the colored people isn’t merely a matter of sympathy, but of self-defense” against the liquor traffic (Harper 1891b). Her message was, if you don’t organize Black women you are going to lose. As Harper’s African American co-organizer Sarah Jane Woodson Early explained it to WCTU delegates in 1888, “The people of African descent form no small factor in the politics of this government. A factor whose suffrage no one can afford to turn to bad account” (Early 1888). In this analysis, racism went against white temperance women’s own political interests.

Based on Harper’s reports, many white temperance women did not realize the moral or political transformation she called for (to put it lightly). Harper registered white women’s indifference almost more than any other response. At first gently, and over time more urgently, Harper requested that white women be more earnest and active in the work of organizing with Black women. The following communication was characteristic:

Sisters: To-day closes the time limited for sending my annual report, and although I have sent out cards and circulars in various directions, I am pained that I have received such meager responses. From several of the states, having, I believe, several thousands of colored people, I have not received a scrap of information. Will the sisters who have taken the smallest interest in this department, or who have done the least thing for the bodies, souls or votes for the colored people, please report to me at their earliest convenience.

(Harper 1886b)

Or, as she put it plainly in Pennsylvania in 1890 after fourteen years of her labor, reform with Black women “suffers from the lack of help.” After reporting her contributions and the silence and indifference she encountered from white women, Harper resigned her state position. “Find some other woman, perhaps a white woman would fill the place better; do more efficient work and get a stronger hold upon your hearts” (Harper 1890a, 157).

Harper experienced the narrowing of grounds for coalition over her career in the WCTU.

This was due in no small part to white women’s combined investment in and indifference to rising white supremacy. In 1883, when the Supreme Court declared the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional, Jim Crow laws and thousands of lynchings ensued with no opposition from a critical mass of white people, including white women. Historian Rayford Logan named this “the nadir,” or lowest point, of Black history (R. Logan). In 1892, Harper published *Iola Leroy*, a novel that literature scholar Hazel Carby describes as “a textbook for the educated black person in the crisis of disfranchisement, lynching, and the Jim Crow laws” (1987b, 93). The novel received scant, if any, attention from white co-workers in the WCTU. There was apparently no mention of her novel, for example, in the WCTU weekly. As Harper had wondered elsewhere about white peers, “when we write how many of you ever read our books and papers” (Harper 1888–1889, 222). She communicated her profound “sense of the wrongs inflicted upon her race” to the entire organization, when she urged them “for the sake of our common humanity, to protest against a lawlessness [lynching], which as sure as God is God must bring its harvest of retribution” (Harper 1892).

The next year, she delivered what biographer Melba Boyd considers Harper’s “political manifesto” at “The World’s Congress of Representative Women” (Harper 1894). In this speech on “Women’s Political Future,” Harper focused on lynching and criticized “those white feminists who refused to identify white male terrorism as a feminist issue” (Boyd 1994, 225). As she had in the speech that opens this chapter, Harper reflected that white women could use “their influence for good or evil”: “In her hand are possibilities whose use or abuse must tell upon the political life of the nation” (Harper 1894). At this time, anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells had documented that Frances Willard, the influential President of the National WCTU, had condoned lynching in a “regrettable interview” in which Willard asserted that Black men in the South “menaced” the “safety of woman, of childhood of the home” (Wells-Barnett 1970, 95–97, 170–178; Wells 1895, 289–299). The resulting publicity—in which white temperance women issued mild statements against lynching, continued to insinuate that rape was the “cause” of lynching, and centered the question on their own “reputations,” not mob violence—became a defining incident in the history of the organization and white women’s racism, and a turning point in Black feminist organizing (Giddings 1984; Feimster 2011; Frances Willard House Truth-Telling). During this period, Harper delivered lectures protesting lynching and white men’s harassment and assault of Black women (*Boston Daily Globe* 1894). Harper specifically decried her white counterparts’ equivocation on lynching in her 1896 poem, “An Appeal to My Countrywomen” (Harper 1896). The poem responded directly to resolutions passed by delegates at a WCTU convention, as Harper noted that white women expressed solidarity for victims of violence who included white Armenian Christians, Russian exiles, children, and

animals, and even tearful pity for white drinking men. Yet white women notably did not demonstrate their supposed compassion to Black victims of lynching—or their mothers—who had so much in common with them, including Christianity, motherhood, and country. (The WCTU's motto was, after all, “For God, Home, and Native Land.”) Harper posed this glaring contradiction directly to white women:

Have ye not, oh, my favored sisters,
 Just a plea, a prayer or a tear,
 For mothers who dwell ‘neath the shadows
 Of agony, hatred and fear?

This neglect was un-Christian, un-American, and un-motherly.

If white women couldn't or wouldn't care about other mothers, then they should act on behalf of their own children:

Weep not, oh my well-sheltered sisters,
 Weep not for the Negro alone,
 But weep for your sons who must gather
 The crops which their fathers have sown.

Here Harper was warning white mothers that the white men in their lives such as their sons (and fathers and husbands before them) might be prone to commit sexual and racial violence (that is, lynching and rape), just as they were at risk to drink. She prayed white women would stop them—and offered them tools to do so.

Conclusion

This chapter examines a case study of organizing and the potential for antiracist feminist alliances in the late nineteenth century. Harper's experience as an organizer educates us that, as scholar Brigitte Fielder writes, “white feminist failures are not inevitable, even as they are historical” (2021, 201). Harper's exhausting encounters navigating potential coalitions and persistent white indifference in an age of violent racist backlash might offer lessons to feminists today. Black activists have noted, and recent polls have confirmed, that after a burst of attention after Derek Chauvin's murder of George Floyd in 2020, white support of the Black Lives Matter movement and commitment to antiracist coalition building has waned (Thomas and Horowitz, 2020). This growing indifference calls to mind Harper's distinction between “grand enthusiasms” and “moral earnestness.” Harper's emphasis on political education in an age of rising white supremacy and her analysis of early white feminists' political projects sounds much like advice

today on how to practice meaningful allyship. For example, she called on white women to listen (Carby 1982), learn from, and cite Black women's political knowledge; to make coalitions based on points of shared interests, not as "white saviors"; to acknowledge difference and the historical roots of difference and not universalize their experience as that of all women; to reflect on their individual and structural investment in racism; to reflect on their historical as well as current relationship to racism and systems of power; and to admit and use their power to confront power, and engage in antiracist work with other white people. White women's long indifference to and active avoidance of that message sustains white supremacist ideologies and systems of power over generations, which is why so much of Harper's analysis resonates today.

Notes

- 1 After the Civil War, Harper was prominent in the American Equal Rights Association, American Association of Women, American Woman Suffrage Association, the Woman's International Temperance Society, the Universal Peace Union, the National Council of Women, the International Council of Women, and the National Association of Colored Women.
- 2 Barbara Smith made this point to the National Women's Studies Association in 1979: "white women don't work on racism to do a favor for someone else... You have got to comprehend how racism distorts and lessens your own lives as white women... and that it is very definitely your issue." Smith, "Racism and Women's Studies," *Frontiers* 5.1 (1979): 48.

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5

THE UNBEARABLE WHITENESS OF LESBIAN STUDIES

Stephanie Andrea Allen

In the 1980s and 1990s, lesbian literary critics engaged in various debates regarding what they perceived as lesbian literature and attempted to articulate a lesbian literary criticism. Bonnie Zimmerman's (1981) well-known essay "What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism" details the difficulties lesbian feminist critics encountered in trying to establish a lesbian literary canon. What is interesting about these debates is that when Zimmerman, a white lesbian scholar, published her essay, there were several published Black lesbian writers whom she did not mention at all. Indeed, while white lesbian feminists and literary critics were trying to ascribe lesbianness to texts and writers who did not necessarily identify as lesbian, Ann Allen Shockley was working on her second novel, *Say Jesus and Come to Me* (1982), having published the first, *Loving Her*, with The Naiad Press in 1974. Pat Parker had been writing, performing, and publishing her poetry for years. While Zimmerman does mention Gloria Hull's 1979 essay on Black woman poet Angelina Weld Grimké, she does not mention any texts by Black women who actually self-identified as lesbian writers.

Nevertheless, Black lesbian writers assumed that they would find community in the relatively new field of lesbian studies, hoping that white lesbian and white feminist claims of solidarity with Black women and other women of color would prove to be fruitful. This was not the case. Undeterred, Black lesbian writers responded to this marginalization with creative, theoretical, and scholarly writing that laid bare the particularities of their experiences as Black lesbians in the United States. This chapter will trace the ways in which racism, sexism, and the privileging of certain ways of knowing and interrogating literary texts kept lesbian literary critics and queer theorists from

including Black lesbian texts in what I call their queer canons, and will reveal the overwhelming whiteness of lesbian studies, particularly lesbian literary studies. This chapter will also offer a brief analysis of Becky Birtha's *For Nights Like This One* (1983), revealing the ways in which race is always already imbricated in Black lesbian lives and experiences, and the particularity of those experiences to Black women and Black communities. Most importantly, this chapter grapples with the ways in which white lesbian writers' and scholars' commitment to whiteness created a literary culture that tokenized one or two Black lesbian writers and excluded most others.

What is lesbian studies?

Before we can grapple with the overwhelming whiteness of lesbian studies, specifically lesbian literary studies, we might consider a few of the questions lesbian studies scholars were attempting to answer at the time: What is the aim of lesbian studies? Who is it for? Is it merely the study of lesbians? Or is it work done *by* lesbians? Some combination of both? What is its relationship to the academy, a space historically antagonistic toward straight women and sexual minorities? Where did lesbian studies come from? For the most part, lesbian studies "means both the grassroots cultural work which tells us who we are and the more formally organized courses on lesbians" (Cruikshank 1982, ix). While a large part of this work included scholarship *by lesbians about lesbians*, non-lesbian identified people participated in this work as well.

While concrete origins of lesbian studies are somewhat fuzzy, scholars point to the creation of the first lesbian caucus at the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) in 1977 as a historic moment for lesbians in academic and activist circles, particularly those interested in excavating lesbian histories from the closet. The nascent field of lesbian studies was a direct result of feminist activism and organizing, as was the relatively new academic discipline of women's studies, which sought to uncover and elevate the work of women, which had long been understudied or outright ignored in the academy due to sexism.

Still, one of the primary reasons for the development of the field was the relative invisibility of lesbians in women's studies. Unquestionably, there were tensions between lesbians and the feminist scholars who sought to include women writ large in their new curricula, but who purposefully excluded lesbians, believing that they would damage the women's movement. According to white English lesbian scholar and activist Tamsin Wilton (1995), lesbian studies "was founded on the theoretical interventions of lesbian feminism, which itself developed from inadequacies in heterosexual feminism and women's studies" (1). In other words, some white feminists, including those working most stridently during the second wave of the feminist movement, disparaged lesbians and actively worked to distance themselves from

them. These feminists further disparaged an already marginalized group within a movement supposedly committed to advancing the rights of all women. To be clear, white feminists weren't the only women disparaging lesbians, but their influence was formidable and wide-reaching. For example, National Organization for Women founder Betty Friedan, author of the *Feminine Mystique*, referred to lesbians as the "lavender menace" (quoted in Gilmore and Kaminsky 2007, 96), at once signaling her own homophobia as well as the attitudes of many white feminists at the time.

Likewise, the move toward creating lesbian studies as a discipline separate from women's studies was fraught with tension. According to Tamsin Wilton, "Opposition to lesbian and gay studies has been fierce. Homophobia is the most respectable of prejudices, and it remains a majority viewpoint that a set of execrated, criminalised sexual practices is an inadequate foundation for an academic discipline" (11). While these words may seem anachronistic to contemporary readers given the concretization of queer theory in *current* academic discourse, it is important to remember that the university has always been a white hetero-male dominated space, and that women, lesbians, queer folks, people of color, disabled persons, and historically excluded groups at the intersections of these identities have experienced marginalization, discrimination, and even outright rejection in the academy. Staking out a place for all these groups in the academy remains an ongoing project.

Similarly, it is important to note the tenuous relationship between lesbian studies and queer theorizing. White lesbian scholars Bonnie Zimmerman and Toni McNaron (1996) state in the introduction to *New Lesbian Studies: Into the Twenty-First Century*:

We continue to see the need to promote an independently defined lesbian studies...lesbian studies entails asking particular questions and, more importantly, proceeding from a particular theoretical stance which will not be subsumed beneath female heterosexuality, male homosexuality, or even queer pan-sexuality.

(xvi)

To be sure, the relative one-size-fits-all approach to identity in queer theorizing ignores the material reality of what it means to be a same-gender attracted woman, and how that might inform the histories, literatures, cultures, and lived experiences of women who identify as lesbian.

So, what did lesbian studies want? Primarily, lesbian studies aimed to recover the lost histories, philosophies, intellectual, scientific, and creative work of lesbians. Huge swaths of the contributions of lesbians were ignored or hidden by scholars, even those who purported to work in women's studies. The work of lesbians was often relegated to that of the umbrella term *sexuality studies* in women's studies by folks eschewing the identity lesbian, and

not always because the moniker didn't aptly describe the woman in question. More often, it was due to the belief that lesbian identities were inconsequential, should remain private, or would degrade the woman's reputation. All of this was steeped in sexism, misogyny, and homophobia, rendering lesbians invisible both within the academy and outside of it.

Finally, perhaps the paramount concern for lesbian studies scholars was (and, for some, still is) this: What is a lesbian? For some, the very definition of lesbian is contested. The term lesbian, generally defined as a woman who is only attracted to other women, would seem to be simple enough. However, that is not the case. During the height of the lesbian feminist movement, some lesbian feminists insisted that lesbians were politically, not sexually, motivated to embrace lesbian identities, arising from their belief that loving and supporting women meant that one was a lesbian, regardless of sexual attraction or sexual orientation. Some, the most notable of whom is Adrienne Rich (1980), believed that all women were lesbians and existed on a continuum. Yet others, mostly lesbian separatists, insisted that lesbians needed to disavow all men (including boy children over twelve years of age), stemming from their belief that patriarchy was the root of all evil and that to support women, one had to completely reject men, regardless of sexual attraction (Anne 2001). While lesbian separatism seemed for many a viable option at the time, most lesbians, including well-known Black lesbian writers and activists, such as Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde, rejected this sort of separatism, understanding that Black women needed to work with Black men as well as Black women to combat racism as well as other systems of oppression, including heterosexism and homophobia (Combahee River Collective, [1977] 1983).

While this chapter cannot fully engage with all these debates, it is interesting to note that lesbian identities remain contested even now, more than forty years after the creation of the first lesbian caucus at NWSA. A small number of radical lesbian feminists seek to exclude trans women from lesbian communities, reminding us that bigotry rears its head in marginalized communities as well as so-called mainstream ones. It is important to remember that trans women are women, and trans women by definition can and do identify as lesbian.

Lesbian literary studies

Although scholars of lesbian studies made interventions in history, sociology, and other disciplines, a primary site for lesbian studies was literary studies. In the 1980s and 1990s, white lesbian literary critics engaged in various debates regarding what they perceived as lesbian literature and attempted to articulate lesbian literary criticism. To start, they had to decide what constituted a lesbian text and who was a lesbian writer. While some lesbian critics defined lesbian based on female same-sex attraction, some felt that a political definition

was appropriate, insisting that defining lesbian through sexual attraction or practice was reductionist. Additionally, Adrienne Rich's lesbian continuum presented problems, as Zimmerman (1981) suggested: "all-inclusive definitions of lesbianism risk blurring the distinctions between lesbian relationships and non-lesbian friendships or between lesbian identity and female-centered identity" (456). Then, too, because these critics mostly looked to white women writers like Virginia Woolf, Radclyffe Hall, and Gertrude Stein who never publicly claimed a lesbian identity, they needed to look for codes in their work that might indicate their "lesbianness," due to the silencing and censorship that had always been a problem for these texts. There is nothing inherently wrong in looking to the past to examine literary movements, trends, and cultural influences; indeed, that is what literary histories do. However, these scholars disregarded most writers who were not white.

Disregard for the work of writers like Lorraine Hansberry and Anita Cornwell (1983) is further testament to the notion that white lesbian studies scholars were creating a very particular lesbian literary history, one that did not include Black women writers. Indeed, *Conditions 5: The Black Women's Issue*, edited by Lorraine Bethel and Barbara Smith and published in 1979, was a direct response to white lesbian feminists who claimed that politically conscious Black lesbians and their writing were nowhere to be found, as well as an intervention to counter some of the negative representations of Black lesbians in white lesbian writing. Bethel and Smith write in the introduction, "This issue, however, clearly disproves the 'non-existence' of Black feminist and Black lesbian writers and challenges forever our invisibility, particularly in the feminist press" (11). Not only were Bethel and Smith claiming a space for Black lesbians in white lesbian texts and publications, but they were also creating their own publishing venues and encouraging Black lesbian writers to chronicle their lived experiences as evidence of their very existence and to reject the notion of Black lesbian invisibility.

In the 1990s, debates on lesbian literature and culture in what was now called lesbian and gay studies were still raging, although queer theory was becoming the vanguard in sexuality studies. However, many lesbian scholars were suspicious of queer theory and its disregard for identity and insisted on the continuation of lesbian studies as a field unto itself. White lesbian feminist Tamsin Wilton (1995) was straightforward in her condemnation of queer theory. She stated:

Just as feminism is working toward its own irrelevance by seeking to deconstruct gender, so deconstructionist approaches to sexuality and queer theory constantly destabilize sexual identity. The debate between essentialism and constructionism and the gender-fuck antics of Queer threaten the very ground on which 'lesbian' stands.

(123)

For Black lesbians, these debates were even more ominous. By eliminating or deconstructing categories of identity, Black lesbian subjectivities were virtually erased, leaving it difficult not only to assert a Black lesbian identity, but to articulate a Black lesbian feminist criticism without being accused of essentialism or of playing identity politics. In other words, white lesbians' insistence that race did not or should not matter, or queer theory's insistence that all identity is fluid, erased the specificity of Black lesbian experiences. To universalize lesbian, that is, to assume that all lesbian literary histories were white, was not only unrealistic, but insular and exclusionary. Likewise, there is a bit of hypocrisy in these accusations, as Sharon P. Holland (1996), a Black queer scholar, reminds us:

I find an interesting parallel between Lorde and these early writers—a sense that she too was searching for some kind of past (specifically in her volume of poems, *The Black Unicorn*); some kind of marker for belonging to a group outside of one's historical nightmare. For this endeavor Lorde is often dismissed as too much of an essentialist, while these same critics urge us not to judge early figures like Stein or Woolf for their essentialism (for this reading of the past, replace the term 'essentialist' with 'avant garde').
(248)

It seemed that claims of essentialism or, in this case, using shared identity markers (even coded language) to create a lesbian literary history, did not apply to white writers, only to Black ones. Jewelle Gomez (2005) warned that the “invisibility of black lesbians is already an ‘epidemic’ in many academic arenas” and that the “affliction of invisibility is in danger of spreading to queer studies as well” (290). Rather than deconstructing Black lesbian identities in service of queer theoretical discourses derived from the work of white (mainly male scholars), critics needed to start with an interrogation of how Black lesbian sexualities were being represented in Black lesbian literature before dismissing them as texts that only foster identity politics.

More importantly, white lesbian and queer literary scholars acted as gatekeepers, deciding what literature was worthy of study and what was not. Holland goes on to say,

Lesbian feminists in the terrain of lesbian writings have constructed a historical arena filled with the Steins and Woolfs of the world, a world where black lesbians don't produce 'literature' and 'theory,' but they do produce 'activism' and therefore, 'politics.' By claiming ownership of 'literature,' white lesbian scholars who adhere to this standard therefore control the 'discourse' which authenticates it.

(252–253)

I quote Holland at length because her sentiments mirror my own, and explain why, to some degree, scholarship on Black lesbian literature, now nearly thirty years after the lesbian, gay, and queer studies boom of the 1990s, is still nearly non-existent. For example, there is very little scholarship on the work of Becky Birtha, although she has been writing for decades and has won numerous accolades for her work. The same is true of Anita Cornwell, an out Black lesbian in the 1950s who wrote about the material reality of being a Black lesbian in the United States for several publications, including *Negro Digest* and *The Ladder*, as well as her own collection of essays, *Black Lesbian in White America* (1981). Although Audre Lorde is probably the best-known Black lesbian writer in the United States, she is often cited as an activist rather than as a writer, although her collection of essays, *Sister Outsider* (1984), is an important contribution to Black lesbian feminist literature. Lorde, compared with other Black lesbian writers, is an anomaly, and “is on the verge of canonization within white feminist academia as the token Black lesbian voice” (Wilson 1992, 77). In other words, when white lesbians *do* write about Black lesbian writers, Audre Lorde is generally the only one mentioned. The dearth of scholarship on other Black lesbian writers is evidence that scholars have not been attentive to this corpus of work.

For nights like this one

What might a reading of second-wave feminist era Black lesbian literature reveal in conjunction with lesbian studies? A brief analysis of Becky Birtha’s *For Nights Like This One* (1983) will reveal that Black lesbian writers were wrestling with issues similar to those of white lesbian writers: identity, community, motherhood, feminism, as well as how to survive in a world inundated with patriarchal systems that oppressed women. However, the key difference is that Birtha’s writing, like that of other Black lesbian writers, also addressed the ways in which race, gender, sexuality, and class were always already present in their lives. Understanding that these issues were interlocking and not single-issue variables was key to illuminating the material realities of Black lesbian lived experiences.

Becky Birtha (b. 1948) is a Black lesbian writer whose work has often been overlooked in white academic, LGBT, and literary discourses. While most of her recent efforts have been devoted to writing children’s picture books, Birtha’s early writing focused on lesbian relationships and the struggle to live an authentic life within the lesbian community of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Her first collection of short stories, *For Nights Like This One*, was published in 1983, although many of the stories had been published in the late 1970s in lesbian literary magazines and periodicals such as *Azalea: A Magazine for Third World Lesbians*, *Focus: A Journal for Lesbians*, and *Paragraph: A Quarterly for Gay Fiction*. This publication history situates

her culturally and historically with the Women's Liberation Movement or second-wave feminist movement, but also within a growing Black lesbian literary community that was striving to publish work that would adequately represent Black lesbian experiences in the United States. *Birtha's* stories explored issues of loss, family, motherhood, and acceptance in lesbian communities, and interracial relationships, mainly between Black and white women. While writing about love between Black and white women might seem antithetical to the purpose of creating stories that represent Black lesbian experiences, this is not necessarily the case. Stefanie K. Dunning (2009) suggests that Black queer texts follow a long tradition of representing the interracial in Black texts by "mark[ing] an affirmation of black subjectivity" (7).

For example, in "Babies," *Birtha's* protagonist Lurie longs to have a child. She also seems to envision a world where she and her white lover could have children that would reflect both their racial backgrounds: "She pictured a golden child. Golden skin and soft fluffy golden hair. She had seen such children and wanted one" (8). However, her partner, Sabra, wants nothing to do with children. Lurie, waking from a dream in which she had rescued a little girl and taken her home, remembered that "Sabra did not like babies" (5). After sharing her dream with her partner, Lurie asks Sabra if she ever wanted to have children. Sabra responds:

No...I never have. In fact, I've always wanted not to have children. I know it's not the same for you, but I've been gay all my life, and I want to be for the rest of my life, and it does make a difference about things like that. I've always felt that little kids were a kind of heterosexual problem, one more way women are oppressed by men. And I've always felt good that I'd be free from that.

(Birtha, 6)

With this one small bit of dialogue, *Birtha* seems to encapsulate what lesbian separatists at the time were advocating: complete and utter removal from anything that might remotely resemble a heterosexual relationship or that might mimic heteropatriarchy. She also seems to suggest that because Sabra has "been gay all of her life," she is better equipped to explain to the newly out Lurie what the rules are in lesbian relationships and communities. On the one hand, it might be possible to read this passage as a cynical indictment of lesbian separatist politics, which for some, including mothers of all races and Black women without children, seemed just as oppressive as "traditional" heteropatriarchal relationship structures, and led to many Black lesbians' rejection of lesbian separatism, and even feminism. However, we later learn that this is not the case. In fact, Lurie gives up her dream of having children so that she can remain in a relationship with Sabra, fully aware that even adoption is not an option for the couple. Lurie states at the end of the story: "If I had to

choose...' she said slowly. Between a child and the woman I loved. It isn't 'If, Sabra, it's real. I've had to make that choice and I've chosen" (14). This line ends the story, and we are left with the full understanding that Sabra and Lurie will never have children, and that Lurie has made her peace with that decision.

What then, if not calling out lesbian separatists for prescribing lesbian behavior, is Birtha doing by suggesting that to be a *real* lesbian, one must give up the notion of having children? While Birtha does not use the phrase *real lesbian* in this story, she does assert that to remain a part of the lesbian community, one must be childless. While Birtha is correct that having children kept many heterosexual women dependent on their husbands for support and relegated to the domestic sphere, it seems antithetical to feminist principles that women *could not choose* to have children, especially in a household that might contain two loving mothers. Birtha's story seems almost ludicrous to our twenty-first-century sensibilities, given recent struggles to legalize same-sex marriages and current challenges to LGBT adoption, but at the time of publication in 1979, this line of thinking permeated lesbian separatism and portions of the feminist movement. Ellen Herman (1996) writes that

many young lesbians at the time consciously carved out adult identities in opposition to everything female, including motherhood, because they considered conventional feminine selfhood a prison. In the 1970s, lesbians and feminists placed a sharp emphasis on demonstrating women's non-procreative and nontraditional talents...Many women rejected a strategy of pointing out how 'normal' lesbians could be—by being or becoming mothers, for example, or by settling into long term unions that resembled heterosexual marriage.

(101)

Indeed, lesbian separatists and other radical feminists rejected anything that remotely resembled "traditional" family structures and attempted to create their own. These revolutionary structures included lesbian communes as well as relationships between women that would never include children. For Birtha and her lesbian characters, an interracial lesbian relationship that did not include children was indeed revolutionary, especially at a time when Black women who stepped outside of traditional roles were seen as a danger to Black communities and Black Nationalist politics. Paula Giddings, a Black woman historian, observes,

Among the more extreme demands of the Black Power activists was for black women to walk two (or more) steps behind their man, to acquiesce to male abuse, and to avoid using birth control so that they could have babies for the revolution.

(as quoted in Austin 2006, 54)

Birtha is forging a path to bodily autonomy by insisting that Lurie commit to herself instead of a political ideology that sees her only as a vessel for motherhood. She does this by embracing her white lesbian lover, yet also by rejecting motherhood, which would not only damage her relationship, but might also restrict her ability to move about in the world unencumbered. Lurie and Sabra create a new type of family, one that rejects conventional attitudes regarding women's roles as mothers and focuses instead on personal fulfillment.

Birtha also examines family and home in her story "A Sense of Loss." Liz, a Black lesbian, is traveling home for her grandmother's funeral. She leaves her white lover Mandy home because she knows that her conservative Christian family will not accept her. Birtha writes of Liz's decision to leave Mandy:

There would be no place for her Mandy and she would stand out conspicuously, inhibiting everyone at a time when they needed to be with people among whom they felt safe. If it were a man Liz were married to, even a white man, perhaps it would be different. A husband would be family by marriage, in-law, someone who could claim a right to be there. But how could she justify the presence of the woman she loved?

(37)

While the issue of bringing a *white* lover home to her Black family is a concern, Liz is much more worried about what her family, who are entirely heterosexual, will think about her *lesbian* lover. She is only "out" to her sister, who is relieved that she has not yet told her family that she is lesbian. While she longs to tell her family who she is—a member of a lesbian writing collective, an activist, and of course, a lesbian—she cannot, and feels "like a first-class hypocrite" for not being able to do so (40). She also understands that her family will not accept her relationship as legitimate, based mainly on the fact that the two women cannot marry. At the same time, although Liz is upset that her beloved grandmother has passed on, she is unable to fully express her grief at the funeral or at the wake while with her family. It is only after she has returned home to Mandy that she is able to unleash the emotion that has built up inside of her. Birtha writes,

And suddenly the awful sadness that was within Liz burst and broke free, and the tears came. That flood of tears that had seemed bound and plugged inside her came effortlessly, easily, the storm finally breaking. In Mandy's arms she was able to cry.

(44)

While Birtha never states that Liz's family is homophobic, she does suggest that they do not understand her, and that they may not be accepting of her

lesbian relationship. She declares, “And she knew now where her home was, her family: here in the arms of the woman who loved her, who understood” (44). Liz loves her family, but she realizes that their conservative Christian values and her more progressive, even radical, politics have created a wedge between her and her family that cannot yet be healed. Still, Birtha’s characterization of Liz’s struggle is sensitive and thoughtful: Liz never vilifies her family for their views, nor does she suggest that the healing might never occur. However, she does suggest that Liz must create a new family, and that for her to fully live her truth, she must surround herself with people who can accept her fully.

Birtha’s commentary on “traditional” values in Black families is a subject that other Black lesbian writers have explored in their work. What is interesting about Birtha’s take on this topic is that, in a white supremacist society that oppresses queer people of all races, she seems to understand that simply denouncing homophobia in some Black communities will not solve the problem. Unlike some other Black lesbian writers at the time who spent copious amounts of time lambasting hetero-dominated Black communities for ostracizing lesbians and gays in their writing, Birtha moves beyond mere criticism and offers a solution that leaves the door open for reconciliation. She also seems to understand that Black lesbians do not necessarily need to suffer outright rejection from their family or community to forge new familial bonds. Instead, Birtha realizes that an inability to be authentic at home is reason enough to leave one’s natal family behind. Other stories in *For Nights Like This One* deal with lesbian dress codes, coming out of the closet, and learning to love oneself. More than anything, this collection of short stories reveals the myriad ways in which Black lesbians experience life and love, and although not all the stories have happy endings, one gets the sense that Birtha’s lesbians are unafraid to face life on their own terms. Becky Birtha is a welcome addition to the Black lesbian literary canon, and the fact that she has won numerous awards and fellowships for her writing, including the Individual Fellowship in Literature from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts in 1985, a Creative Writing Fellowship Grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1988, and Pew Fellowship in the Arts in 1993, attests to its literary and cultural merit. The fact that she did this as an out Black lesbian is remarkable.

The way forward

To be sure, much was lost by the exclusion of Black lesbians from lesbian studies and lesbian literary studies: the particularities of what it means to be a Black lesbian living in the United States, the racism Black lesbians experienced from white women in lesbian communities, as well as the many contributions that Black lesbian writers, historians, activists, and others have made

over the years. White lesbian writers' and scholars' commitment to whiteness created a literary culture that tokenized one or two Black lesbian writers and excluded most others. Queer theorizing created an overwhelmingly white scholarly and cultural milieu that eschewed identity and made it increasingly difficult to recognize the importance of Black lesbian contributions to the fields of lesbian studies, LGBT studies, and queer theory.

Black lesbian representation in literary texts is an important tool by which Black lesbian writers articulate their experiences as well as the societal and cultural forces at work in American society and culture regarding Black women's sexuality. To combat the overwhelming whiteness of lesbian studies, contemporary scholars must take seriously Bethel's and Smith's 1979 admonition: "As Black women, as Lesbians and feminists, there is no guarantee that our lives will ever be looked at with the kind of respect given to certain people from other races, sexes, or classes.... We must document ourselves now."

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6

BELL HOOKS

Black indigeneity, ancestral memory, and lessons on resistance

Reanae McNeal

Dedicated to bell hooks and her courage to invite us to create a better world.

bell hooks, who was of African American and Native American descent, was one of the most powerful Black feminists of the twenty-first century as well as a social activist, professor, author, teacher, cultural critic, and prolific writer across genres. She was the author of over thirty-five books that encompass themes on Black women, feminism, pedagogy, spirituality, love, patriarchy, white supremacy, self-help, and personal memoirs, underscoring the dynamics of resistance and oppression in their multifaceted forms. Her ingenuity and innovation as a thought leader continue to shape generations, despite her death on December 15, 2021. hooks left a legacy of activism that has had a profound influence across educational fields and diverse people and communities globally.

hooks' work continually challenges white supremacist thinking, domination, and atrocities through her persistent decolonizing endeavors. Her decolonial Black feminist critique acknowledges interlocking oppressive systems:

We can't begin to understand the nature of domination if we don't understand how these systems connect with one another. Significantly, this phrase [imperialist-white supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy] has always moved me because it doesn't value one system over another... So, for me, that phrase always reminds me of a global context, of the context of class, of empire, of capitalism, of racism and of patriarchy. Those things are all linked — an interlocking system.

(Yancy and hooks, 2015)

hooks' scrutiny of interlocking systems of oppression has brought deeper understanding to discriminatory practices. Re-citing and re-collecting her intervention into colonial white supremacist constructions of history, identity, and community, this chapter highlights her thought-provoking commentary in her groundbreaking essay "Revolutionary 'Renegades': Native Americans, African Americans, and Black Indians"¹ in her book *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992).

I underscore hooks' resistance to a colonial white supremacist erasure and suppression system that seeks to undermine bonds among Africans, African Americans, and Native Americans. I also examine hooks' critique of interlocking systems of oppression and her decolonial approach to the retelling of history. In so doing, I demonstrate the way she makes visible the rich connections among Africans, African Americans, and Native Americans, as well as Native American Blacks and African Americans with Native heritage (also known as Black Indians), including in her own family. Refusing the dominant culture's intentional separation and erasure of the bonds between these communities, hooks conveys other historical accounts, drawing on such sources as oral traditions.

"Revolutionary Renegades" is an invitation to resist colonialism, white supremacy, and interlocking systems of oppression. Simultaneously, it is an opportunity for readers to gain an understanding of how the ideology of white supremacy, in conjunction with interlocking systems of oppression, has served to divide, harm, and violently impact Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) while undermining historical and present-day connections between Blackness and Indigeneity. hooks beckons readers to understand why we must focus on "critically examin[ing] the ways white supremacy...is advanced by white groups and by all groups who internalize racism" (184). I focus on the following four themes in hooks' essay: (1) denaturalization of white supremacy and white domination; (2) colonial white supremacist tools of destruction such as genocidal drama; (3) oral traditions that underscore (re)membering as resistance; and (4) lessons on resistance, healing, and restoration. I centralize hooks' analyses to understand both the collective impact of these themes across communities and their individual impact on hooks and her family. I call the reader to a deeper and more nuanced comprehension of the levels of violence that white supremacy and interlocking systems of oppression have perpetrated on BIPOC.

The denaturalization of white supremacy and white domination

hooks *denaturalizes* white supremacy and domination. She reveals the violent harm done by a "white supremacist sensibility (the belief that all that is white is superior, more 'civilized,' more intelligent and destined to dominate)" (183). This white supremacist sensibility, hooks contends, "can be shared by non-white people, hence increasing the destructive power of the habits of thought and being perpetuated by white supremacist ideology" (183).

hooks offers a deeper understanding of the functionality and impact of white supremacy, and how unnatural this ideology is to human progression and particularly to the wellness of BIPOC.

At the same time, hooks reveals how colonialist white supremacy disparages, erases, and suppresses the truth of the overlapping and interwoven histories of Africans, African Americans, and Native Americans. hooks notes, “Over time, white supremacist constructions of history have effectively erased from public collective cultural memory the recognition of solidarity and communion among Native Americans, Africans, and African Americans” (181–182). This includes the erasure of Blackness and Indigeneity as shared identities and experiences—that is, between African Americans, who are the displaced descendants of Indigenous Africans, and Native Americans, Indigenous people of the Americas.

hooks highlights how the intentional erasure and suppression of these connections are used to divide and dominate Blacks and Native Americans. She points out:

Disturbed by political solidarity and bonds of affinity between blacks and Native Americans racist white people both then and now strategically work to separate the two groups. An important strategy has been historical erasure and suppression of documents and information affirming the depth of these ties or their perverse rewriting of history from the colonizing standpoint.

(182)

An example of what hooks is referring to is the act of *paper genocide*. Historian and humanitarian Chena Bullock (Shinnecock and Montauk) explains: “‘Paper genocide’ is a term used to describe the intentional destruction of documents and records related to a particular group of people, usually with the intent of erasing their histories and cultures” (n.d.). Like hooks, Bullock points out how “In the United States, [paper genocide] has been used as a ploy to destroy the histories of Native American and African-American cultures” (n.d.). Paper genocide includes “the destruction of records related to Native Americans, such as the destruction of treaties and other documents related to their land rights” (Bullock n.d.). The destruction of such information has caused a “perverse rewriting of history” (hooks 182).

Bullock further confirms what hooks is saying about erasure and suppression when she says:

Laws continue to be created at the state and federal levels that perpetuate paper genocide. When the first census was taken in 1790, census takers who came into the Native American communities collected race classification

data based upon the way they perceived community members, using the categories of ‘red,’ ‘black,’ ‘white,’ ‘negro,’ ‘Indian,’ or ‘mulatto’.

(n.d.)

This racial categorization of Native people by the federal government has had the long-term impact of disappearing Native Americans. “Throughout the years,” Bullock observes, “there has been a decrease in the number of Native Americans on paper” (Bullock n.d.).

The colonizing standpoint, grounded in white supremacy, as hooks makes known, seeks to also erase the presence of “Native American blacks [and] African Americans with Native ancestry” (hooks 183). The repercussions of paper genocide meant some Black Native Americans and African Americans with Native ancestry found their Native ancestry erased on government documents. Additionally, the “one-drop rule” that was advanced by the slave-owning south played a major role in the erasure of Black Native Americans and African Americans with Native ancestry. The “one-drop rule,” also known as the “one black ancestor rule,” meant that “a single drop of ‘black blood’ makes a person black” (Davis n.d.). Rules such as these derived from racist and racialized definitions, grounded in white supremacy, aided the enactment of paper genocide. These colonial white supremacist practices served five functions: (1) to erase Indigenous ancestral lineages and cultures; (2) to recategorize Native people into non-Native racialized categories for the sake of land theft; (3) to suppress connections between Blacks and Native Americans; (4) to maintain white supremacy/white “purity” and increase an exploited Black labor pool while upholding strict color lines between Blacks and whites; and (5) to rewrite history in ways that undermined the kinship and overlapping histories of African Americans and Native Americans (hooks 182). As a result, mainstream history books continue to leave out the presence of Native American Blacks and African Americans with Native ancestry, perpetuating a colonizing, white supremacist standpoint that embraces the erasure and suppression of these relational dynamics and their descendants who bear the rich heritage of both African Americans and Native Americans.

hooks notes the insidious ways institutionalized white supremacy maintains this erasure and suppression: “Institutionalized white supremacy puts in place structures for the dissemination of knowledge, whether elementary schools, universities, or the mass media, whereby all connections between African and Native Americans are erased and the knowledge of our shared history is suppressed” (184). In other words, the distorted history told through the standpoint of a colonizing white supremacist lens becomes another killing zone, a genocidal historical project that obliterates relations between Africans, African Americans, and Native Americans, and erases their descendants. An early example of these overlapping histories is that

“[i]n shared slavery, enslaved Africans and enslaved Native Americans intermarried with one another. Because their marriages were usually not considered legitimate by law, their children were slaves like their parents and considered illegitimate” (Collins and Rickert-Bolter 2021). Histories that underscore the kinship and bonds that took place under oppression often remain marginalized in mainstream history books, ignoring the descendants of these interactions.

hooks points out how interlocking systems of oppression perpetuate forgetfulness:

within white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, forgetfulness is encouraged. When people of color remember ourselves, remember the myriad ways our cultures and communities have been ravaged by white domination, we are often told by white peers that we are ‘too bitter,’ that we are ‘full of hate’.

(191)

Memories of atrocities become condemned, as is the case with the suppression of “critical race theory” in mainstream school curricula. As a result of suppression, erasure, and distortion that play down the realities of what has happened and continues to happen, many students remain uninformed about the past and how it influences current interactions and social injustices. In the framework of what hooks describes as a “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks 191), BIPOC often experiences backlash for (re)membering.

The white colonizing standpoint seeks to block the transmission of an interwoven history that reveals Africans, African Americans, and Native Americans as accomplices with each other, working toward liberation and solidarity. hooks gives counternarratives that reveal these entwined histories. For example, “When white armies sought to destroy the Seminole nation they found that blacks and Native Americans were ‘identified in interests and feelings,’ that black leaders mapped out strategies for their red comrades and influenced decisionmaking” (182). hooks draws on Black elders’ oral traditions, grounded in lived realities, as witness to these overlapping histories. “In the old days,” hooks says,

black elders (even those who were not raised in Native American communities) remembered their ties to the first culture (that we now call Native Americans). When they spoke history, they identified these ties, called their ancestors red and black by name.

(184)

Garnering these oral traditions as testimonials that resist erasure, hooks uses them to contradict dominant narratives while showing the preservation

of ancestors who attested to the overlapping histories of Africans, African Americans, and Native Americans and the presence of Native American Blacks and African Americans with Native ancestry.

hooks conveys a history that questions and challenges white dominant narratives that promote a “red and black history which shows both groups acting in complicity with white domination, [which] is often far more widely known than any acts of documenting solidarity” (192), thus reinforcing the false history that solidarity relationships and connections did not exist between these groups. These dominant narratives often go unchallenged. With that said, hooks does not romanticize Black-Indigenous relations. She acknowledges conflicts and painful interactions between Africans, African Americans, and Native Americans. She points out each group’s supporting the white domination of the other when she writes about the Black “buffalo soldiers” who “fought alongside the U.S. government against Native Americans” and about “Native Americans who owned black slaves” (192). In doing so, she problematizes the narratives that have been more widely shared by integrating the impact of white domination on Blacks and Native Americans. hooks insists, “This history is important to remember, for it reminds us of how easy it is for the colonized to be co-opted, to compromise in the interests of material survival, to forget themselves” (192). In essence, hooks brings the reader’s attention to how the people subjected to colonization are impacted, even as it pertains to enacting harm against each other, one of the ways in which they “forget themselves” (192).

hooks interprets these scenarios from a decolonial Black feminist standpoint, bringing a more nuanced understanding to the violence embedded in colonial white supremacist domination. Simultaneously, she brings focus to often erased and suppressed stories of solidarity. She also draws from narratives that convey other forms of relating, such as the kinship between Native Americans and Black people, as well as acknowledging Blacks who lived in Native nations. She gives this historical example of solidarity and common interest:

[William] Katz [an historian] reports that a group of Black Cherokees petitioning for equal rights in 1879, adamantly declared their citizenship and solidarity with Native peoples: “The Cherokee nation is our country; there we were born and reared; there are our homes made by the sweat of our brows; there are our wives and children, whom we love as dearly as though we were born with red, instead of black, skin.”

(181–182)

Stories such as these serve as counternarratives to dominant tales that emphasize “complicity with white domination” (hooks 192).

hooks also emphasizes the denaturalization of white supremacist ideology by challenging overarching notions that make “racist exploitation appear as a universal human behavior” (192). As a case in point, hooks demonstrates another often suppressed historical narrative that illustrates other ways of interacting with differences:

Contrary to colonial white imperialist insistence that it was ‘natural’ for groups who are different to engage in conflict and power struggle, the first meetings of Africans and Native Americans offer a counter-perspective, a vision of cross-cultural contact where reciprocity and recognition of the primacy of community are affirmed, where the will to conquer and dominate was not seen as the only way to confront the Other who is not ourselves.
(181)

hooks goes on to reveal the vast differences in interactions between Columbus and Native Americans versus Africans and Native Americans:

The Africans that first came to the ‘new world’ before Columbus recognized their common identity with the Native people who gave them shelter and a place to rest. They did not come to command, to take over, to dominate, or to colonize.... These African explorers returned home peacefully after a time of communion with Native Americans.
(180)

This passage makes four important points. Unlike Columbus, African explorers embraced (1) a recognition of their “common identity” with Native people; (2) a mindset that did not seek to “dominate” and “colonize”; (3) an interaction of communion with Native people; and (4) a peaceful return to their homelands. These points underscore some of the differences in their worldviews compared with European settlers who enacted domination, violence, and land theft.

hooks thus beckons readers to understand that there were liberatory ways of interacting with the “Other” (181). She transgresses the notion that racist exploitation is universal and natural human behavior; instead, her passage suggests that racist exploitation is unnatural. hooks demonstrates a historical narrative that questions the legitimacy of the colonial white supremacist standpoint and invites other ways of interacting and being in the world.

Colonial white supremacist tools of destruction: Genocidal drama

hooks demonstrates how media is used as a colonizing tool promoting dominant narratives that reinforce white supremacy and white domination

and demonstrates how a legacy of distorted thinking and perception about marginalized racialized bodies continues. She explains, “Despite civil rights movement and changes in the nature of racial apartheid in the United States, white supremacist thinking continues to inform and shape the way most people think about race, ethnicity, skin color, and identity” (191). hooks underscores how white supremacist thinking maintains white domination by normalizing a colonial white supremacist standpoint as a primary lens that controls perceptions, labels, and identities of marginalized racial groups based on deficit notions and racial purity. She says that “‘ethnic purity’ is an inheritance of white supremacy, the refusal to acknowledge mixture and kinship” (191). Because of this racial apartheid system, grounded in ethnic purity, it remains hard for the dominant culture to imagine that Native American Blacks and African Americans with Native heritage exist.

In her critique of William Katz’s book *Black Indians*, hooks points out that Katz “addresses that book to an audience presumed to be either white or white identified” (1986, 183). She reveals how racial identities are impacted:

In his introduction to *Black Indians*, Katz begins,

Black Indians? The very words make people shake their heads in disbelief or smile at what appears to be a joke, a play on words. No one remembers any such person in a school text, history book, or western novel. None ever appeared.

Who are the “most people” he is talking about? Certainly not Native American Blacks or African Americans with Native Ancestry.

(1986, 183)

White supremacist thinking causes groups who identify according to interweaved heritages to be erased, unacknowledged, and even demonized, because according to mainstream knowledge, they don’t exist.

A colonial white supremacist lens distorts the view of marginalized groups to maintain white superiority and domination. hooks brings understanding to the monumental role mass media has played in shaping and perpetuating distorted images and histories as well as violence against BIPOC. She refers to mass media as “a major colonizing force” when she explains the impact of what she refers to as “genocidal drama” (186). She writes,

Both Africans and Native Americans have been deeply affected by the degrading representations of red and black people that continue to be the dominant images projected by movies and television. Portrayed as cowardly, cannibalistic, uncivilized, the images of ‘Indians’ mirror the screen images of Africans.

(186)

These degrading images, hooks reveals, perpetuate harm against Africans and Native Americans through representations that define these lives as not valuable or worthy of respect. Such images have a traumatizing impact on the communities that are misrepresented. As hooks notes, “When most people watch degrading images of red and black people daily on television, they do not think about the ways these images cause pain and grief” (186). The normalization of these degrading images, hooks suggests, legitimizes them and calls up a disconnection from the violent impact such images cause.

hooks demonstrates how genocidal drama has even influenced children’s play in genocidal charades across communities. She points out, “During the heyday of westerns on U.S. television, anyone watching saw spectacle after spectacle of white men destroying hundreds of Native Americans” (186). Films such as *Stagecoach* (Ford, 1939) exemplify a violent lineage of genocidal drama featuring white supremacist depictions, born out of a colonial imagination, of Native Americans as “savages,” “dangerous,” and “threatening.” Westerns painted demonized images of Native Americans, upholding dominant narratives that justify and promote messages that Native Americans deserve to be killed. Such genocidal drama naturalizes brutal killing and violent discriminatory practices against Native Americans and sovereign nations.

Genocidal drama remains harmful, especially to the wellness of Native Americans, shaping the consciousness of those who continue to watch these types of westerns, including children. hooks is acutely aware of the way in which genocidal drama impacts children’s play: “When westerns were regularly shown on television one could daily witness the slaughter of [Native American] nations by white people. Children naturally mimic the genocidal drama and play cowboys and Indians” (186). hooks bears witness to the horrid impact of the reenactment of genocidal drama in children’s play across generations and communities, to the extent that playing cowboys and Indians became “normalized” in most communities. This mimicking of genocidal drama through play sets up the practice that these deadly interactions are “normal” and therefore “okay.”

hooks underscores the deadliness of the colonizing white supremacist standpoint in mass media. This standpoint legitimizes murder after murder of Native Americans through continually sending messages that this behavior is somehow justifiable. Thus, the colonizing white supremacist standpoint perpetuates the lie that all “Indians” have been killed and therefore colonial settlers’ land rights to Turtle Island (North America) are legitimate. hooks also demonstrates that genocidal drama does not take into consideration “the psychological impact on individuals (especially Native Americans) who have suffered holocaust and genocidal attack only to live in a culture where the major medium of mass communication reenacts this tragedy for ‘entertainment’” (186)—that is, entertainment used to facilitate the repetitious

reenactment of deadly attacks on Indigenous nations and people, and scenes that glorify the incessant deaths of Native people's ancestors.

Other media besides film and TV also contribute to contemporary atrocities of oppression. Bullock states,

Many scholars, historians, and museums contribute to the historical wrongdoings by publishing works that further the oppression of Native Americans.... Schools and other institutions use these published works that perpetuate misinformation, such as writing about Native Americans from the past tense perspective.

(Bullock n.d.)

To write about Native Americans in the past tense emphasizes erasure. Thus, publications that participate in the long line of historical wrongdoings play a similar role to genocidal drama in contributing to Native American oppression.

Bullock illustrates the harm misinformation does to Native youth:

Even in the classroom, students are punished for speaking out and correcting the teacher. "But how can all of the Indians be dead when I am sitting here in the classroom?" "How come this map does not show where my Tribe is?" These are a few of the questions children in early education ask. As they move through their educational career, they begin to ask less and less. They suppress all of the frustration they experience. This causes a domino effect that permeates the Native American community. Statistics show that Native American youth are in the highest percentile for dropping out of high school and suicide in the United States.

(n.d.)

This passage speaks to the severe repercussions for Native American communities and youth when misinformation is disseminated and when Native people are spoken of in the past tense, thereby erasing tribal nations.

Furthermore, the normalization of whiteness becomes problematic as the standard by which all groups are judged and by which BIPOC are conceptualized as deviant, inferior, less valuable, and therefore disposable. Writer and poet Cole Arthur Riley (2022) explains the term whiteness and its impact:

When I speak of whiteness, I am referring not to the mere existence of a person in a particular body; I am referring to the historic, systemic, and sociological patterns that have oppressed, killed, abducted, abused, and discredited those who do not exist in a particular body. Whiteness is a force.... In art, it might look like the glory of the American Western film and the lie of white bravado. In global development, the lie of the white savior.

(6)

To further illustrate the violent impact of the images and standards by which BIPOC are judged and persecuted, one only must review the historical violence against BIPOC—for example, the long legacy of police brutality against Blacks and Native people and all people of color via colonial white supremacist perceptions of these bodies as inferior, less valuable, and dangerous. BIPOC are deeply impacted by negative socially constructed images and the standard of whiteness. The many violent and deadly incidents of police brutality BIPOC experience, particularly Black Americans and Indigenous people, *even when videotaped*, often go without punishment, or receive minimal punishment within a white-dominated judicial system. hooks establishes how seeing through a white supremacist lens is unnatural and causes violence against BIPOC to be seen as both “justifiable” and “legitimate,” even in child’s play such as the “normalization” of the deadly game of “cowboys and Indians.”

Survivors: African Americans and Native Americans

hooks asserts a decolonial Black feminist perspective that speaks back to dominant narratives when she writes, “In the United States it is rare for anyone to publicly acknowledge that African Americans and Native Americans are the *survivors* of holocaust, of genocidal warfare waged against red and black people by white imperialist racism” (emphasis mine, 187). These genocidal attacks include such horrors as the violence of slavery, Jim Crow, the lynchings of African American people, and the multiple forms of genocidal attacks to seize Native American homelands. hooks highlights unrecognized forms of genocide in the present-day United States: “Since much racialized genocidal assault against both these groups continues in less aggressive forms than all-out massacre, it is easy for everyone in the society to act as though red and black people do not suffer ongoing trauma” (186).

hooks redefines historical violence against BIPOC and identifies the ways in which white colonial violence has been minimized in textbooks. She names the many forms of mayhem that African Americans and Native Americans survived according to the realities of their lived experiences. In this fashion, hooks names the histories of “white imperialist racism” (187). Recognizing slavery as a holocaust where many Black lives were violently lost and the impact of the legacy of slavery on the generational survivors, she “acknowledge[s] the trauma of slavery holocaust, the pain that lingers, wounds, and perverts the psyche of its victims, leaving its mark on the body forever” (186).

Likewise, hooks underscores historical atrocities against Native Americans, such as the Trail of Tears, where Native Americans were violently removed from their homelands and relocated, with many dying in the process. She discusses the impact of past and present-day white supremacist attacks on

Native American survivors: “Ravaged by genocidal attack and invasion, by white imperialist colonization, all Native American nations and surviving communities suffered...the ongoing experience of psychic trauma that afflicts survivors, their children, and their children’s children” (hooks 187). In so doing, she reveals the importance of acknowledging Black and Native people as holocaust and genocidal warfare survivors of “white imperialist racism” (186).

hooks refuses the minimization and distortions of people of color that are often integral to mainstream textbooks. She summons the reader to a decolonial perspective of history and the lived experiences of African Americans and Native Americans that often goes unacknowledged. hooks’ recognition of African Americans and Native Americans as *survivors* instead of *victims* of white imperialist racism reveals three important points: (1) the power in naming the severe warfare that targeted African Americans and Native Americans as genocidal; (2) exposure of the *rare public acknowledgment* of African Americans and Native Americans as survivors of white imperialist racism; and (3) acknowledgment of the resiliency and resistance of African Americans and Native Americans to white imperialist racism.

hooks further establishes that seeing through a colonizing white supremacist standpoint causes one to not see, or to choose not to acknowledge, the profound harm on those targeted (186). In naming the realities of what has happened to African Americans and Native Americans, hooks contradicts a “retelling [of] the past, [where] the colonizer invariably minimizes this suffering” and the survival of African Americans and Native Americans against such perilous atrocities goes unacknowledged (187). Instead, she seeks to name the severity of what has happened and the powerful survivorship of both African Americans and Native Americans, so healing can take place.

Oral traditions: (Re)membering as resistance

hooks highlights the power of oral traditions to preserve memories of ancestors and the bonds between Africans, African Americans, and Native Americans, as well as render visible Native American Blacks and African Americans with Native ancestry in the present day. She asserts that an essential resistance practice is the act of “reclaim[ing] the word that is our history as it was told to us by our ancestors not as it has been interpreted by the colonizer” (hooks 184). In this fashion, hooks posits ancestral (re)membering as activism that leads to the “political self-recovery of colonized and oppressed peoples” (hooks 193). She demonstrates how oral traditions transgress the distortion and erasure in the written documents about those who have this rich mixed ancestry. For example, she centers the oral stories of her grandmother and speaks

about the rich oral traditions of Black elders who preserved memories of their ancestors by passing down their stories. She reveals that not only were these oral traditions a form of preservation, but also a way of resisting the erasure and suppression of these stories.

hooks demonstrates that when people of color internalize colonialism and racism, this can cause self-hate. Illustrating internalized racism in some Native Americans, hooks states, “Even black-skinned Native Americans, whose hair was a mixture of straight and coarse, like many of the Lumbee, did not want to be seen as ‘black’” (185). The socially constructed images of Black people, grounded in a colonial white supremacist viewpoint, portrayed Black people as being bad and everything associated with the color black was considered evil. As a result, the color black became associated with a social death that put you at the bottom of the racial hierarchy.

hooks reveals the different ways Native American Blacks and African Americans with Native ancestry were assaulted for claiming their mixed heritage in a society that sought to erase and suppress the connections between Africans, African Americans, and Native Americans and set up a caste system based on color. She demonstrates the ridicule, stigma, and disaffiliation experienced by some Native American Blacks and African Americans with Native ancestry across communities while accentuating an internalized “racial color caste system,” in the following ways (hooks 185): (1) *ridicule* by “racist white people” for those daring to voice oral testimony as legitimate documentation of having Native American heritage, which caused “black folks to hold their tongue on such matters” (hooks 185); (2) *stigma* by “colonized black people... [who]... suggest[ed] that Black folks who claimed Native American heritage were self-hating, wanting to deny blackness” (hooks 185); and (3) *disaffiliation* by

Native Americans who internalized racism [and] also sought to disassociate themselves from blackness (the racial color caste systems which became a norm in black communities also were established in many Native communities and dark-skinned groups were seen as inferior and ugly).

(hooks 185)

Indigenous nations and communities faced severe repercussions due to “battling a government that traditionally seizes any excuse (e.g., mixture with Africans) to violate treaties, land claims, and human rights” (qtd. Katz 1986, 191). A contemporary example of US government and corporate colonial practices is the Dakota Access Pipeline, a multi-billion-dollar oil pipeline, the construction of which destroyed sacred sites, accelerated climate change, and violated the treaty rights of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe (Grote and Johnson, 2021). Lucy Simpson (2016), the National Indigenous Women’s

Resource Center (NIWRC) director, wrote an open letter titled “NIWRC’s Open Letter/Statement on Standing Rock,” which underscores the history of violations that Native nations face:

The extractive industry itself, like rape and sexual violence, forces itself on tribal lands without the required meaningful consultation with tribes as sovereign nations. In this way, the extractive industry is a perpetuation of the rape and colonization of our women and our land that has been occurring for over 500 years.

(*n.p.*)

These types of attacks remain an integral part of Native existence due to ongoing assaults on the sovereignty of Native nations. They have shaped how Native nations govern and navigate a hostile terrain that includes the instances of anti-Black discrimination that hooks describes.

Sharing her own story as a Black feminist of African American and Native American descent, hooks reveals the impact of colonialism, white supremacy, erasure, and notions of ethnic purity on her family and life. She resists these interlocking forms of oppression with a testimony of her own ancestral story. hooks recounts the story her grandmother conveyed:

My grandmother told me that her mother, my ancestor Bell Blair Hooks, whose memory I keep alive by taking her name as my writing name, had left her native community to marry my grandfather who ‘looked like a white man but was a n----.’ Telling me the stories about the way Bell Hooks fused her ways of living in the world with black traditions.

(190)

For hooks, this story, a cherished example of her grandmother’s *oral documentation* of the family history and ancestral connections, was a counter-narrative to stories of Black-Indigenous conflict. hooks’ Native grandmother Bell Blair Hooks’ lived experience testified to the interweaving of cultural traditions and the intermarriages between Blacks and Native people. Furthermore, hooks exposes the fallacy of socially constructed racial categories—that is, the reality that race is an idea and not genetic—by pointing out her Black grandfather looked like a white man. In a colonial white supremacist system that functions on notions of racial purity, anti-Blackness, and a monolithic racial category system, the fairness of her grandfather’s skin didn’t matter or change his status as a Black man, since he was legally defined as Black based on his African ancestry.

In a society that maintains a white supremacist lens, hooks posits that (re)membering for BIPOC becomes imperative to survival, and to creating

a more accurate account of these communities' lived experiences. Like so many others, hooks also was faced with the pressure of forgetting:

I learned early not to repeat these stories, not to come home with my head 'full of nonsense' for fear that our visits [between hooks and her grandmother] would be limited.... These days when I ask about the 'truth' of her words, no one says anything, no one remembers. They want to forget this past.

(190)

Here, hooks illustrates the social pressure, including that which is imposed by her family members, to forget "[w]ithin white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, [where] forgetfulness is encouraged" (hooks 191). The encouragement to forget is one of the many reasons why hooks' family story becomes so important in the discussion about the real devastation and erasure enacted "[w]ithin white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks 191). hooks determines that this framework of interlocking oppressive systems encourages amnesia about the bonds between Africans, African Americans, and Native Americans. This includes forgetting or erasing the overlapping histories and lived experiences of these groups, including intermarriages that produced descendants with a rich mixed heritage.

hooks emphasizes the importance of memory to resistance. Her work is an invitation to listen deeply to communities who have been assaulted, misrepresented, and erased—then told to forget. As hooks asserts, "*Memory sustains a spirit of resistance*" (191). By recounting and documenting her story, by way of preserving these connections to her grandmother, as a girl child who is a descendant of the intermingling of these groups, she invites us to hear and (re)member other lived experiences where the ties between Africans, African Americans, and Native Americans are at the center.

In her discussion of Black Indigeneity and her family, hooks also makes visible Indigenous homelands: "Raised in Kentucky where Shawnee, Cherokee, and at times Chickasaw communities dwelled, the elders remembered times when red and black people lived and worked together" (190). This cross-cultural communal (re)membering counteracts histories woven from a colonizing white supremacist standpoint that suppresses evidence of these connections through mainstream media or invalidates these memories because they are oral and not written accounts. hooks notes, "[w]ithin a white supremacist culture, to be without documentation is to be without legitimate history" (193). However, hooks states, "There will never be enough proof, enough documentation, since so much data has been lost that can never be recovered" (192).

Lessons on resistance, healing, and restoration

This chapter concludes with hooks' attention to the healing and restoration of Black and Native people. As hooks explains: "Within changing worlds, black and red people look once again to the spirit of our ancestors, recovering worldviews and life sustaining values that renew our spirit and restore in us the will to resist domination" (194). Building on hooks' call to resist domination, this chapter invites readers to resist a colonizing white supremacist standpoint that erases Black-Indigenous histories and elevates whiteness. I re-cite and re-collect bell hooks' writing as an invitation to reimagine a world where healing as well as regenerative and transformative justice can take place, especially for those who have been severely impacted by historical and societal trauma through colonial white supremacy within interlocking systems of oppression.

hooks invites readers to relearn history, a decolonial history that is inclusive and underscores the "[c]elebration of the shared history between African American[s] and Native American[s]" (194). As hooks asserts in the last lines of her chapter:

We affirm the ties of the past, the bonds of the present, when we relearn our history, nurture the shared sensibility that has been retained in the present, linking these gestures to resistance struggle, to liberation movement that seeks to eradicate domination and transform society.

(194)

These words can serve as a pathway to continue the work of transforming society through the enactment of decolonization and social justice practices.

Note

- 1 Please note I recognize that the naming of nations, communities, and people is political, especially due to the particular histories of those who are marginalized. I use references to groups interchangeably and for consistency purposes throughout the chapter to underscore hooks' quotes and references.

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LA SANGRE LLAMA

Denise Zubizarreta

I wake to the sound of my ancestors' call
I hear the drums in the distance
Do you see me, they say
Can you hear me, they say
In a language the mind does not comprehend but in the soul remains

Who am I, I ask

Can you not feel it?
Can you not sense it?
Can you not connect to it?

Who am I, I ask again

You are all you thought you were
You are the product of our pain
Energy
Burned into your DNA train
Forged from the strain
A physical manifestation of hate combined with fear
You are the next generation we call upon to hear

La sangre llama
It calls to me

Don't believe what you see
There is more to you than the honey they stole from our bees
There is more to you than the whiteness they perceive
You are the master and the slave
For generations we've continued to dig our own graves
And today we focus on the lives you couldn't save
Can you hear us?
Can you see us?
We call to you from beyond the grave
Lingering through your DNA
You were born from the screams of the innocent and the lies of the "brave!"

QUESTIONS, ACTIVITIES, AND RESOURCES

Questions for writing and discussion

- 1 Brainstorm with other students about what you already knew about the histories covered in the first six chapters and what was new to you. How do the perspectives and information in the chapters change your understanding of historical events, or of your own relationship to the past?
- 2 How do the traditional norms, roles, and “tools” of cisgendered white womanhood that the authors describe show up in the world as you know it? Look at several dimensions: social relationships, culture, consumerism, politics, etc. How do these expectations differ for women of color? Specifically, for Black, Native, Latina, or Asian women?
- 3 Several of the authors use sources that are not traditionally part of academic knowledge, such as social media and oral histories, to ground their analyses. How can these sources of knowledge enhance, transform, or diversify what is taught in schools and colleges? What guidelines should a researcher using such sources to create new knowledge about race and gender keep in mind?
- 4 In campaigning for social reforms, Francis Ellen Watkins Harper took on the added labor of instructing white women about race, gender, and racism in movement organizing. Why do you think this tactic was important to her? What do you think of the idea of social change movements as “political education”?
- 5 How do the histories recounted in any of these chapters illustrate the workings and impacts of intersectionality, or interlocking systems of oppression? What do they show about oppressed people’s resistance to domination?

- 6 What are some ways that we reinforce the belief that racist exploitation is natural and universal in everyday language, customs, or institutional structures? Why is it important to understand that whiteness and white supremacy are not built into nature?

Learning activities

- 1 Look for Karen memes or videos on the internet, and individually or in a group, annotate how these representations repeat aspects of the traditional construction of white femininity or women's past roles in upholding white supremacy. How would the situation be different if "Karen" were a white man?
- 2 Do an internet search to find the website of one or more of the following Indigenous organizations: the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, Coalition to Stop Violence Against Native Women, Honor the Earth, Indigenous Environmental Network, LandBack, National Indigenous Women's Resource Center, Native American Rights Fund, NDN Collection, or Seeding Sovereignty. What is the mission of the organization? What tribal affiliations are mentioned on the site, and where are the traditional territories of those tribes? Choose one of the organization's initiatives, and analyze how this work reflects and resists the ongoing impact of white supremacy and colonization.
- 3 Watch the New York Historical Society's re-enactment of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's 1866 speech to a gathering of white suffrage activists, performed by Ariana DeBose: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VG0IItfc5Qo>. As you watch, write notes on statements Harper made that still seem relevant today, and statements that offer you insight into the historical context for her life and work.
- 4 Look up recent news articles about white women organizing to control what schools can teach their children about race or to have books on certain topics banned from libraries. Why do they see these topics as a threat? See if you can find an example of the laws some states have passed to ban the teaching of topics related to whiteness, white supremacy, and race. What are the consequences of restricting this kind of information—on a local, state, or national level? How can a lack of access to knowledge on these topics impact individuals?
- 5 If you can, look into your own family history. What do you know about your own ancestors? Where did they live, what was their way of life like, what did they care about, what did they experience, what gave them joy, and how did they understand their relationship to the world? Or how do you understand their relationship to the world, and how has that understanding changed over time? If they moved a long distance, when, and why? If you have an older family member, interview them using these

questions. (They may not be able to answer all of them.) See if you can use research to discover how your ancestors might have been situated in relationship to the historical processes of colonization.

- 6 Imagine that your ancestors are calling out to you for recognition, as in Denise Zubizarrieta's poem. Write a poem about what they would tell you if you asked them who you are. What stories, images, and values from their lives would they want to pass on?

Resources

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PART II

Theory and self-reflection

Introduction

Building critical consciousness

Feminist talk about whiteness has a long and continuing history in which self-reflection and theory are intertwined. *Theory* refers to the conceptual tools we use to understand how the wider social world shapes lived experience. Feminists have derived these tools in part by studying theorizing from earlier artists, scholars, and activists, but also from their efforts to make sense of contradictions and conflicts in their own lives and the lives of others. The conceptual tools generated by theorizing aid us in analyzing the ways that similarities and differences in lived experience across identity categories reveal structural injustices. The goal is to gain *critical consciousness*: that is, the capacity to analyze how social structures—such as the policies and practices of institutions—perpetuate multiple forms of discrimination and violence, together with the capacity to respond not just with awareness, but by taking action to dismantle unjust structures. Feminist theorizing about whiteness has developed over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries through long, generative processes of storytelling, dialogue, and critique among BIPOC feminists and feminists who are white. The chapters in this section continue that process, adding new accounts of self-reflection, reconsidering concepts that have become commonplace, and enriching the ways in which we use theoretical tools to think through our contemporary contexts.

Chapter 7, “On white privilege and anesthesia: Why does Peggy McIntosh’s knapsack feel weightless?” reconsiders the concept of white privilege, which has circulated widely since the publication of McIntosh’s groundbreaking

essay, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” in 1989.¹ The author of this chapter, Alison Bailey, a white philosopher, points out that the concept of white privilege is now often misunderstood and misused. White readers introduced to McIntosh’s analogy of racial privilege as an invisible, weightless knapsack often take away the idea that checking their privilege means no more than becoming aware of how social systems give white people advantages because of their race. Too often, white readers fail to take accountability for the ways that white privilege causes devastating harm, not only to BIPOC but also to white people themselves. Bailey argues that the knapsack is heavy, not weightless, but that white privilege numbs white people to its weight. Citing a multiracial group of predecessors, including twentieth-century authors, such as James Baldwin and Audre Lorde, and contemporary thinkers, such as Robin DiAngelo and Claudia Rankine, Bailey invites white readers to join a conversation that calls attention to the ways that continuation of the violence done to communities of color depends on white people being numb—being dehumanized psychologically, morally, materially, spiritually, and intellectually—enough not to care about ending it. She challenges white readers to recognize habits they use that allow numbness to take over and to face the pain in antiracism work as a step toward taking action.

Chapter 8, Fear, loathing, and las whiteness: Whiteness as fearfulness, brings together several conceptual tools that have become valuable in analyzing whiteness: “white privilege,” “white fragility,” “white rage,” “white tears,” and “white innocence.” The author, Andrea Dionne Warmack, a Black philosopher, proposes that together, these concepts represent *white terror*. White terror is both a state of defensive fearfulness and a pattern of violent and oppressive actions directed against BIPOC—all the habitual ways white people experience, express, and deny their implication in white supremacy. Warmack identifies two fears about whiteness that haunt white people: not just fear of the other, but also fear of the white self, a fear based on resistance to being aware of the self’s investment in whiteness and of the resulting moral failures. The chapter illustrates white terror by looking closely at three events: a white terrorist massacre at a mosque in New Zealand in 2019; the violent assault on the US Capitol Building on January 6, 2021; and, at a smaller scale, white graduate students’ responses to studying critical whiteness and critical race theory. Warmack argues that white supremacy and white terror are emotionally and spiritually stunting and antithetical to love. She draws on the writings of Black feminists Audre Lorde and bell hooks as she envisions the possibilities of loving courage in the struggle to grow beyond the distortions imposed on us by oppressive systems.

Chapter 9, Academic survival: Troubling the tensions between race, gender, and class in a predominantly white academic institution, describes the many-layered harms that habits of whiteness can inflict on BIPOC in

an everyday white-dominated work setting. Carolyn Tinglin, an educator and organizer, recounts her experiences as the first Black faculty member to teach health science at a predominantly white Canadian university. Common interactions on campus amplified the tensions between her intersectional identity as a Black woman and the white-centric institutional forces operating to maintain the status quo. Tinglin traces how she came to terms with the ways that microaggressions undermined her self-knowledge, resolve, and emotional and physical health, and recounts her process of discovering how to resist through self-advocacy and self-care. She describes and analyzes what it was like to try to resist the stereotypes, tropes, and performance expectations projected on her, then pinpoints structures of racism and sexism that Black women experience in academia, together with historical and social aspects of split identities. She concludes by exploring how Black women's voices can be amplified, white academic spaces confronted, and transformative resistance broadly adopted.

Chapter 10, *Colorism in the Latina community*: The internalization of racialized sexism, applies the *white racial frame*—a theoretical tool for analyzing the white worldview that denigrates nonwhite characteristics and idolizes whiteness—to an analysis of skin color prejudice and its impacts on Latinas' body image and health. Melissa Ochoa, a white-passing Mexican American scholar, describes how *colorism*, a byproduct of systemic racism, privileges individuals with lighter skin color and Eurocentric features over those with darker skin color and features. Common Spanish phrases indicate a preference for lighter skin; Ochoa shows that this internalized colorism has a basis in the difference that light skin makes over the course of a lifetime. She cites research that shows that Latinas with lighter skin tend to have better life outcomes in education, career, housing, marriage, and self-esteem. These differences are historically rooted in colonialism. Early Spanish colonizers imposed the racist-sexist system that created colorism, especially among women, because Eurocentric features were linked to feminine beauty. This gendered colorism has been perpetuated across generations and remains alive in Latine community consciousness. Latinas are encouraged to evaluate their beauty and self-worth, and those of other Latinas, based on the shade of their skin. Yearning to achieve whiteness in their appearance leads Latinas and other women of color to use skin-bleaching creams, hair straighteners, and hair dye in hopes of accessing social privileges associated with whiteness, but these unattainable beauty standards come at a high cost. To resist colorism, Ochoa proposes decolonizing strategies for families and schools, and urges BIPOC and white people alike to resist the preference for whiteness.

Chapter 11, *Feminists talk whiteness: Disrupting the grip of whiteness on feminist movement building*, links the history of feminism and whiteness to antiracist practice by closely examining the ways in which whiteness and white supremacy have shaped white feminist antiracist activism from the 1970s to

the present. A scholar of social justice movements, the author, Ann Russo, presents her evolving worldview as a white middle-class lesbian involved in antiracist feminist movement building for over forty years. She grounds her analysis in her own sustained efforts to weaken the grip of whiteness and racism on her activism, teaching, and scholarship. The scholarship and activism of US and transnational feminists of color give the author conceptual frameworks and language to name, identify, and challenge white supremacist beliefs and forms of violence. Crafting her critical lens from deep readings of the works of Cherrie Moraga, Audre Lorde, Aurora Levins Morales, Sherene Razack, and other BIPOC feminist thinkers, she examines pathways as well as roadblocks to building feminist movements. She focuses especially on how white supremacy culture, with its emphasis on individualism, binary thinking, and competition, derails and undermines collective practices essential to a feminist praxis of social change and transformation. The key she offers to white feminists for dismantling racism is ongoing intentional and honest critical self-reflection about the ways in which white supremacy shapes not only the dominant culture and systems of power but also their own consciousness and activism.

Chapter 12, *Beyond choice: A dialogue on the whiteness of liberal feminism and reimagining freedom beyond individual choice*, continues a long tradition of feminist interracial dialogue. Houda Ali, an Arab Muslim woman living in the Australian settler colony, and Britt Munro, a white woman living on colonized Turtle Island (the United States), ground their shared understanding of feminism and whiteness in a critique of *Western liberalism*, a white Eurocentric worldview that places individual liberty at the center of what it means to be human, while also constructing less-than-human “others.” They reflect together on the ways in which whiteness has shaped their different experiences with feminism, considering how they have navigated the entanglement of liberalism, feminism, and whiteness throughout their lives. The authors draw on their different locations and experiences to question the universality of liberal norms. Weaving in theory and scholarship that have helped them to make sense of their own experiences, the authors map out some of the ways gender has been used historically as a tool of *racialization*—or the construction of racial others. They explore how this process of othering makes it difficult for racialized women to identify with the principles and aims of liberal feminism. Ali and Munro invite readers to think critically about the historical relationship between liberal feminism and whiteness, particularly the uses of liberal feminist discourse for Islamophobic ends. The questions they raise prompt readers to carefully consider whose life, worlds, and aspirations may be captured in the language of liberal feminist “freedom,” and whose might not.

Part II closes with three poems. In “My body is a river,” Rachel O’Hanlon-Rodriguez, a white-passing Boricuan actor, organizer, and teacher,

uses the figure of a river to capture the embodied drive for liberation, and its challenges to the foundations of colonialism and white supremacy. In “What chou mean we, white girl, revisited,” Becky Thompson, a white poet and scholar, revisits the 1970s texts of two feminist foremothers in antiracist struggle, one white and one Black,² and grapples with the ways that white supremacy has infused her own and other white women’s lives—including the ways she resists racism. Liseli A. Fitzpatrick, a Black Trinidadian poet and professor, invokes a beloved anthem and its eighteenth-century composer in “Amazing Grace (for the children of John Newton).” John Newton worked in the slave trade in his youth; the song marks his turn from a life as an agent of structural racism to a life of abolitionist activism. Stumbling on Newton’s description of grace as “sweet,” the poet speaks to the bitterness and outrage of oppression, referencing the knowledge of forebears from Langston Hughes to Audre Lorde as she calls for a different sweetness: justice.

Notes

- 1 Peggy McIntosh, “White privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” *The National SEED Project – Wellesley Centers for Women*, 1989. Versions of this essay are available at multiple online sites.
- 2 Anne Braden, “Free Thomas Wansley: A Letter to White Southern Women from Anne Braden,” *Southern Patriot*, 1972, and “A Second Open Letter to Southern White Women,” *Southern Exposure* 6:4 (Winter 1977): 50; Lorraine Bethel, “What Chou Mean We, White Girl? Or the Cullud Lesbian Feminist Declaration of Independence (Dedicated to the Proposition that All Women are not Equal, i.e. Identical/ly Oppressed),” *Conditions Five: The Black Women’s Issue* 11.2 (Summer 1982): 86–92.

Note: With thanks to Georgianna Abdelmoety for her insights on these chapters.

7

ON WHITE PRIVILEGE AND ANESTHESIA

Why does Peggy McIntosh’s knapsack feel weightless?

Alison Bailey

The invitation to “check your privilege” almost always makes white people defensive. It asks those of us who benefit from the unearned advantages of white supremacy to remain still long enough to recognize what we have been socialized to ignore. It calls on white people to see what we’ve been taught not to see and to hear what we have been habitually encouraged to tune out. It summons us to unsilence our bodies so that we can feel what we are uncomfortable feeling. The fact that most white people (myself included) respond to these invitations with disdain, anger, despair, or indifference is not accidental. White privilege is designed to be check-proof—it’s engineered to operate unnoticed by those who benefit directly from it.

Peggy McIntosh’s (1988)¹ article comparing white privilege to an invisible weightless knapsack is required reading for most university courses with intersectional feminist content. Her essay invites students to unpack their own knapsacks by listing the privileges they enjoy as members of dominant groups. Listing privileges makes them tangible.² McIntosh famously describes privilege as an

invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in daily, but about which I was meant to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, code books, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks.

(66)

Her knapsack metaphor helps readers articulate how these privileges differ from random perks and earned advantages. Privileges are a special class

of unearned assets produced by intersecting systems of domination. Sara Ahmed (2017) describes privilege as “an energy-saving device. Less effort is required to be or to do” (125). These special tools and provisions also function like wildcards. And, if you are a cardplayer, you know that wildcards have a broad-spectrum value—they work to a player’s advantage in any hand they are dealt. Whiteness strengthens every hand white people play. White privilege removes obstacles. It grants people perceived as white the white public’s trust. It puts bank tellers at ease. Whiteness gets white people’s attention. It prompts white academic advisers, physicians, and bus drivers to offer extra assistance. It calms white police officers. It offers white people second chances, warnings, and opportunities. It enhances the credibility of our testimonies. Whiteness signals honesty, reliability, leadership, and trustworthiness. It puts other white neighbors at ease. It makes white employers believe you are the perfect fit for the new position.

Why doesn’t McIntosh fully unpack the weight?

The knapsack metaphor is a useful entry point into making white privilege visible, but McIntosh only unpacks it half way. Remember, white privilege is an invisible *and weightless* knapsack, but she never names the weight or explains why the knapsack feels weightless. What might account for this omission?

To be fair, unpacking the knapsack completely is a tall order for one article. Still there are whispers of the weight in McIntosh’s observation that: “We need more understanding of the ways in which white ‘privilege’ damages white people for these are not the same ways in which it damages the victimized. Skewed white psyches are an inseparable part of the picture....” (67) You can’t check your privilege if you can’t spot privilege, so metaphors are a good place to begin. Checking your privilege is a form of political labor. It takes time. The very act of naming makes injustices tangible, real, and perhaps slightly less annoying. Feminists are really good at this. We have a long history of conjuring words for problems that had no names—mansplaining, transphobia, misogynoir, sexual harassment, femicide, or victim-blaming. As Ahmed (2017) remarks:

Having names for problems can make a difference. Before, you could not quite put your finger on it. With these words as tools, we revisit our own histories; we hammer away at the past. It took a long time for me to even describe how race and racism had structured my own world.

(32–33)

Still, we need to name the weight. When we confine our conversations to making privilege *visible*, we do the work of the head and not the heart.

Again, I don't think this is accidental. It takes courage to name the weight and patience to feel what we've been taught not to feel. Humans are hard-wired to move toward safety and comfort. So, when racialized fears take over these basic instincts, even the most well-intended white people will be more comfortable thinking about what white supremacy and privilege *does for us*, than feeling what it *does to us*. Joy James (2015) said it best: white folks secretly want to have it both ways, they "want the benefits of whiteness, but they want them to come with no costs" (211). Visibility gets at the benefits. The weight gets at the costs and losses to our humanity. No wonder we stop unpacking! Holding the weight asks that white people become sensitive to our own insensitivity.

Unpacking the weightless knapsack

I want to extend a weighty invitation to you. An invitation to complete the unpacking task McIntosh began—an invitation to feel those parts of yourself that you'd rather not feel. My invitation to the weighty conversation is directed primarily at white readers (Bailey, 2021). People of color feel the weight of whiteness every day, so I understand if you don't want to take up my invitation today. White readers, however, are numb to the weight. Again, this is no accident. Most of us have a low tolerance for even the smallest amount of racial stress, a condition that Robin DiAngelo (2018) calls "white fragility." White fragility is an expression of white fear, a form of anxiety that makes us dangerous to people of color. So, my invitation will surely trigger a chorus of defensive responses from some readers, including anger, fear, guilt, shame, discomfort, anxiety, and silence. Others will offer reasons for why they personally don't need to open the invitation. *I'm a good ally, so this invitation doesn't apply to me. I have no idea what you are talking about! What weight? I don't feel any weight! Whiteness is not heavy. It allows me to move through the world with ease. It makes me feel lighter, it's an energy-saving device, remember? If the weight is so heavy, then why can't I feel it?*

Exactly. Why *can't* you feel the weight if it's so heavy? Here's the short answer. Privilege is not only intended to be invisible; it's also designed to feel weightless. The knapsack is not weightless because it is empty. It's filled with wild cards, special tools, and provisions, remember? The knapsack only *feels* weightless because white people have become anesthetized to our own brokenness. In Aurora Levin Morales's words: "Every social injustice demands that we silence our bodies" (2019, 43). So, before you numb out again, please know this. White supremacy relies on white people's fear of the weighty conversation to keep functioning smoothly. As long as white people are numb to the damage white supremacy does to our humanity, then the violence will continue (Bailey, 2021). Our failure to feel and hold space with the weight that breaks us means that white people will continue to blow

our fear, discomfort, anxiety, and trauma through people of color's bodies and communities.

White fragility prevents most white people from taking up the weight of whiteness too quickly. If we want to feel the weight, then we need to wade into it gradually, like a swimmer moving into a still pool on a chilly day. I know this accommodates white fragility, but I don't think this is such a bad thing for the unpacking project: when we slow down the conversation, we create space to feel what we'd rather not feel. So, if you can't feel the weight at the moment, don't worry. We'll wade into it gradually, first by attending to the heavy impact white supremacy has on people of colors' lives. Next, I'll explain what I mean by the weight of whiteness and offer a few personal examples of how the weight shows up in my own white body. It's difficult to name the weight because privilege works like anesthesia; this is why the knapsack feels weightless. The anesthesia of privilege prevents us from knowing and feeling the damage that whiteness does to our humanity. It's my hope that calling attention to the weight will motivate readers to remain still long enough to feel the anesthesia in their own bodies. Now, let's get to the unpacking.

People of color feel the weight of whiteness every day

Let's begin by witnessing the weight's damage and tracing it back to the source. Here's a helpful metaphor to get us started. Picture yourself walking on a muddy rural road after a heavy thunderstorm and coming across a set of deep tire tracks. You may not have seen the vehicle that caused the damage, but you can infer that something heavy has been here. You might say to yourself, "Something extremely heavy must have been through here to cause such damage." So, if you can't feel the weight in your own bodies at this moment, then can you at least imagine whiteness as something heavy. Can you at least be mindful of its impact on people of color's lives and communities?

Black, Indigenous, and people of color carry the weight of white people's fears every single day. The weight shadows Black and Brown bodies as they move through their daily routines, wait for friends in coffee shops, stand in line at the market, drive to work, or go running in their neighborhood. bell hooks (2014) named the weight when she observed, "To travel, I must always move through fear, confront terror" (49). Claudia Rankin (2020) felt the weight when white men repeatedly cut in front of her as she waited to board her flight. They assumed she was not a first-class passenger (33). Nazreen Bachus felt the weight as she walked down West Fourth Street wearing her pink hijab. She smiled at white women who turned away and did not smile back. Breonna Taylor felt the weight when three white male Louisville police officers battered down her apartment door and shot her eight times. Jordan Rogers felt the weight when a white woman called the

police to report an eight-year-old Black girl selling water without a permit. The weight crushed Serena Williams as she went into labor with her first child. Her celebrity status and the knowledge she had of her own body were not enough to get the attention of the hospital staff when she told them something felt wrong. Rosalind Chou felt the weight as anti-Asian racism fed off the Covid-19 pandemic. She told a reporter, “My fear is coughing in public, coughing while Asian, and the reaction other people will have.”³ Erika Martin felt the weight when she gave food to a homeless man outside of the local Safeway. The staff called 911 to report suspicious activity. Two police cars arrived and questioned her for an hour. Mary Annette Pember felt the weight when she and her autistic daughter, Rose, got pulled over as they were leaving the reservation after attending a late-night ceremony near the tribal administration offices. When Rose reached for the glove box to get the insurance papers, the officer reached for his gun. She screamed.

The weight of whiteness accumulates in Black, Brown, and Indigenous bodies weathering them and making their hearts and central nervous systems fragile. Aurora Levins Morales (2019) compares the weight to “a big backpack full of rocks we haul around on our backs. It slows us down, tires us out, and skews our aim” (13). The “weight,” as Ahmed (2017) observes, gathers

like things in a bag, but the bag is your body, so that you feel like you are carrying more and more weight.... You are thrown...You begin to feel a pressure, this relentless assault on the senses; a body in touch with a world can become a body that fears the world.

(23)

There is strong medical evidence that people of color’s higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder are caused by repeated exposure to race-based stressors. bell hooks (2014) refers to this as “white people fatigue syndrome” (177). So, what is this weight? How does it show up in white bodies? What does it do to us? And, why can’t we feel it?

The weight of whiteness

The weight of an object can be measured in ounces, pounds, or tons. I measure the weight of whiteness in terms of the costs and losses to our humanity. The weight is a heaviness that breaks human connection. Broken connections feel heavy in our bodies. Consider the heaviness of a broken heart, the death of a family member, a friendship that has gone off, the loss of a community, or the news of another mass shooting. That’s the quality of the weight I want us to feel. James Baldwin (1984) poetically captured the price of privilege and the costs of belonging best when he wrote that “the price of the ticket, is

our moral being, our humanity” (91). The word “humanity” refers to those traits that make us human, such as our ability to love, to make ourselves emotionally present to one another. Empathy, kindness, sympathy, compassion, tolerance, and forgiveness are what makes us human. Human beings are biologically wired for social connection. Our very survival depends upon it. So, anything we do that damages, contorts, or permanently severs our connections with one another, takes a chunk of our humanity with it. What kind of a personality or temperament do you have to cultivate to make such a heavy imprint on the world? What kind of person do you have to become?

Some white people’s responses to the testimonies above are a telling measure of our humanity. One of the habits of whiteness is to push back against what we don’t want to feel. *Seriously, these events never happen to me. So, if they happen to you, then you must be either mistaken about what’s causing them, or maybe you did something to bring it on.* Listen carefully and you can hear the weight resting quietly in the indifferent tones of some white people’s responses. *Well, they did find drugs in his body, maybe that killed him. She’s being oversensitive! I mean how can you tell if someone’s a first-class passenger? The doctors probably knew what was best for her, after all, it’s not like she had a medical degree.* If you deepen your attention, you can almost hear the human connections snapping. *She must have done something. Snap! Don’t make the pandemic about race. Snap! Look, New Yorkers don’t smile at anyone. Snap! Snap! The police were just doing their job. Sometimes they make mistakes. Snap, Snap, Snap!* Yet I’m hopeful that cultivating a mindfulness around human connection might restore our humanity. Here’s what happens when we choose to hold the weight. George Floyd felt the asphyxiating weight of white male police officer Derek Chauvin’s entire body during the last nine minutes of his life. Darnella Frazier held that weight as she recorded the public execution on her cell phone. She did not know Floyd personally, but her humanity was intact enough to recognize that another human being was suffering. When our humanity is intact, we don’t drop the weight and step back, we walk into it. The humane response to sexual or racial violence is not “she should not have worn that short dress,” or “he should not have been selling loose cigarettes on the street.” It’s “Are you alright? Do you need anything from me?” Sit with that for a moment.

The weight in white bodies

I’ve spent a good part of my adult life trying to reason my way out of the racist lessons I absorbed as a child, only to realize that racism does not live exclusively in my thoughts. As Resmaa Menakem (2017) observes, white supremacy doesn’t live in our heads; it lives and breathes in our bodies, so it might be better to call it *white-body supremacy* (5–6). White-body supremacy has been taken up by all bodies in the United States regardless of race because

we are constantly bombarded with messages about the value of whiteness. So, where does the weight of whiteness show up in my body, and what does it feel like? Sometimes I feel as if white supremacy has taken possession of my heart, gut, and central nervous system. I grew up in New Jersey in the wake of the Newark Race Rebellion and as a white child got many lessons about which communities and people were safe and which I should fear.⁴ Whiteness pulls white minds, hearts, and bodies toward safety and comfort. These lessons are still in my body. They show up as hypervigilance, hoarding resources, entitlement, and a condition I call “learning to perceive the world inaccurately.”

The white habit of hypervigilance taught me to keep an eye on strangers, but I’ve noticed that my gaze lingers much longer when Black and Brown people walk through my neighborhood. There is the social weight: racism drives an awkward wedge between friends, family, community members, co-workers, and neighbors. It produces social anxiety, causes many of us to racially self-segregate when we eat, work, worship, or gather as a community. I’ve noticed painful turns and awkward moments in my social interactions with friends of color that often surprise me. I’ve also felt the material weight of whiteness. The impulse to accumulate and hoard is a response to feeling empty and fragile. Feelings of emptiness and entitlement pull white people to take an unfair share of education dollars, healthcare resources, well-paying jobs, tax credits, second chances, government bailouts, homes in nice neighborhoods, clean water, healthy food, congressional seats, and people of color’s time. Morales (2019) explains how systems of privilege

are constructed on fear of scarcity, an insatiable hunger for more wealth, more power, more imaginary guarantees, and they depend on the ability of the privileged to ignore the huge social consequences of inequality, to dehumanize or ignore the people destroyed by the pursuit of excess. They are built on the belief that no one else will look out for us, that narrow self-interest is just common sense, that social equality and reciprocity will impoverish rather than enrich our lives.

(4)

What do greed and accumulation do to our humanity?

Whiteness also has an epistemic weight. It has taught me to make sense of what I perceive inaccurately. When white people perceive the world wrongly, we feel the world wrongly and respond to it wrongly. This makes us prone to misjudging people of color’s actions and intentions. For example, white educators regularly perceive Black girls as more adult-like, sexually mature, and in need of less nurturing and protection. This phenomenon (called *adultification bias* or *age compression*) leads Black girls to be more frequently and severely disciplined for small infractions. Age compression cost Tamir Rice

his life. Tamir was a twelve-year-old Black child, but when the police arrived at the park they saw a twenty-one-year-old. I'm astounded at how often I have to reorient my own uncensored misperceptions. Muslims running in airports are terrorists. *No. They are late for their flight.* Latinx men waiting for the bus are a gang. *No. They are going to work.* The Black woman in the supermarket parking lot is breaking into a stranger's car. *No, she is locked out of her own car.*

I've gradually been able to feel the weight of whiteness in my own body by attending to these habitual movements. Fragility can be a source of knowledge if we remain still long enough to own the fear behind it. I'm slowly working to become mindful of what's going on in my own body when I'm out of my racial comfort zones. Where, when, and with whom does my body feel safe, at ease, and comfortable? Where, when, and with whom does my body feel tight, constricted, anxious, fearful, or ill-at-ease? Under what circumstances does my body feel settled and at ease? I wonder what weight you carry in your bodies?

The anesthesia of privilege

Let's wade in a bit further. White people can't really touch the damaging weight of whiteness until we understand why we can't feel the weight I've described in the first place. Anesthesia is an indispensable part of the master's tool kit. "Anesthesia has its own gravitas— it pulls you under. It severs human connections. It blocks sensation. It pulls us apart" (Bailey, 2021). It's easier to name the weight if we can attend to those moments when the anesthesia lifts.

I did not quite fully understand the tight connections between privilege and anesthesia until I read Mab Segrest's (2002) account of the "anesthesia of power." Following W.E.B. DuBois, Segrest asks: how much do white people have to contort their basic humanity to maintain power? Segrest invites us to consider how "the anesthesia of slavery" permitted white southerners to block the basic sensory information, feelings, and emotions that would have allowed them to empathize with the pain and suffering of the Black people they enslaved. "Necessary to the slave system," she observes, "was the [white] master's blocked sensation of its pain, an anesthetic that left him insensible not only to the fellow human beings he enslaved, but to the testimony of his senses that might have contradicted ideologies of slavery" (165). The anesthesia took the form of false beliefs: enslaved Africans are animals not persons; they have a high tolerance for pain; they are like children; they are actually better off under slavery than they are on their own. Think of how much anesthesia you have to inhale to explain away or justify the whipping, raping, branding, unbearable working conditions, or the raw cruelty of families being separated on auction blocks. How numb

did the white people who founded and ran the US and Canadian Indian Boarding Schools have to become in order to carry out their mission of forced assimilation?⁵ How much did they have to contort their humanity to believe that the violent eradication of Native languages, spiritualities, foodways, and the separation of Native children from their families and ancestral homelands was in the children's best interest? How much anesthesia do you have to inhale to override what your senses are telling you about another human being's suffering? What does it take to extinguish your empathy, sympathy, and basic decency?

What held slavery and Native genocide in place, then, was more than raw power. It required white people to override their humanity and to numb themselves to the horrors before them. Some of the horrors are subtle and difficult to name, so we must attend to their broad features. The anesthesia of privilege, then, can be broadly understood as anything that prompts white people to turn away, stop listening, disconnect, push back, dissociate, or distract ourselves in ways that break human connections. The everyday anesthetizing habits of white people show up as disinterest, inattention, or indifference to the lived experiences, needs, concerns, histories, and feelings of people of color. When white people feel uncomfortable, the anesthesia kicks in to restore our comfort.

If you dismiss Segrest's account of the "anesthesia of slavery" and my mention of the genocidal missions of the so-called Indian Schools as ancient history, then anesthesia is still with you. Invitations to the weighty conversation encourage white people to name the anesthesia of privilege in contemporary contexts by taking up *relational* understandings of how the violence done to communities of color relies on white people being psychologically, morally, materially, spiritually, and epistemically numb and disfigured enough to allow the violence to continue. Think about the relational part this way. What kind of person do you have to become to keep another person "in their place?" Have you ever personally tried to control another person's choices, behaviors, or movements? If you have, then think about what kind of a disposition you have to develop to force them to behave in ways that make *you* feel comfortable. Who do you become when you feel entitled to every opportunity? Who are you when your attention is constantly trained on what people of color are doing in your neighborhood, on your campus, in your store, or at your child's day camp? What does that do to you? If you hold still long enough, your body will tell you how this feels. Fearful. Anxious. Defensive. Entitled.

Holding the weight of whiteness

Most of us white people are so hooked into our whiteness that we don't know how to live in our bodies without anesthesia. Collectively, the heavy

habits of whiteness make us move through the world on a dull emotional register, half-awake, uncurious, and oblivious to the fact that our numbness contributes to people of color's continued suffering. Touching that weight means leaving the comforts of whiteness long enough to feel the damage. Still, I know that well-meaning white readers and allies will push back. *I would never respond in those ways. I know I benefit from white privilege. I've unpacked my knapsack. I believe people of color's testimony and I empathize with their pain. My humanity is intact!* If you went there, I'm inviting you to wade into the weight more deeply. Well-meaning white folks can be really good at spotting and attending to the ways that people of color suffer under white supremacy, but we are extremely reluctant to feel the collateral damage in our own bodies and take time to consider how the habits of whiteness contribute to the weight.

Our bodies can teach us a great deal about whiteness, but these lessons won't sink in unless white people learn to mindfully sensitize ourselves to the weight. I've tried to make tangible a few of the white habits that, in my own experience, continue to break my connections with people of color and their communities. Cultivating a sensitivity to our own insensitivity means that we must learn to *feel* and hold the weight without yielding to the desire to numb out, drop it, or explain it away. So, in the spirit of McIntosh's list of privileges, I invite all readers to wade more deeply into the weight of whiteness by naming those white habits that break human connections. Here are a few to get you started.

- The myth of meritocracy is a form of anesthesia because it deadens white people to the reality that people of color work three times as hard to get half as far.
- Segregation and redlining are forms of anesthesia because they break human connections geographically and spatially by dividing up public spaces and neighborhoods along racial lines.
- White talk (e.g., "My ancestors never owned slaves," "I have Asian friends") is anesthesia because it signals that speakers are more interested in being perceived as good and innocent than listening to what people of color are saying.
- Silence can be anesthesia when it's being driven by the fear of having difficult conversations.
- Narratives of racial progress (e.g., "Race relations are better today than they were during Jim Crow") are anesthesia when they stop conversations so that we can avoid feeling contemporary racial violence.

These are just a few general ways that anesthesia shows up in our lives. If you identify as white, I invite you to make these examples of anesthesia more

personal. This will help you to train your attention toward what triggers you and makes you numb out. I anesthetize myself to the weight when...

- I confine my daily routines to white spaces to avoid the discomfort of moving through spaces where my whiteness feels raw and exposed.
- I fail to show up and be fully emotionally present for people of color when we are in one another's company.
- I hold tight to only the comfortable parts of US history or my ancestral histories in order to avoid feeling the weight we inherit from the past.
- I frame my social justice activism in terms of helping or saving people of color, rather than healing the damage whiteness does to me.
- I say "Oh it was just a joke," or "I didn't mean that," when someone calls me in on a microaggression. This is a comfort-restoring move, not a sincere apology.

I'm hopeful that white readers (in particular) will use these examples as a springboard to expand their collective understanding of privilege as anesthesia. This is important because feeling the weight in our own bodies is an essential part of our collective liberation. The sad part about living in an anesthetized body is that you can't selectively numb the emotions you don't want to feel. Neurologically speaking, there is no local anesthesia. When you anesthetize pain and anxiety, you also anesthetize love and joy. And, here's the tragic part—white people have become so comfortable living in our anesthetized bodies that we have come to equate numbness with comfort and safety. Anything that stirs us from our comfortably numb existence feels like a threat.

So, you see, I don't think that we can ever deeply engage and dismantle white supremacy and privilege by bracketing the question of why McIntosh's knapsack feels weightless. If we want to be free, then we must fully unpack the knapsack. The white ally who refuses to consider how her white habits (hypervigilance or defensiveness) have real material implications for people of color refuses to feel how centuries of white entitlement distort her humanity. She drops the weight. She may avoid the conversation because she fears re-centering her whiteness. Her caution does not make her a good ally. It makes her an anesthetized missionary, eager and willing to help, but unwilling to feel. If the connections between holding the weight and our collective liberation are unclear, then consider a more manageable example. Suppose you were doing couples therapy with your partner who says to you:

Okay, I'll go to appointments with you and support the work you are doing to heal our relationship, but don't ask me to work on my own trauma, anxiety and depression. That's too heavy and painful. I'm not uncomfortable doing that.

Will this partner's attitude contribute to the couples' liberation from their unhealthy dynamic? Nope. Liberation is a group effort. This is why white people need to walk into those places that scare us. White people's fear of the weight signals our ongoing failure to heal. As Rachel Cargle (2019) explains, "Silencing happens when, for white people hearing the truth is too much; when the truth hangs so painfully heavy on their shoulders that they'd rather get rid of the weight, than face the issues head on." White folks' fear of the weight signals our ongoing failure to heal from the damage that white supremacy does to our collective humanity. Audre Lorde (1984) understood the tight connection between our human capacity for sensitivity and liberation when she remarked: "The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The black goddess within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free" (33). The anesthesia of privilege may serve the need for temporary comfort, but it will never serve our liberatory goals. The anesthesia of privilege makes it impossible to stand in genuine solidarity with people of color. We need to feel to be free. Remember, anesthesia is an essential component of the master's tool kit. Cultivating a sensitivity to our own insensitivity then will be essential to our collective liberation.

Notes

- 1 McIntosh frames her account of privilege in the language of visibility. This is understandable. Western ways of knowing routinely equate knowledge with visibility and knowing with seeing. I use the language of tangibility to signal the fact that knowledge comes from many forms of perception—hearing, touch, affect, and sensations. Also, I want to avoid ableist language.
- 2 This chapter is based on material from my recent book, *The Weight of Whiteness: A Feminist Engagement with Privilege, Race and Ignorance*.
- 3 Lauren Aratani, "‘Coughing While Asian’: Living in Fear as Racism Feeds Off Coronavirus Panic," *The Guardian*, 24 March 2020. Web.
- 4 The Newark Rebellion (12–17 July) was part of the "Long Hot Summer of 1967." There were over 150 collective responses to racial injustices that year. During the decades following World War II and leading up to the rebellion, the city experienced rapid deindustrialization and suburbanization which, combined with local government corruption, widespread racial injustice, and white flight made Newark a flashpoint. On July 12, 1967, two white police officers arrested John William Smith, a Black cab driver, after he signaled and passed a double-parked police car. Smith was dragged from his car, brutally beaten, and arrested for assault. Residents of the majority Black Hayes Homes housing project witnessed the arrest and began to gather outside of the precinct office. The situation escalated into four days of unrest. The tensions elicited a strong response from the governor who called in the New Jersey State Police and later the US National Guard. Twenty-six people were killed and 1,465 arrests were made.
- 5 American Indian Residential Schools were an integral part of colonization. In the beginning, schools were run by Christian missionaries. Later the US government subsidized schools both on and off reservations. The most famous being The Carlisle Indian school which adopted the assimilationist model of education suited to rural American needs. Native boys received vocational training while

girls were trained for domestic service. The abuse Native students received in these schools has been well documented. They were given white names, forced to speak English, to wear uniforms, and cut their hair. Many were sexually abused, forced to work long hours, and beaten. Many died or committed suicide and were buried on the school grounds.

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8

FEAR, LOATHING, AND LAS WHITENESS

Whiteness as fearfulness

Andrea Dionne Warmack

Whiteness and anti-Blackness are apparatuses of power—supple, nimble, alluring, and flexible—that structure our lives in their wake (Sharpe 2016). This chapter explores the condition of being that underpins whiteness (for white people largely—but not exclusively—in the US context¹) using critical phenomenology.² This chapter moves from the experiential horizon represented by Carol Anderson’s concept of “white rage” and Robin DiAngelo’s concept of “white fragility” to explore the fundamental nature of white being. On this account, whiteness (as lived by white people) is a situation of fearfulness that results in *micro-* (small-scale) and *macro-* (large-scale) acts of terror. I have chosen three events, two large-scale (one international and one national) and one smaller scale, to explore the fearfulness at the heart of white-being-in-the-world:

- 1 The Christchurch Massacre at a masjid in New Zealand on March 15, 2019
- 2 The attempt to violently overthrow the US government on January 6, 2021
- 3 Responses to Critical Whiteness and Critical Race Studies in academia, specifically, a graduate seminar on Critical Whiteness Studies

Though *white terror* is primarily mundane, daily, and ongoing acts of micro-terror serve as anchoring points for the framework of larger or more explicit acts. Thus, distinctions between overt or explicit acts of racial terror (as extraordinary, unique, or individual, and a bug in the system of events) and covert, implicit, or unintended acts are destabilized. White terror refers to both the particular acts that white people engage in that do not participate in actively antiracist and care-full encounters with nonwhite folks as well as the constitutional terror—the

terror at the core—of white folks living whitely. Linking macro-terror and micro-terror to the same source—whiteness as fearfulness—allows for greater accountability and leaves fewer places for the “unintentional” racial aggression of “nice white people” to hide. Finally, this chapter contrasts white terror with Audre Lorde’s account of the erotic, to challenge beliefs that white supremacy is equivalent to white people loving white people. Following Lorde, it becomes clear that fearfulness forecloses the possibility of love.

“Backlash blues”³: White rage and white fragility

In her 2014 *Washington Post* op-ed, Carol Anderson explores the contours of what she calls white rage. By her account, white rage is “virtually unnoticed” in its routine flares: “white rage carries an aura of respectability and has access to the courts, police, legislatures and governors, who cast its efforts as noble, though they are actually driven by the most ignoble motivations” (Anderson 2014).

White rage takes the form of and is legitimated through the juridical and the legislative systems. It moves in silence; it festers, and, when encountering that dream that will just not be deferred, it explodes. White rage is state-sanctioned and deployed *backlash*. As Anderson carefully tracks, it is historically commensurate with the existence of diasporic peoples’ attempts to flourish in the US context:⁴

The trigger for white rage, inevitably, is black advancement. It is not the mere presence of black people that is the problem; rather, it is blackness with ambition, with drive, with purpose, with aspirations, and with demands for full and equal citizenship. It is blackness that refuses to accept subjugation, to give up. A formidable array of policy assaults and legal contortions has consistently punished black resilience, black resolve.

(Anderson 2016, 13)

Anderson describes white rage as “triggered.” Anderson’s understanding of white rage as a response to a trigger—as *backlash*—positions it as not necessarily inevitable. For, though one may be triggered—and though one may not always know what, when, or where that trigger may be—how one *responds* to the trigger can, over time, be predicted, re-oriented, and transformed. Responses are habits. Habits are acquired. We can take up and practice new ways of responding.

Yet this attention to lived experience requires that white ragers take up the opportunity—the *gift* of the opportunity—to learn other ways to respond and to ethically be with nonwhite folks in the world. Anderson’s account of white rage is a historical portrait of the bad faith failure to do just that. As such, white ragers and the white people who enable them are accountable

for their continued choice of these habits of whiteness. By refusing the gift of the choice to develop different habits, white ragers mobilize their rage against themselves as a legalized death sentence for the white soul.⁵ Further, Anderson's account distinguishes white rage from white self-love while aligning white rage with white supremacy. White rage is outward-turned despair and befuddlement at the too-muchness of Blacklivings, at our wayward methods for rising, for Beautifying america (Hartman 2019; Sharpe 2019). When white rage is understood as a reaction, it means that white ragers are reactionary (as a core construct of how they are in the world). White rage situates its practitioners in a reactive stance. Their way of being-in-the-world is defensiveness and antagonism constituted by fear.

In her 2011 journal article and her 2018 monograph, DiAngelo defines white fragility as a “lack of racial stamina” that conflates racial comfort with safety, such that incidents of racial discomfort are treated as (physical) attacks resulting in defensiveness, opposition, denial, shutting down, withdrawal, and other attempts to maintain racial (dis)equilibrium,⁶ or racial contentment with white racism, by entrenching white supremacy (DiAngelo 2011, 56–58; DiAngelo 2018, 116–118). One way to think about racial “(dis)equilibrium” is in terms of the phrase, “Don’t rock the boat.” The boat is the emotional okay-ness, or baseline pleasant or not-challenged-by-this-ness of white folks. It carries white folks through their lives. I want to suggest that the stakes are experienced as higher than just getting a little wet if a wave breaks over the bow or if the boat tips a bit. The whitely fragile are in boats and they cannot swim. Yet, they refuse to leave the boat. This means that their orientation to the world is fearful. At any moment their boats may be upended by a kraken of black and brown living. So, any disturbance is perceived as life-threatening. Yet, rather than learn to swim (or at least, float) or address the impracticality of boat life as a nonswimmer, the whitely frail clings to the dis/comfort of boat life.

White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium. Racial stress results from an interruption to what is racially familiar.

(DiAngelo 2011, 56)

DiAngelo frames white fragility as a state—that is, a way of being-in-the-world. As such, white fragility always already exists at the background of experience and moves to the foreground when white people—living whitely—are alerted to their socially determined white status. She applies Bourdieu's account of

the *habitus*, or socially ingrained habits, to position white fragility as largely unconscious (DiAngelo 2011, 57–58 & DiAngelo 2018, 107–109). Whereas Anderson’s white ragers seem to have greater conscious appreciation of their actions, DiAngelo’s frail whitelies need not be conscious of their attempts to reclaim (dis)equilibrium.

I find the accounts of habit and habituation developed by Helen Ngo more fruitful than *habitus*. In Ngo’s account, habits are simultaneously reflective and non-reflective: “Habit occupies the hazy space between conscious and non-conscious being” (Ngo 2016, 849). For Ngo, habits are the commingling of what is consciously taken up—*habituated*—and what is pre-consciously enacted—*habitual*—such that our habituation “entails habitual action” (849). Ngo’s account of habit turns our attention to the possibility of transforming our bad (and racist) habits by pointing to the ways we are responsible for them (854, 866). Habits are both something we consciously acquire and something that, once acquired, operates in the background of our daily lives. Driving is a good example of this. I am a new driver. When learning to drive, each time I was behind the wheel I was acquiring/developing habits. Now that I am licensed and drive for my own needs/pleasure, each time I am behind the wheel those habits settle into my body and into my self experience of driving the car. Now, I hardly notice the action of engaging the turn signals or checking my blind spots for other drivers. I have formed the basic habits of driving, and so formed, they emerge as (almost) instinctual when I am behind the wheel. Yet, because I have developed/acquired these habits, they can never truly be instinctual or passive.

DiAngelo’s description of white fragility as a state frames it as a habit. So it is neither passive nor wholly unconscious. It is active in shaping human engagement with the world. Similarly, Anderson’s “white rage” is *also* a habit that indicates a way of being-in-the-world. White people—by virtue of their commitment to whiteness⁷—take up white fragility and/or rage as it is always already within their reach. I propose white *terror* as an umbrella term for white people’s habit of expressing racialized rage and indulging their racialized fragility.

White terrorists commit to these habits in an attempt to flee, rather than confront, their state of being as “white embodied lives [that] have already been claimed” by whiteness, and the painful truth that “there is no white self that stands above the fray, atomic, hands clean” (Yancy 2015, xvii). This means there is no innocence. This is a way in which whiteness harms white people. Because one must actively develop new habits, one is bound to miss some. Whiteness is so thorough and so nimble a structure that it has been internalized and can camouflage itself as ignorance and lack of intent. Though this is not an exact parallel, one way to consider this impossibility of innocence is to pay attention to the ways that able-bodied folks engage in

ableism. Think about the response to Lizzo's (2022) album's use of the word "spazz." Many people who are Millennials and Gen X were introduced to the word and developed the habit of using it, without knowing or intending ableist origins. But that ignorance or lack of intent does not absolve us of the harm and offense caused by the use of the word. So, while some folks were quick to rush to defend Lizzo's use of the word on the grounds that Lizzo was innocent—that either she didn't know or didn't intend harm—Lizzo (rightly) faced the music and apologized.

What Anderson and DiAngelo show us is that rather than turn to face what is feared to transform it, the white terrorist resorts to habits of evasion. One move of this evasion is projection—"Talking about race is racist;" "Critical Race Theory is racist;" "1619 is not an important date in American history," and so on—and tears. These tears are attempts by the white terrorist who "never owned slaves" to flee self-reckoning by positioning themselves as outside of group affiliation and historical affiliation—that is, outside of whiteness and the history of white oppression and violence. In other words, white people attempt to separate themselves from whiteness in order to escape accountability for white racism against people of color. This plea of innocence is a refusal to engage in the soul-work of transforming the white self—risky and tremendously difficult work that leads to no completion. Because there is no innocence, there is no possibility of arriving at a place where one is free from work. Clinging to a sense of oneself as racially innocent closes off the self. This fearful flight from risk prevents the kind of self-analysis that exposes anti-Black beliefs and behaviors and is necessary to develop and deploy anti racist habits.⁸ To accept the gift of non-terrorist ways of being with others is to embrace risk and to turn toward loving transformation.⁹

"I give you your problem back."

The Christchurch terrorist, who killed 51 worshippers in two mosques in New Zealand in March 2019, described himself as "just a [*sic*] ordinary White man," a "regular White man, from a regular family. Who decided to take a stand" (Stephen A. Crockett 2019). There are two things of note in this account. One is the appeal to ordinariness, to the norm. His whiteness is what he draws on to affirm his fit with the world. His way of being-in-the-world is primarily that of comfort; he lives an unfettered "I can" that extends the reach of his body into the whole of New Zealand *and* Australia (Ahmed 2007, 158). His commitment to whiteness allows him to believe that his reach—his capacity to do and be—far exceeds his immediate location and extends without interruption or being stopped (Ahmed 2007). Two: if whiteness is regular, if he is the product of a "regular family," then one can examine the actions of an "ordinary" and "regular" white guy to examine the

structure of whiteness and what it means to be structured as white. It is his ordinariness that allows us to examine the ways in which whiteness is not extraordinary, the ways in which it has been internalized as natural and normal. To be a regular schmegular white is to (1) perceive the existence of non-whites as threats, (2) fear this perceived threat, and (3) feel entitled and commanded to “take a stand” against it to maintain comfort.

This description extends to the January 6, 2021, terrorists who attacked the US Capitol building, who described themselves (and were described by others) as “patriots” (Mogelson 2021) or just “impressionalable” folks who got caught up in Trump’s rhetoric (Temple-Raston 2021):

‘Please be patient with me and other peaceful people who, like me, are having a very difficult time piecing together all that happened to us, around us, and by us,’ Chansley [the ‘QAnon Shaman’] added. ‘We are good people who care deeply about our country’.

(Martin 2021)

The January 6 terrorists felt that they were called to act by “[their] president” at a “Rally to Save America” (Barry et al., 2021). These Regular Joes and Janes saw themselves as “defending” “their” country.

It is important to look at how these white terrorists self-describe and describe others because it provides an opening onto their way-of-being-in-the-world and their experiential horizons. Descriptions are the self-reporting of the ways the describer experiences themselves in relation to the world and others. Experience and perception are as much—if not more—an implication about the perceiver as they are descriptions. To describe the self as a “patriot” who is defending one’s nation implicates the describer in an engagement with the world that is antagonistic; it implies seeing other people in the world as a threat. To describe some of those other people as n—rs implicates the self in and *as* all the negative connotations the slur evokes (Ross 2021). As James Baldwin wrote:

While I know this, and anyone who has ever tried to live knows this, that what you say about somebody else, anybody else, reveals you. What I think of you as a being is dictated by my own necessities, my own psychology, my own fears and desires. I’m not describing you when I talk about you; I’m describing me. Now here in this country we have something called a ‘[n---r]’... We have invented the ‘[n---r]’. I didn’t invent him. White people invented him. I’ve always known, I *had* to know by the time I was 17 years-old, that what you were describing was not me, and what you were afraid of was not me. It had to be something else. You had invented it, so it had to be something you were afraid of and you invested me with. ... But if I am not the ‘[n---r]’, and if it’s true

that your invention reveals you, then who is the ‘[n----r]’? ...I know that a person is more important than anything else, anything else. I learned this because I had to learn it. But you still think, I gather, that the ‘[n----r]’ is necessary. But he’s unnecessary to me, so he must be necessary to you. I give you your problem back. You’re the ‘[n----r]’, baby, it isn’t me.

(Baldwin 1963)

Baldwin’s observation implies that there is connection between the *habits* of the white terrorist and the *fundamental nature of being* the white terrorist. This connection makes the acquisition of certain habits easier than others. For Baldwin, this connection is fear. This is not an account of an isolated incident of fear. This is a condition of fearfulness that *constitutes* white-being-in-the-world.

This fearfulness blocks the ability to risk the feelings of and encounters with the world and others in the world with anything other than terror habits. Non-terror encounters require a facility with uncertainty and the capacity for deep feeling with and across difference. They require risk: the risk of the discomfort from asking the uneasy question—of themselves and the country—*Who art thou?* Because whiteness is constituted by fearfulness, the white terrorist turns away from this question and toward comfort and ease. The inability to endure the stress of difference means that white terrorists apprehend nonwhite bodies as standing out in a way that reinforces the (dis)equilibrium of spaces and countries as theirs and white (Ahmed 2007, 159). However, this ease and comfort *is fragile* and requires constant (raging) reinforcement. The fearfulness that is the fundamental organizational principle of the white terrorist makes it easy, comfortable, and “ordinary” for white folks to participate in stopping the bodies of nonwhites. This stoppage of nonwhite bodies is also the stoppage of white bodies from feeling little other than fear/terror (even when masked as anger) and the uncomfortable and painful gift of “unsuturing.”¹⁰ Peggy McIntosh writes of how white privilege stops feeling: “some privileges make me feel at home in the world. ...Through some, I escape fear, anxiety, or a sense of not being welcome or not being real. ...Most keep me from having to be angry” (McIntosh 1988, 295).

To *stop*, in this sense, obliterates the possibility of a risky, transformative, actively anti racist encounter predicated on a wide range of feeling, and reduces it to a mandate to impede the nonwhite body. The stop-ability of the nonwhite body is an interpersonal example of the habits of the limitation of the feeling of the white terrorist. And we see this in Christchurch and January 6—white terror mobilizes anger at the foreground, anger that our nonwhite bodies just won’t stop living.

To stop “illegitimate” votes—where “illegitimate” means nonwhite bodies (Ahmed 2007, 161)—is to assume that one already knows the answer to *Who*

are you because one already knows the answer to its twinned question: *Who am I?*¹¹ It is to deny the excessiveness of the encounter, to deny the opportunity for care, and to deny that which opens onto deep feeling and the sharing of deep feelings such as love, including love of the self. Audre Lorde's account of the erotic is such an account of deep feeling and the sharing of deep feelings. For Lorde, the erotic is a life force of connection that is not limited to sexual expression. It is the means by which we mobilize ourselves toward political and transformative action and it requires a deep curiosity about and embrace of risk, difference, and love (Lorde 2007). It is opposed to the stagnation and limitations of whiteness.

The easy comfort of whiteness fits Lorde's account of pornography, an account of use and erotic denial rooted in fear.

[P]ornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling....For the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing.

(Lorde 2007, 54)

This is one reason why the erotic is so feared.... Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives. And this is a grave responsibility projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected nor the merely safe.

(Lorde 2007, 57)

Pornography is a fear-based creation of those who live feeling mandated to stop in the service of whiteness. It is a turning away from seeing, being with, examining, and loving the self and the other. It is neither love nor hate. For hate is a deep feeling that emerges from self-scrutiny: *Who am I?*

Fearing the white self

Whiteness traffics in two fears. The lesser fear is fear of the Other: xenophobia. This is a fear of difference. It requires a misunderstanding of difference as an isolated or isolatable deviance:

We have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it...copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate.

(Lorde 2007, 115)

Whiteness deploys all three methods. It copies (and thus cannibalizes) racialized difference in order to re-center itself as an innocent victim by making statements like “All lives matter,” “One race, human race,” “I don’t see color,” “the only oppression is class/capitalism,” and “I am just like you” (Yancy 2012, 160). These statements prevent white terrorists from acknowledging their complicity in the “structural sin” of whiteness while simultaneously shifting the problem of race to those folks who demand that they acknowledge their complicity (Yancy 2015). Destruction is a method at the heart of this chapter. Following the self-descriptions of the Christchurch and January 6 terrorists, the only option for the ordinary white person faced with difference is fear-based destruction. Fear, rather than opening possibilities, rather than opening the path to flourishing for white folks, limits possibilities, truncates relations, narrows the scope of whiteness to a self-phobic way of being-in-the-world.

The great fear, the one that underpins the lesser fear, and the trickiest to root out, is the fear of the truth of the self claimed by whiteness. This is the fear of the world/hell this claiming has wrought and the desire to flee this profound moral failure. Robert Jensen turns to face this fear of his white self:

I believe that white people are afraid to face the truth because they are afraid that the truth can only lead to self-loathing, to hating ourselves and other white people. ...For people with unearned privilege in an unjust system, this is the worst, to look in the mirror honestly, both to acknowledge the damage we have done to others and to see what we have done to ourselves.

(quoted in Yancy 2015, 98–99)

White people fear themselves and the multiple habits through which they engage the anti-Blackness that shapes their lives. Whiteness, when understood as fearfulness rather than hate, illuminates reasons for the difficulty even disadvantaged white people have in doing the work of transformation. For the risk involved in “reach[ing] down into that deep place of knowledge... [to] touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there,” the risk involved in realizing it is one’s own white face that stares back, is not just the immediate experience of the self-encounter, but the foundation of the self that is having this experience (Lorde 2007, 113). It is recognizing the white self as the problem (Yancy 2015).

This fearfulness and pornographic way of white-being-in-the-world underpins even minute engagements. It allows the habits that shape and are shaped by the choices made by white students in classrooms throughout the United States, particularly where they explicitly address race, as in seminars on Critical Race Theory or Critical Whiteness Studies which I participated in as a graduate student. In these courses—designed to promote acts of

loving bravery and erotic encounter of their white selves—white terrorists weaponized silence, became defensive, and engaged in the (dis)equilibrium-inducing habits of shutting down, tears, and pleas for unearned grace. Lorde describes what it means to choose fear over grace:

The fear of our desires keeps them suspect and indiscriminately powerful, for to suppress any truth is to give it strength beyond endurance. *The fear that we cannot grow beyond whatever distortions we may find within ourselves keeps us docile and loyal and obedient*, externally defined and leads up to accept many facets of our oppression as women.

(Lorde 2007, 57–58 – *italics mine*)

Lorde specifically addresses *white* women in their whiteness, their womanhood, and in their white-womanhood. This address is particularly prescient for the majority white women students in this Critical Whiteness Studies class I am discussing. Their silence suppressed the truth of their desire not to confront their hidden selves. They responded to the gift/grace that we, the Blackwomxn and Black Feminists in class, offered them, an invitation to turn toward the parts of themselves they fear and reckon with the imbedded terrorist, affective flight: tears, protestations of innocence, and silence/shutting down out of affective flight and the fear that they might say or do the “wrong” thing. They chose to actively recommit themselves to the bad habits or terror with silence and dis-identification (Yancy 2015, xvi). Haunted and hunted by the specter of the unbidden but present non-innocent white self—the hungry ghost of this affective failure—they swung between frailty and rage. They obeyed the deeply embedded and *inextricable* “opaque white racist self” and rejected the risk of self-examination: *Who am I?* (Yancy 2012, 170).

They had their chance to commit to love and risk.

[L]ove can be described in the form of profound risk, a self-effacing movement toward another in absolute honesty, even as there is no guarantee of reciprocity...

(Yancy 2015, xxi)

Commitment to truth telling lays the groundwork for the openness and honesty that is the heartbeat of love. When we can see ourselves as we truly are and accept ourselves, we build the necessary foundation for self-love.

(books 2000, 53)

Instead, they chose terror. Rather than the gift of an honest, ethical, productive, and fruitful vulnerability—*Who are you?*—they chose the myth of being untouchable and invulnerable, the fallacy of total self-transparency,

and the ill-gotten belief that in merely stepping into the classroom, they had arrived (Yancy 2015, xxii, 5, 13–15). They chose ease and bludgeoning comfort in their turn away from love, from an erotic commitment that, as Lorde might say, *called on them to demand something better of themselves* (Lorde 2007, 54). They are united with the terrorists of Christchurch and January 6 through their choice to flee the erotic excess of engagement and risk. This example of a “minor” or “unintentional” harm serves as the quotidian background through which the “explicit” terror acts emerge. This is a choice to live unintentionally and with limited feeling: a choice to give over their destinies to being the problem.

“Not all gifts are without pain”; some presents are struggle. And my classmates refused the loving struggle while crying innocence and pleading for grace. But *they can have no grace other than the one that their hearts make possible*.¹² They quake with the terror that their hearts might not be strong enough yet. *And throughout that quaking, they should work on their hearts.*

[A] vast amount of the energy that goes into what we call the Negro problem is produced by the white man’s proud desire not to be judged by those who are not white, not to be seen as he is, and at the same time a vast amount of the white anguish is rooted in the white man’s equally profound need to be seen as he is, to be released from the tyranny of his mirror.

(Baldwin 1993, 95)

If you are a reader who is white, do you find yourself, in this moment, refusing the gift, refusing to see yourself and be seen? Or do you read this as an invitation to take a risk, to turn toward yourself to “grow beyond whatever distortions” you find? Have you resorted to the habit of flight of terror, or do you choose to develop new habits of honesty and vulnerability? Are you *working* for grace?

The grace you can imagine

Fearful people are without grace. Love requires and makes possible the very grace that fear forecloses (Baldwin 1993, 95). To extend grace is to model the vulnerability and vigilance required for an encounter and to know that one must confront the problem in order to transform the relation into something better (Yancy 2015, 13–17). To be lovingly, erotically, or gracefully in the world is to be something other than fearful. It is to commit to the risk of being open and unfolding. This negotiation of risk is the distinction between the condition of fearfulness and the incidence of being afraid. In the “Transformation of Silence,” Lorde demonstrates this distinction. In this piece, Lorde—a Black lesbian poet—refers to the fear of “pain, or death” that might result speaking in a racist, sexist, ableist, classist world from her lived position. She

is not afraid, neither in general nor as a way-of-being-in-the-world. This fear is specific.

I began to recognize a source of power within myself that comes from the knowledge that while it is most desirable not to be afraid, learning to put fear into perspective gave me great strength.

(Lorde 2007, 41)

Lorde's "fear" is backed up by a knowledge shared by other non-whites that takes into account historical and system encounters with white terror that allows BIPOC to look at, negotiate, and remain open to the myriad possibilities that inhere even in moments of white terror (despite the fact that white terror is ongoing). In contrast, to *be* fearful is to close oneself off to the erotic uncertainty that inheres in the voiced question: *Who are you?*

But primarily for us all, it is necessary to teach by living and speaking those truths which we believe and know beyond understanding. Because in this way alone we can survive, by taking part in a process of life that is creative and continuing, that is growth.

(43)

We who are oppressed (but unclaimed) by whiteness may be afraid—but we are not *fearful*. The risk of love makes it possible to "put fear into perspective" so that one may be both afraid and open. Love is growth without domination or decimation of others (hooks 2000, 98). Love is observing prayer service the Friday after a terrorist kills your family in faith and your biological family. Love is speaking though someone is kneeling on your throat.¹³ Love is speaking when *your own hungry ghost gnaws at your throat*. Love is asking what you did "wrong" knowing that the answer will be ongoing. Love is what is necessary to take up habits that confront and transform white terror, and white individuals do this every day.

Nina Simone said, "I'll tell what freedom is to me. No fear" (2016). Love is no fear. My heart goes out to those white people who don't have enough love for themselves to want to be free.

Notes

- 1 It is important to note that while anti-Blackness and whiteness are not solely foundational conditions of the US American experience/structure, the United States has iterations of these structuring relations that are similar to, but distinct from other countries in the Americas and the rest of the global community due to the US American practice of chattel slavery.
- 2 While phenomenology is the study of lived experience, critical phenomenologists center their intervention in the silence around raced, gendered, sexed, classed, ability, and sexuality differences in lived experience. Critical phenomenology

is a corrective that explicitly takes up the silences in the account of the human subject and its way of being in the world that emerges in phenomenology. Guether's definition (Weiss, Murphy, Salamon eds. 2020) of critical phenomenology—that emerges from her reading of Lorde—is stirring!

Critical phenomenology goes beyond classical phenomenology by reflecting on the quasi-transcendental social structures that make our experience of the world possible and meaningful, and also by engaging in a material practice of “restructuring the world” in order to generate new and liberatory possibilities for meaningful experience and existence. In this sense, critical phenomenology is both a way of doing philosophy and a way of approaching political activism.

As a philosophical practice, critical phenomenology... open[s] up new possibility for reimagining and reclaiming the commons. It is a way of pulling up traces of a history that is not quite or no longer there – that has been rubbed out or consigned to invisibility – but still shapes the emergence of meaning.

As a political practice, critical phenomenology is a struggle for the liberation from the structures that privilege, naturalize, and normalize certain experiences of the world while marginalizing, pathologizing, and discrediting others. These structures exist on many levels: social political, economic, psychological, epistemological, and even ontological. They are both “out there” in the world, in the documented patterns and examples of hetero-patriarchal racist domination, and they are also intrinsic to subjectivity and intersubjectivity, shaping the way we perceive ourselves, others, and the world (15–16).

- 3 This subtitle is a riff on Nina Simone's “Backlash Blues” (1967).
- 4 One way of thinking about diasporic identity is to think of it as acknowledging the conditions under which Black people arrived in the Americas and the ongoing tension between US American/belongingness and Blackness. Hortense Spillers writes:

[M]y contention [is that this New World order] with its human sequence written in blood, *represents* for its African and indigenous peoples a scene of *actual* mutilation, dismemberment, and exile. First of all, their New World, diasporic plight marked a *theft of the body—a willful* and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire (Spillers 2003, 206).

This acknowledgment of a primary historical event that has ongoing lived reach such that American Black people are neither indigenous nor patently settlers.

- 5 Anderson traces the juridical and legislative permissions that are granted to white rage in “access to the courts, police, legislatures and governors” (Anderson 2014). This access allows for white rage/backlash against non-whites. This is its external and interpersonal component. Yet there is another component: the intrapersonal and internal. The same state sanctioned harm against others doubles as harm against the self. White rage is legalized moral suicide of the self complicit in whiteness.
- 6 And, let's be clear: it cannot truly be equilibrium if it requires kneeling on another's neck until they are dead.
- 7 Alcoff (2019), Baldwin (1993), Ngo (2018), and Yancy (2015) provide us with explorations of the lived experience of whiteness. Whiteness is a structure, or a framing construct, that is implicit and at times explicit in the overall/general (macro-) and particular (micro-) organization of social, political, and historical, engines of our (current and ongoing) world through a host of violent practices such as the theft of Indigenous children, Chinese exclusion policies, Japanese internment, redlining, “English only” practices, the white-washing of Latine populations in the US Media, the school-to-prison pipeline, police surveillance in

Black and Brown communities, and the explicit rise in opposition to critical race pedagogies. When individual white folks can make different choices with regard to these specific practices, they must do so consciously, actively, and consistently, in an attempt to form new habits. When they do not—even when they are not actively participating in them, but merely allowing them to continue—their inaction is an implicit commitment to whiteness. All white people are committing to whiteness unless they are actively working to learn new habits.

- 8 Let's bring it back to Lizzo. Even though Lizzo apologized, as an able-bodied person, her engagement with ableism is one that means that she will always have to be self-critical, self-reflective, and hold herself accountable for what she takes for granted. Lizzo accepted the critique of her use of the word “spazz” as an opportunity—a gift—to develop new habits of being herself and being with others even if it meant she had to rewrite her hit, even if it meant being open to the risk of more critique.
- 9 “One can give nothing whatever without giving oneself—that is to say, risking oneself. If one cannot risk oneself, then one is simply incapable of giving” (Baldwin 1993, 86).
- 10 “[U]n-suturing is a deeply embodied phenomenon that enables whites to come to terms with the realization that their embodied existence and embodied identities are always already inextricably linked to a larger white racist social integument or skin which envelops who and what they are” (Yancy 2015, xvii).
- 11 In her chapter, “Wonder” in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Luce Irigaray ([1984] 1993) takes up the account of wonder in Descartes’ “The Passions of the Soul” to apply it to her own account of the necessity of sexuate difference for the ethical relations between females and males.

This other, male or female, should *surprise* us again and again, appear to us as *new, very different* from what we knew or what we thought he or she should be. Which means that we would look at the other, stop to look at him or her, ask ourselves, come close to ourselves through questioning. *Who art thou? I am* and *I become* thanks to this question. Wonder goes beyond that which is or is not suitable for us. The other never suits us simply. We would in some way have reduced the other to ourselves if he or she suited us completely. An excess resists... (74)

Indeed, what Irigaray is calling for here is an ontological position that is foreclosed by those accepting the many insidious recruitments of whiteness. What the ontological status of whiteness closes down is the possibility of surprise, of encountering the “new, very different.” Thus, the lived experience of whiteness what should ethically be *surprise* emerges as threat.

- 12 “[Baby Suggs, holy] did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it” (Morrison 2004, 103).
- 13 See: George Floyd.

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9

ACADEMIC SURVIVAL

Troubling the tensions between race, gender, and class in a predominantly white academic institution

Carolyn Tinglin

In the following pages, I come to terms with *points of contention*, teaching-related situations that have rubbed me the wrong way and occupied space in the back of my mind without paying rent. These situations have tested my inner strength and my patience; they have made me question my understanding about who I am and how my race and gender shape my teaching experiences. My race and gender are intrinsically connected to and reflected in the world. In other words, these are aspects of my personhood that interact within me as well as externally with the environments I encounter. I found it impossible to let these points of contention go.

Points of contention

In many cases being “the first” is considered a good thing. Synonyms for the word “first” include “greatest,” “original,” “foremost,” “utmost,” and “outstanding.” From the time we understand the meaning of the word “first,” we have been socialized to believe it’s an admirable and highly valued thing. But there are times when I have loathed the word, hated its cheery and optimistic attitude, bemoaned its high status, and cringed every time I thought about it in relation to academia.

Being first was never my intention when I accepted an assistant professor position at a predominantly white university (PWI). I began teaching in the faculty of health because, besides enjoying learning from and shaping student health science practice, I didn’t see anyone in health science academia who looked like me. It never occurred to me that a career in health science education would be the beginning of many questions about “firsts.” I was

the first Black person to teach in the health science faculty, first Black teacher for many of my students, first Black woman to be a team leader within my department. Why was I the first Black faculty member at this institution? It was, after all, almost 2020. I couldn't have been the first Black health science instructor the institution came across who qualified for the job. Surely there were other Black academics prior to me, who were available and capable of teaching in the faculty. Why was I their first Black woman faculty hire?

These contentious race and gender issues were not new, but they occupied a new space for me professionally. I thought about the bondage of socially constructed labels like race, gender, sexuality, and class, and how socially constructed categories produce and protect whiteness (and access to certain academic circles), while for others, socially constructed labels are barriers. In my case, race and gender facilitated access to some academic circles and created roadblocks to others. I thought about the ways in which institutions are powerful places of *belonging*. That is to say, universities categorize and sort who *belongs* in certain academic environments and who does not. Universities embed sorting systems that are not only self-serving but also self-sufficient. An example of this can be found in university hiring practices. At many universities, hiring policies and practices act as academic gatekeeping systems resulting in systemic productions and reproductions of hegemonic hiring (white, male, straight, for administrative positions, white, female, straight for teaching positions). Despite there being laws to encourage *equal opportunity hiring*, most university administrators and staff fall in line with the dominant academic culture, yielding to the status quo (Cukier et al. 2021).

If academic faculty environments did not reflect me, where did that leave me? Where did I belong? Belonging is a matter of blending in. Blending in was heavily based on how similar I was in physical appearance, socioeconomic status, political ideologies, and so forth to most people in my faculty (Settles et al. 2021).

Think about the ways in which PWI hiring practices sort and categorize applicants, as well as the ways in which socially constructed categories like race and gender also sort who *belongs*. What does it mean to automatically belong or blend in? Conversely, what does it mean to automatically stand out or be “different”?

Belonging in the institution can be sticky business. Faculty, staff, students, and administrators are systematically sorted (through embedded hierarchies, relationships, associations, and roles) and designated insider/outsider status. As a health science faculty member, I was an insider because I belonged to the “academic world.” As a Black woman educator, I was an outsider within my own health science faculty. My gender made me an insider within a female-dominated work environment, but as the only Black woman faculty, I sat on the outskirts of a sisterhood of health science faculty. The reality is that in non-HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) settings,

the default is white, cis, straight, and economically advantaged (Cole 2020). For academics who do not belong to the default (dominant) group, academic life is a matter of drifting in and out of institutional consciousness.

Being part of and excluded from the institution's consciousness is a phenomenon I refer to as *insider/outsider politics*. Insider/outsider politics also manifest internal tensions. I struggled to navigate how much of my authentic self was safe to share, versus the inauthentic performances I presented to the institution, which were necessary to make it through each day. Any internal sense of belonging was drowned by the constant reminders that my racialized body dwelled in a sea full of white coordinators, managers, receptionists, professors, department heads, deans, and students. The stares, comments, assumptions, misperceptions, stereotypes, and off-color jokes were my new norm. Inside I raged in perpetual frustration while my outer persona tried desperately to blend in, hide, and become invisible, as if blending in or shrinking would change the constructs of whiteness.

Historical and social contexts of race in education

How did we get here? I can't reflect on my challenges as a Black woman faculty without reflecting on many of the historical battles between US civil rights activists and education systems built from white supremacy. My reflections turn toward the historically significant case of *Brown vs. Board of Education* (Weinstein et al. 2004). *Brown vs. Board of Education* was a landmark case in the civil rights movement that made school segregation unconstitutional because education provided to Black students in Black schools was not equitable compared with education provided in white public schools. "Equal protection under the law" was guaranteed to *all* US citizens under the provisions of the Fourteenth Amendment. Black teachers who had a long history of education for emancipation, institutional opposition, and equity-seeking education activism were central to desegregation (Baker 2011).

Milner, Delale-O'Connor, Murray, and Farinde argue that desegregation led to a loss of relevant cultural, political, and social capital for African Americans (Milner et al. 2016). For example, in states like Alabama and Georgia, Black teacher activism focused on ways to improve the conditions of Black schools within the Black community (Baker 2011). These teachings and political curricula were lost when school desegregation took place.

Pioneers like Septima Clark and Bernice Robinson developed Citizenship Schools all over the South, focused on socio-educational mobilization (unschooling of Black students, teaching about Afro history, social justice, and Black pride on university campuses across the country) while fostering Black community leader development—instrumental pillars of the civil rights movement (Ling 1995). These Citizenship Schools were part of the Citizenship Education Program originally launched in Highlander School in South

Carolina and contributed to the development and training of generations of Black teacher activists like Esau Jenkins (Ling 1995, 400).

The educational equity and desegregation work that civil rights activists fought for (and continue to fight for) have a place in today's post-secondary environment, since post-secondary institutions continue to be inequitable spaces (Milner et al. 2016).

Politics of opposition

A path to institutional emancipation could not open for me without my acknowledging the emotional and intellectual impacts insider/outsider politics have on my self-perceptions, self-confidence, and ability to oppose the institutional forces that manipulated where I belonged. I experienced increased anxiety, fear, and depression. It became my ritual to give myself a pep talk while walking from the car to the building entrance. My pep talk was an exercise in self-monitoring and self-policing—how I should walk, what my resting face should look like, and how to engage in conversation. It was all so painfully exhausting.

Opposing and resisting institutional forces was a relentless job. A Black woman faculty's presence at a PWI *was* resistance. Protective practices (such as self-talk and deep breathing) are resistance. Wearing my natural hair was resistance. Speaking up when stereotypes and tropes were reinforced in conversations, teaching materials, anti-Black racism, and institutional culture was resistance.

Institutional resistance was and is political. It is important to understand the risk of political fall-out in academia, which, for Black women faculty like me, is loneliness, further isolation, and institutional disenfranchisement. As the first and only Black woman faculty in my department, my acts of resistance became a routine part of my academic life. Maintaining the vigilance, self-monitoring, and inauthentic performances was just not sustainable.

Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. (2012) describe post-secondary teaching environments as antagonistic spaces where women of color face the harsh realities of historical and societal ideologies supporting structures of racism in the academic world. That is to say, to map the structural and generational pedigree of whiteness in post-secondary education, we need to look no further than to the institutions themselves, paying close attention to the structural, functional, and systematic ways in which race and gender are formulated to produce structural and functional barriers for Black women faculty.

The following is a short list of instrumental ways in which I have experienced barriers as a Black woman faculty in Canadian academia:

- 1 The campus environment has very few to no symbols, artifacts, or work developed by, for, or about Black people. The absence/erasure of *Black*

- presence on campus* renders Black faculty and students invisible. *I found myself wondering if I was welcome on campus.*
- 2 Faculty–student relationships are often strained. Students’ negative perceptions of Black faculty’s knowledge and credibility is common. Non-Black and Black students fall prey to a certain *presumed incompetence* of Black women faculty. *Students questioned the content and context of my lessons, although I had page references from my resources (just in case anyone asked, and they did). Students often debated their assignment marks, and my inability to understand what they’d written or were trying to say (despite providing all students with a rubric and opportunities to discuss the rubric in detail). I often found myself defending how I knew what I knew (answering repeated questions about my academic qualifications and about the quality of my information resources), something my white colleagues did not experience.*
 - 3 Tokenism. An academic environment barren of Black women faculty reflects insufficient and ineffective university recruitment and retention policies and practices (Cukier et al. 2021). It is also an indicator that the institution fails to recognize that *one* Black woman faculty is not the definition of “diversity.” *Being the first, the only Black woman faculty meant I was often perceived as the spokesperson for all Black women faculty.*
 - 4 Black woman stereotypes. My daily routine involved ditching, dodging, and confronting Black woman tropes and stereotypes, white perspectives of who I am and what I am capable of. I could never be upset, or *too friendly*, or *smile too much*, or be *too loud*, or be *too outspoken*, or *too soft-spoken* or—the list goes on and on. What I couldn’t be is myself. Being a *Black woman* in academia is to sit at the crossroads—at the intersections of different societal categories (race, gender, socioeconomic position, sexuality) designed to sustain institutional whiteness. *Common stereotypes of Black people (such as lazy, incompetent) converge with common stereotypes about gender (women are moody, emotional, irrational). Black women faculty face a combination of racialization and gendering, in addition to specific stereotypes of Black women (loud, overweight, obnoxious, pushy).*

My examples of structural, functional, and systemic formulations of race and gender in academia may sound familiar, because they are the same structures and mechanisms of systemic racism that have historically helped, and continue to uphold, white supremacy in general society (Lander and Santoro 2017).

Existence is resistance

Despite the enormous strides of the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, very little has changed in academia. Historically speaking, *mainstream* educational institutions were never meant for racialized people, and, from

a faculty standpoint, they continue to alienate racialized faculty (Black, Indigenous and Peoples of Color, or BIPOC).

To confront and combat academic exclusion and marginalization I found it helpful to draw on important legacies of both the US and Canadian civil rights movements in education. Resistance in education—the fight for education equity—has come in many forms, including ideological resistance, resistive and empowering pedagogy, campus sit-ins, and scholar strikes (bell hooks 1994). Because educational institutions were never meant for racialized people, my very presence in racially impoverished academic environments was also a form of resistance (Matias and Mackey 2016).

Deckman's (2017) study of teachers in racially stratified high schools and middle schools reveals the challenges of being a racially objectified person in classroom environments. Of particular interest to me were the accounts from Black teachers who described their teaching environment as “race neutral,” where administrators, teachers, and students were encouraged to ignore historical and cultural aspects of race and to avoid any discussions about race, no matter what the context. This was also my experience at the university where I taught. The university fell silent on issues, conversations, and discussions even remotely related to race, culture, or non-eurocentric ways of knowing.

The problem with taking a *race neutral* position is that it is dismissive of the realities of the racialized world we live in, especially for those who are racialized. *Race neutral* is really *race absent*. How can we respect and honor the humanity of each other without acknowledging and honoring the racial, cultural, and ethnic aspects of personhood? Ignoring race and devaluing the significance of race, its historical, social, and political proximity to personhood, is to deny the realities of racialized people. It is dehumanizing.

Academic survival

Being a Black woman faculty in a PWI is not just a matter of resistance, but it is also a matter of emotional and academic survival. Black women faculty are forever the outsider looking in, trying to break down barriers, refute stereotypes, defend against questions about your academic and relational abilities, and be on guard against microaggressions that often pierce your emotional armor. Microaggressions can be described in terms of encounters I had with students and colleagues, most of them white, who incessantly questioned my competence (despite my clearly exceeding the qualifications for the position); it was also their attitudes, unspoken words, and body language that suggested I was not welcome.

Academic survival meant constantly proving to students and staff that my health science knowledge and teaching abilities were good enough (Gutiérrez y Muhs 2012). Black women faculty are viewed with suspicion;

their qualifications and competence are scrutinized more vigorously in comparison with their non-Black peers. Academic survival requires a game plan. It requires careful strategizing to avoid the microaggression landmines ready to explode at a moment's notice. How do Black women faculty create a suit of armor to protect against the myriad of stereotypes, tropes, and microaggressions we experience in the academic world? The keys to academic survival includes code switching.

Code switching

I believe we have versions of ourselves that we present to the world depending on the circumstances and environment with which we are interacting. We flow in and out of identities depending on the situation and self-critique our identity performance (Alexander, Anderson, and Gallegos 2005). It is a struggle at times to understand my own code switching, so how on earth can I move past the constant internal turmoil resistance brings?

Code switching is an academic survival strategy I adopted on my first day at work. From day one, I had a self-talk about which parts of myself I was able to reveal, how to navigate the stereotypes, how to create a path that balanced my love of teaching with my Blackness. Entering the university was like entering a car, getting ready to drive. I had to perform the *safety check*. Can I be myself? Can I share the “real” me with the people around me? Is it safe to show emotion? How much emotion is okay? Can I speak freely, or should I keep conversations very superficial? What about my resting face?

I would often pull into the parking lot at the university, park my car, take a deep breath, and envision my walk through the corridors up to my office. I would sit in my driver's seat thinking deeply about how I would walk down the hallways, whom I might see, the facial expression I needed to keep on my face, the positive mental attitude I needed to maintain, not just from the car to the office but from the office to the classroom.

Whether I had a good morning or not, whether my hour-long drive to work put me in harm's way or weather conditions rendered me late, I didn't have the luxury of getting into my feelings, because I was on display at all times, performing myself on campus and trying to avoid Black woman stereotypes at all costs. Put on a smile, think happy thoughts, I would tell myself. It was all part of my weekday ritual, putting on my emotional cloak to hide my authentic self. Then, I would open the car door and take a long, deep breath, taking in every ounce of that cool, fresh rural air. As I walked toward the institution, I thought about how comforting and uncomfortable it felt to be cloaked in an invisible external armor of politeness, happiness, and kind gestures that made me appear non-threatening and human.

Code switching salvaged my emotional and psychological well-being each and every day. In Hall et al.'s (2012) study of the experiences of Black

women in predominantly white workplace settings, participants recalled feeling like they were under a microscope, every move being watched in their white observers' efforts to confirm meanings which were often derived from stereotypes (such as "the angry Black woman," "the secretive Black woman," and "the exceptional Black woman" —exceptional because the way she speaks, her appearance, her behavior align with dominant culture expectations).

There were occasions when I attended committee meetings and sat in a sea of fifty to sixty faculty members as the only Black person and the only Black female in the group. I automatically switched to performance mode, acutely aware and sensitive to how the people around me perceived me. I used gentle, "non-threatening" language, attitudes, and behaviors at all times. When I managed to speak up at staff meetings, I shrunk my body language and used the gentlest of voices in a tone that was sweetly pleasant for fear of being perceived as angry or bitter. During class time, I switched things up by speaking in a very friendly tone and always monitored my resting face to make sure I didn't appear upset or frustrated. I switched my vocabulary, taking care to speak to colleagues, staff, and students with sterile and formal language, sanitized of colloquialisms and slang.

Code switching was an academic survival strategy that took up as much time as a part-time job—an unpaid, unrewarded part-time job in addition to my faculty work. It is work that my white colleagues were not burdened with. Inside institutional walls, the strategizing and navigation work made it hard for me to recognize myself. I always looked forward to just sitting in my car in the parking lot where I was able to remove the performative shell, lower my shields, and be free.

Living in contradiction

Turner (2002) described the ways in which women of color faculty must negotiate spaces between the institutional environment and personal/intellectual/emotional safety. Turner refers to this as "lived contradiction" (Turner 2002, 75). In other words, to survive in the institution, to be myself and be a presence in a PWI institution, is to be embattled—the institution versus my personhood. Whiteness is a battle of oppressive attrition, wearing down the resistor until that individual becomes a shell of themselves. Can self-betrayal be reconciled? What are the long-term effects of *war at work*?

What are the tensions?

It was exhaustingly difficult to live a double life at work. My daily work-life consisted of carefully coordinated code switching, self-monitoring, and measuring reactions to my behavior. On the inside, I really wanted to breathe

out, relax my shoulders, laugh, and shoot the breeze. In most cases, I was the fly on the wall, participating on the fringes of conversations, daintily nodding, not always having the strength to interject when I overheard a racist comment or culturally biased remark about a student—“They need to speak English even if they’re not in the lab, we speak English in Canada” or “Well, I think in their culture, they’re used to being in subservient positions, so they’re really lucky to be here.” Their racism was more subtle with me—the exclusion, questioning my knowledge, skills, and abilities.

Participants in Kelly and Winkle-Wagner’s (2017) study of Black women faculty in PWI described overwhelming feelings of isolation because they were the only Black faculty. Participants described difficulties connecting with white peers and tensions that arose due to dissimilar political and social views. One participant recounted her experience of finally receiving tenure, only to have peers and administration alike question whether university standards were lowered to accommodate her tenure appointment.

These tensions and stressors can lead to *racial battle fatigue* (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. 2012). Black women in the workplace who experience a barrage of microaggressions on a regular basis can suffer from physical, emotional, and psychological symptoms which can vary from tension headaches to memory loss (Hall et al. 2012). I regularly suffered from tension headaches and anxiety and was a little depressed. Avoidance was the tried and true strategy I used to cope. Sometimes crying during my hour-long drive home was another go-to method. My thoughts and feelings found no resolution; I carried them with me everywhere I went.

Tensions affect the mind and body, since they are inescapably connected. It makes sense that my responses to the social and emotional tensions at work had physiological consequences. My mind and body engaged the fight or flight cascade much too often, which was an unsustainable physiological solution to institutional oppressions. It was after gaining over thirty pounds, no longer being able to go on my regular jogs, and watching my diabetes go out of whack that I came to realize that I urgently needed a strategy to reconcile these institutional tensions. My physical health depended on it.

Troubling the tensions

The truth is, I don’t exist in a silo; I am part of an interconnected web of living beings. I felt uncomfortable and disconnected from my colleagues because I just wasn’t able to be my authentic self. It took a lot of emotional and mental *work* to keep up with the code switching, facades, performances, and pretense each day. I cannot change (nor would I want to) what I look like, and to a certain degree, I cannot change how I am perceived, so I thought about the ways in which I might reconcile the discomfort, the shell of myself, the untenable tensions I experienced at work.

We have been conditioned to believe different is strange, something to be feared. As such, each of us needs to take responsibility for our own biases and fears, and for de-centering our own ideologies and practices, even for just a moment. It takes a willingness to be vulnerable, open to discomfort and agitation, because dwelling in reflective discomfort often leads to self-discovery and growth.

I considered meditative and mind–body practices to safely reflect on, reconceptualize, and reconcile my internal and external institutional tensions. I wanted to take a stab at *troubling the tensions*. I reviewed a few popular meditative practices, such as Zen Buddhism. Bai (2018) makes a strong argument for the use of Zen arts as a transformative tool. Zen arts come from the Buddhist tradition of mind/body/spirit approaches to meditation. Zen meditation encourages certain postures, breathing techniques, and reflection aimed at improving focus, reclaiming thoughts and reducing stress. For example, an enlightening and physically satisfying way to work through some of these tensions is Neigong, which incorporates both physical and mindful elements. I used Neigong to reflect on various uncomfortable, disturbing academic experiences at the institution. In doing so, I was able, at least in part, to reconcile some of these tensions in ways that helped me manage my emotional and physical responses to those academic conflicts. I learned that being present in each moment and searching ways in which to connect with others within the academy is a habit worth forming, for my own mental, emotional, and physical health. When used purposefully, Zen can help reconfigure unproductive tensions into something more useful and less emotionally and physiologically damaging.

Zen meditation allowed me the freedom to reflect on my experiences without making it a purely intellectual exercise. Instead, I used all my senses when I replayed academic moments in time, going deeper than individual difference. My inner sight—replaying uncomfortable, painful episodes of structural racism, as though it were a movie someone else was starring in. I forced myself to remember as many details as I could see and sat in the discomfort. As I replayed various scenes, I listened for cues in conversations (as I recalled them). What was happening in the background? Who was there? What were the environmental “props” in the scene? And I sat in reflection on those key items, deep breathing as the painful parts rolled in and out of focus. Were there certain smells (in the cafeteria or break room) associated with the event I was recalling/replaying? What were they? I remembered, and breathed, and analyzed until the discomfort was felt but understood. The pain was more bearable, and had a place in my memory that I could control. Breaking down each episode into manageable pieces, analyzing in safety, facing the discomfort, breathing deeply through painful recollections by allowing my mind to have visceral exchanges with my body, gave me control, insight, and, in some ways, more peace.

I reflected on my faculty experiences through a meditative lens and asked myself important *who/what/where/when/why* questions. For example, when I reflected on my attempts to reach out to faculty colleagues, I asked myself *who* I chose to reach out to, and *why*. Was there something I missed? Did I assume certain colleagues would be more likely to connect with me more than others? *Why* did I feel that way? Were my assumptions based on facts or biased perceptions?

Combining a meditative mindset, reflection, discomfort, and discovery is one approach to troubling academic tensions that can be productive, to the point where those tensions might even be reconfigured. Meditative approaches and reflective practices were safe and productive ways for me to intellectually and emotionally interrogate my faculty experiences. In fact, other mind–body practices have the potential to transform what I experienced as hostility and negativity in the institution into more manageable interactions on campus (Kelly 2017). Over time, meditative reflection practices become habit-forming, and conditioned responses, especially those related to *racial battle fatigue*, give way to fertile tightness.

Transforming the tensions

Transforming academic tensions is a process, not necessarily a goal. Tensions are healthy when they give rise to positive and new understandings of ourselves and the spaces we occupy. Meditative reflection is one approach to reconciling academic tensions. Other interesting approaches also have implications for personal health and well-being.

When I was faced with marginalization and isolation at the institution, it was difficult to remember that my faculty position did not define me. Moving forward, I will gently remind myself that my job is not the only or most important aspect of my personhood.

One of my coping strategies will be to celebrate my identities outside of teaching (volunteer, mentor, mother, cos player). Kelly (2017) suggests social networks outside of work (family, friends) are a mainstay coping strategy for Black women faculty.

Other scholars who study Black women in academia offer multiple and multi-level strategies to help Black women survive the institutional environment while keeping their mind, body, and soul intact. Watson (2017) suggests a key strategy is to collaborate with other BIPOC professionals, within and external to the education sector, who are keen on addressing and confronting issues that affect Black women faculty. This collaboration could be in the form of conversations, coalition formation, symposiums, or policy huddles to discuss social justice practices in PWIs. Professional relationships with other faculty members who have similar social, racial, or sexual identities is another high on the priority list (Gutiérrez y Muhs 2012). Additionally, Black

women faculty should form identity-based micro-networks enlisting friends and members of various social networks to engage in discussion and develop a community of practice around shared identities and experiences on a regular basis (Gutiérrez y Muhs 2012, 280).

Transforming academic tensions into manageable, livable, synergetic agitations without sacrificing my heart and soul is no easy task. I have chosen to combine what I have learned (and continue to learn) about the nature of being through meditative practices such as Zen to reflect on and deconstruct institutional oppressions and my responses to them. Furthermore, I have incorporated some suggestions Black women faculty as well as notable scholars have used to manage race and gender-based tensions on university campuses.

I used my toolbox of strategies, starting with some of the coping strategies I discussed previously. I did a lot of deep breathing. I reminded myself (during my daily affirmations) that my faculty position did not define me. I created a social network of friends and family with whom I talked and shared. It was a welcome relief, a much-needed catharsis. I found other Black faculty outside of the institution who were interested in taking action to promote equity in academia and counter academic oppressions.

Blending meditative practices with action-oriented relational efforts helped me to regulate my mind, body, and spirit. I focused my energies on being present and in the moment. I captured opportunities to transform tensions one situation at a time. For example, when faced with a situation where students questioned my competence, I immediately focused my attention on breathing and posture and reminded myself that my faculty position did not define me. I thought about the relational connectedness I had with students and side-stepped differences to find our mutual humanity. I then reached out to a trusted colleague outside of the university to debrief, exhale, and express my frustrations, concerns, and questions. I became better equipped at managing my responses to institutional tensions. At times I was able to transform these tensions; at other times the tautness remained, but I had an outlet, at least one person willing and able to listen, who allowed me to purge if I needed to.

Race, gender equity, and whiteness in academia are not my problems per se, it's a systemic problem that can't be fixed by one person. But I am responsible for the ways in which I respond to academic tensions, and the care I take to nurture (not torture) my mind, body, and spirit. It's worth the exploration to find the right balance (if there is such a thing) between academic oppressions and academic survival.

Conclusion

Black women who work in post-secondary institutions navigate multiple socially stratified spaces, including race, gender, and socioeconomic status (Kelly 2017, 12). Being intersectionally positioned in academia leaves Black

women faculty vulnerable to oppositional tensions between the authentic self and our code switching self, being an insider and outsider, our Blackness being hyper-scrutinized and invisible, playing the role of the resistor while also experiencing institutional oppression. Black women faculty often face questions about our competence from students and colleagues, undermining our authority (Turner 2002, 76). These microaggressions often lead to racial battle fatigue, emotional distress, and physical illness because of overstimulation of the fight or flight response.

Meditative practices were practical, sustainable ways that helped me to stand firmly and calmly in whatever space I occupied on campus. I used self-care techniques that allowed me to stand tall in the discomfort of oppressive forces, to encounter others' perspectives and be confident enough to interrogate perspectives that are based on stereotypes and false "facts" when the opportunity arises.

Self-care also meant seeking out communities of practice where I had opportunities to learn from and share with other teaching faculty who were intersectionally positioned like me. I befriended faculty and staff who had similar interests in social justice for Black women faculty and relied heavily on my social support network, which provided me with an outlet to express my frustrations and concerns. I used deep breathing often, and, while doing so, reminded myself that no matter what, my position did not define me.

You can reclaim and transform academic tensions, and traumatic racialized experiences by using reflective practices to guide healing. Meditative practices, as described in this chapter, compliment the anti-oppressive self-care work necessary to survive the academy. Academic survival requires making space for emotional, mental, and spiritual resistance downtime (Gorski 2019). Take an active role on committees responsible for hiring and retention, advocate for equity (not diversity) in hiring practices, promote the benefits of hiring culturally enriched women faculty. I cannot and should not be the only person actively advocating for this, but I do accept the prospect of being the first at my institution to do so.

Non-Black women faculty can and should be part of the supportive circle Black women faculty seek. Allyship is a responsibility which shouldn't be taken lightly. True allies initiate connections, seek guidance, take the time to do their own research about justice and equity for Black women faculty, speak up and speak out for equity and justice for their Black women colleagues, especially in academic spaces where Black women faculty are excluded.

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10

COLORISM IN THE LATINA COMMUNITY

The internalization of racialized sexism

Melissa K. Ochoa

I had arrived late the night before my cousin's quinceañera in Monterrey, Mexico, and was still tired from the flight. These occasions are always formal, so it is customary to have our hair and makeup professionally done. I was half awake the next morning when the hairdresser began to section off my hair and curl it. As she enthusiastically shared stories about her family, I listened and nodded. She told me that her daughter's new baby was the cutest ever, and then she said something that startled me awake. "He is just so beautiful, because his skin color is just like yours," she said as she caressed my arm.

He is really blanquito (white) and güerito (has white features). He has light eyes and we think they might be blue. Even though my daughter is dark like me, his father is light-skinned, so the baby came out hermoso (beautiful). He is going to be handsome.

I didn't know what to say. I know colorism exists in the Mexican community—we have had similar conversations in my family, but I hadn't expected it to come from a stranger. Should I lecture her? Would it be presumptuous of me as a white-passing Mexican woman to speak on this issue to a darker-skinned woman who is also providing me a service? All of these thoughts kept racing through my mind. She proudly presented his picture to me on her phone, and I responded, "Aww! Look at those cachetones (big cheeks)! He is so adorable!! Ay, all babies are beautiful." I had hoped that my message would be received, but she responded with a big smile as she put her phone in her pocket and picked up the hairbrush, "Yes, yes! Of course, all babies are cute, but the güeritos are more beautiful." I bit my lower lip and half-heartedly

*shrugged my shoulder. She continued to talk about other things, but I just replayed this conversation over and over, wondering what I could've said to her, if anything. Living with white privilege, I certainly understood why she would be happy her grandchild was lighter-skinned. I couldn't fault her for it. I couldn't preach to her about why she shouldn't give in to colorism when I greatly benefited from it. I know that because of my skin color I receive better customer service and career opportunities, and I don't have to fear the police. I don't know what it is like to live otherwise. I could never understand her perspective, so what right did I have to reprimand her?*¹

Colorism is the discriminatory practice of privileging individuals with lighter skin color and Anglo features over those with darker skin color and racialized physical features (Hunter 2008; Garza 2014; Harris 2018). It is an extension and byproduct of racism. In the United States, the identity “white” first appears in colonial law in the late 1600s, automatically creating an “other/ nonwhite” category (DiAngelo 2018). Whites classified people based on “perceived degrees of blood” or phenotypic features and placed them into racial categories. They used these classifications to justify and maintain systemic racism. Since skin color is the most salient feature in public spaces, it was especially used as a distinguishing characteristic (Montalvo 2004). White people were, and continue to be, at the top of the racial hierarchy. Historically, they have had more control over social resources and have wielded the most power to create racial stereotypes and enact institutional discrimination (Feagin 2013; Thompson and McDonald 2016). A core aspect of systemic racism is the *white racial frame*, which is “an overarching white worldview that encompasses a broad and persisting set of racial stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, images, interpretations and narratives, emotions, and reactions to language accents, as well as racialized inclinations to discriminate” (Feagin 2013, 3). The white racial frame denigrates nonwhite characteristics and idolizes whiteness, including skin color. This dominant frame is built into the foundation of US American culture, normalizing the association of whiteness with positive traits. White privilege—such as having a stereotypical white-sounding name on a resume, having an ethnic-free² accent when speaking English (Garza 2015), or having Anglo physical features (Gonzalez-Barrera 2019)—affords individuals better life opportunities and outcomes (Harris 2018). It is no surprise then that people of color also adopt the white racial frame to some extent by putting preference into white European standards of beauty, such as lighter skin color. Colorism permeates communities of color, ranging from family members to people in positions of power, news anchors, celebrities, and media (Hunter 2008; Gómez 2008).

Just recently colorism in the Latine³ community has taken a spotlight. In June 2021, Latino American playwright Lin-Manuel Miranda issued an apology for not including any dark-skinned Afro-Latines in leading roles in *In The Heights* (Ramos Ardila 2021). Though the movie was still

a breakthrough for the Latine community, it lacked full representation and perpetuated colorism. Nevertheless, the movie sparked the much-needed awareness and conversation about colorism among Latinas. In this chapter, I will first briefly discuss how colorism in the Latina community stems from a unique history of racialized sexism through Spanish colonization. Although Latin American countries and Latine communities do not have a formal racial caste system, they use similar categories to differentiate people within their same racial group. Second, I will show the ways in which Latinas internalize and reproduce both racialized sexism and colorism through the adoption of the white racial frame. Latinas, like other women of color, reproduce colorism by purchasing various beauty products meant to modify their bodies and physical characteristics in attempts to achieve the white Eurocentric beauty standard. However, the constant reproduction of white beauty standards in the media, in the home, and within oneself has consequences. Racialized sexism and colorism impact Latinas' mental health and life outcomes. Lastly, I will discuss proactive ways to counter colorism and the white racial frame within ourselves, our Latine families, and our communities.

Colonization: Creating racialized sexism and colorism

Skin color stratification, or colorism, has deep colonial roots. The Spanish conquistadors arrived on the coast of modern-day Veracruz, Mexico, by 1518 and eventually encountered the descendants of the Aztecs, the Mayans, and the Incas (Nalda, 2010; Chavez-Dueñas, Adames, and Organista 2014). The Spanish violently murdered, raped, and enslaved many Indigenous people (Anzaldúa 1999; Castañeda 1993). Garza (2014) argues that the Spanish colonization of Mexico created a *sistema de castas* (a racial caste system) in response to the offspring that resulted from the intermarriage and rape of Indigenous women by Spanish men. The Indigenous population was also decreasing due to disease and Spanish violence, so the Spaniards compensated their loss by bringing more than 10 million enslaved Africans to Latin America, which further deepened the racial binary social system of dark and light skin (Chavez-Dueñas et al. 2014; Rodriguez 2019). Colonialism and slavery simultaneously worked to maintain the racial status quo by favoring whiteness (Simpson 2015). Spanish men relied on Indigenous women's reproductive capabilities to create lighter-skinned offspring—colonizing not just the land and culture, but especially Indigenous women's bodies. This reality has been further confirmed by a recent large-scale mitochondrial DNA study of Mexicans and Mexican Americans (Kumar, Bellis, Zlojutro, Melton, Blangero, and Curran 2011). The Spanish Crown encouraged lower-ranking Spanish colonial officers to marry Indigenous women by rewarding them with land rights (Garza 2014). Indigenous women were both racialized and

sexualized by Spanish men, creating a type of racialized sexism unique to women of color. Their bodies, reduced to reproduction, were perceived as *lesser than* on both the gender hierarchy and the racial hierarchy. However, as is still the case today, those closer to “whiteness” had economic and social privileges (Bonilla-Silva 2009; Quiros and Dawson 2013).

Over time, elite light-skinned Mexican-born and Spanish women distanced themselves from darker Indigenous women (Montalvo 2004). Many darker-skinned individuals engaged in *blanqueamiento*, or ways of “whitening,” to gain social privileges for themselves and their children, which only further reproduced the notion that being dark was undesirable (Wade 1997; Montalvo 2004). The racial caste system established by the Spanish colonizers during colonial times is still evident in Latin America and within communities of color in the United States in the form of colorism. Although Latin American countries frequently use *mestizaje* as a standard identity, one that celebrates racial mixing and focuses more on national identity, research consistently shows that darker-skinned Latines are poorer than those who are lighter-skinned and have fewer social and economic opportunities (Telles 2009; Simpson 2015; Adames, Chavez-Dueñas, and Organista 2016; Rodriguez 2019). In addition, colorism persists in the Spanish language and culture. Latines tend to use affectionate nicknames based on appearances, including body size and skin color (Montalvo 2004; Garza 2015). These nicknames likely have emotional and psychological consequences for children and adults since many of these nicknames are rooted in Eurocentric beauty standards, combining sexism and racism. Though the nicknames are considered terms of endearment, Latines still place a higher value on characteristics closely associated with whiteness.

Historically, many Indigenous people saw intermarriage to the Spanish colonizers as a way to *mejorar la raza* (improve the race) by integrating more idealized European features, thereby eliminating Indigenous characteristics (Castellanos Guerrero, Gomez Izquierdo, and Pineda 2009; Chavez-Dueñas et al. 2014). People in the Latine community continue to use the expression *mejorar la raza* to explain a preference for their loved ones to marry lighter-skinned individuals (*cásate con un blanco/a*) (Comas-Díaz 1996). Chavez-Dueñas et al. (2014, 17) note other common phrases that also show idolization of whiteness:

- *Vete por la sombrita* (Go into the shade [to avoid getting darker])
- *Oh, nació negrito/ prietito pero aun asi lo queremos* (Oh, he was born Black/dark but we still love him all the same)
- *Pobrecita, tiene el cabello tan malo* (Poor little thing, her hair is so bad [coarse])
- *Eres tan Indio* (You are so Indian [connoting negative stereotypes about Indigenous people])

Whiteness is not just connected to “good” but also to “beauty,” an expectation of women. Women internalize colorism more than men perhaps because there is more societal pressure to meet beauty standards, which can also take a toll on their mental health (Wilder and Cain 2011; Landor, Gordon Simons, Simons, Brody, Bryant, Gibbons, and Melby 2013; Simpson 2015).

Studies on dark-skinned Black women have indicated a “triple jeopardy situation” in which their gender, skin tone, and race had great potential to negatively affect their self-esteem (Thompson and Keith 2001; Harrison, Reynolds-Dobbs, and Thomas 2008). These three aspects of their social identity are intersectional, creating a unique impact on all of their interactions—not just on how they are perceived and treated by others, but also on how they perceive themselves (Crenshaw 1989). Anzaldúa (1999, 42) refers to this as “intimate terrorism.” The internalization of colorism and racialized sexism, referred to as *internalized oppression*, impacts our relationship with ourselves. Nevertheless, it is understandable why women engage with white feminine beauty standards when there are benefits from doing so. Likewise, Latines also internalize and reproduce colorism because there is a clear advantage for those who do, especially for Latina women and girls.

The impact of internalizing and reproducing colorism

According to a Pew Research Center survey, Latines with darker skin are more likely than those with lighter skin to report specific incidents of discrimination, such as being treated as if they are not smart, being subject to jokes or slurs, and noticing others act suspicious of them compared with Latines with lighter skin (Gonzalez-Barrera 2019). In addition, skin color is correlated with life opportunities and outcomes, including occupation, education, housing, and employment (Murguia and Telles 1996; Allen, Telles, and Hunter 2000; Hunter 2008; Telles 2009; Garza 2014). Black girls with darker skin were perceived to be more sexually precocious and had an increased risk of school suspension (Blake, Keith, Luo, Le, and Salter 2016). Individuals with stereotypical white features such as light skin tone, light eyes, long straight hair, and stereotypical Anglo facial features have greater access to well-educated spouses, to higher social and economic status, and to healthcare (Banks 2000; Hunter 2016; Harris 2018; strmic-pawl, Gonlin, and Garner 2021). It is not just beneficial to have white privilege; being without it can be detrimental to life outcomes. This reality is why a “yearning for whiteness” continues to persist in communities of color (Glenn 2008; Rodriguez 2019). It is not surprising that communities of color continue to internalize and reproduce colorism—especially women.

Based on interviews with Mexican American and African American women, Hunter (2008) found that nearly all of the dark-skinned women wanted to be lighter at some point in their lives so that they could benefit from the social

privileges associated with whiteness. Research found a positive relationship between skin color and self-esteem for women, but not for men (Thompson and Keith 2001; Simpson 2015). Women are held to higher beauty expectations that are difficult for any woman to obtain, but because these standards are Eurocentric, they are even harder for women of color—and those expectations persist even within communities of color. People of color engage in “intra-racial prejudice” by placing preferences on lighter-skinned group members, who are perceived to be more attractive, competent, and likable, and to have a higher likelihood of societal success in education and income (Keith 2009; Burton, Bonilla-Silva, Ray, Buckelew, & Horde Freeman 2010; Haywood 2017; Rodriguez 2019; strmic-pawl, Gonlin, and Garner 2021). For example, both men and women preferred women to have lighter skin tones (Void 2019). These expectations may explain why women relatives are more likely to perpetrate colorism with children, especially girls (Wilder and Cain 2011; Hunter 2016).

Women of color can achieve idealized white characteristics in a number of ways, including hair products, eye color contacts, umbrellas to shield the sun, and cosmetic surgery. However, skin-bleaching creams are the most popular “whitening” technique worldwide, common in the Americas, Asia, and Africa (Hall 2008; Hunter 2008; Peregrino, Moreno, Miranda, Rubio, and Leal 2011). Skin bleaching is a multi-billion dollar a year industry and is poorly regulated (Hunter 2008; Peregrino et al. 2011; strmic-pawl, Gonlin, and Garner 2021). The demand for these creams remains high despite health risks associated with their usage, such as skin cancer, mercury poisoning, and permanently damaged skin (Hunter 2011; Rodriguez 2019). Mercury is known to be one of the most toxic elements for animals and plants and yet continues to be a main ingredient in the skin creams (Peregrino et al. 2011). A study of 119 US Latinas using skin-bleaching creams found that 87 percent of them had elevated mercury levels in their urine (Weldon, Smolinski, Maroufi, Hasty, Gilliss, Boulanger, Balluz, and Dutton 2000; Peregrino et al. 2011). In addition, women who used these bleaching creams also used them while they were pregnant or breastfeeding and sometimes applied them on their children (Hunter 2008). It is important not to chastise the women and men using these whitening techniques, but instead to recognize that these are the lengths some people of color might need to go to in hopes of improving their children’s life circumstances *because* of the existing racial disparity and the white racial frame.

Whitening products are used within communities of color to access social power and privileges, but they do have psychological consequences. Researchers consider “the bleaching syndrome” to be a self-denigrating process that is emotionally detrimental and may also be connected to “weak ethnic identity” and “high levels of internalized racism” (Charles 2003; Hall 2008; Rodriguez 2019). In some cases, being connected to whiteness decreased

ethnic identity. For example, Davenport (2016) found that many biracial Latines preferred to identify as white and, in general, Latines are more likely to choose a white-only identity compared with other racial groups (Harris 2018). These individuals may see the social benefits of rejecting their non-white characteristics and culture. Regardless, it is not beneficial to hate or judge people of color for wanting to improve their opportunities by accessing or yearning for whiteness. While their colorism helps maintain systemic racism and the white racial frame, they weren't the creators of it, and no matter how much whiteness they achieve, they will never be white enough to equally benefit from the system. But we can bring more awareness to our communities and implement positive color consciousness.

Decolonizing: The mind, the family, and the community

Latin America's history of colonization and slavery set the foundation for systemic racism, and we continue to see its repercussions and the maintenance of the white racial frame today within communities of color. Latin America and US Latines are color-conscious and engage in colorism by classifying other Latines as güero/a, indio/a, blanco/a, moreno/a, prieto/a, negro/a, and other racialized categories, and treating them differently (Wade 1997; Telzer and Vazquez Garcia 2009). As women of color upholding the white racial frame, we also internalize racialized sexism and enforce it on other girls and women. However, people of color can actively engage in counterframing colorism by first becoming aware of it and changing our practices starting in the home. Parents are the first socializing interactions children have, so they will be an important factor in how children see themselves and perceive the world (Wilder and Cain 2011). Women relatives, especially maternal figures, provide the most support for colorism ideology, so it is important for them to show positive color consciousness (Void 2019).

Telzer and Vazquez Garcia (2009) found participants whose parents prepared them for racial discrimination and emphasized equality of all people were somewhat more protected from colorism. "Those with darker skin and higher levels of racial socialization were more satisfied with their skin color and felt more attractive" (Telzer and Vazquez Garcia 2009, 370). Parents not only promoted racial pride but also prepared them for the reality of racism and taught them how to overcome it. Dr. Nayeli Chavez-Dueñas, a Mexican professor at the Chicago School of Professional Psychology, researches colorism and parenting styles. To counter colorism, she provides parents with the following four suggestions noted in her book *Race and Colorism in Latino Communities: Towards a Racially Conscious Understanding of Latinxs* (Rohr 2021):

- Acknowledge the reality of racism and colorism in the community and the effects it has on social privileges as well as life outcomes.

- Pay attention to how you reinforce colorism through actions and words at home, such as using coloristic nicknames like *negrítola*, *morenalo*, *güeralo*.
- Be prepared to handle pushback from family and friends who might not see a problem. Don't shut it down; reframe. For example, if a grandmother tells her granddaughter that her hair is *pelo malo*, instead of shutting her down, say, "Hair is not good or bad. Her curly hair is beautiful."
- Actively create social awareness with kids, or what Chavez-Dueñas calls "positive racial socialization," by pointing out colorist situations in the media or in conversations. Explicitly and consistently counter anti-blackness with positive words and images celebrating diversity. Affirm and compliment your child.

It is not a one-time conversation, but a constant proactive and interactive conversation between parents and their children. Although this chapter mostly discusses the effects of colorism within the Latine community, as a byproduct of systemic racism, everyone can participate in dismantling colorism by having the above conversations at home. In addition, positive racial socialization needs to counter the persistent white racial frame at school and in the community. The decision-making power positions in these spaces tend to be dominated by white US Americans, accentuating the need for everyone to engage in positive racial socialization.

Schools should include curriculum on colorism, racism, and sexism throughout the year rather than just during certain months designated to celebrate minoritized populations (Hunter 2016). In diversity and inclusion conversations, colorism often gets overlooked, but should be included to counter the narratives of anti-blackness (Thompson and McDonald 2016). In addition, there is a lack of Black and Brown educators at every level in academia (Hunter 2016). It is important not only for students of color to see themselves represented in teachers and administrators, but also equally important for white students to see people of color in these positions of power. Moreover, with the vast accessibility of the media and internet, the Latine community has broadened, and it has become easier to bring awareness to these issues and hold celebrities accountable. For example, after bringing attention to the colorism in *In The Heights*, Miranda listened and promised to "do better" in future projects to honor "our diverse and vibrant community" (Ramos Ardila 2021).

However, I think there is an expectation placed on people of color that whites do not have. They often have the unfair burden of having to choose between their communities of color or attempting to improve their life opportunities by accessing whiteness, but it is next to impossible to be both "brown enough" and "white enough" in a system built on racial disparity. Latines do need to do better to decolonize ourselves and our communities, but that alone will not dismantle systemic racism and sexism. Those of us with white

privileges need to focus our decolonization work outside of communities of color to help our marginalized communities.

As a white-passing Mexican woman, I cannot relate to the racialized sexism most women of color endure and experience, which makes some question my “Mexicanness” and “Latinidad.” But Latina poet/writer Kim Guerra (2019) reminds me:

I am a privileged Latina.
 This is hard for me to say.
 My light skin, education, and citizenship.
 Somehow, it makes me feel less Latina.
 Then, I learned I could use
 My privilege pa’ mi raza,
 Mi voz pa’ mi raza,
 Mi vida pa’ mi raza.
 This is what being Latina is about.
 (@brownbadassbonita)

Notes

- 1 The narrative is my own. I am a white-passing Mexican woman who immigrated from Mexico to the United States at four years old. Both of my Mexican parents are light skinned; my dad has blonde hair and blue eyes. I identify as a woman of color, but I understand that because of my white privilege, I will never have the racialized experiences many women of color share. For this reason, I felt I could not judge or criticize my hairdresser’s experience or colorist commentary. Instead I use my white privilege to educate and call out white US Americans on their racism in situations where they think they are in all-white settings.
- 2 I am referring to minoritized people of color with accents, not white European accents.
- 3 Many scholars have chosen to use the term “Latinx” to avoid the Latino/Latina binary, but as a native Spanish-speaker, I find that using “e” as in “Latine” is more inclusive linguistically, as it can also be applied to nationalities (“Mexicane,” “Colombiane,” etc.) and as article replacements (“les” for “las” or “los” as opposed to “lxs”). “Latine” is also the preferred term among activists in Latin American countries rather than the imposed “Latinx” from academia that the general population does not use (Del Real 2020; Ochoa 2022).

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11

FEMINISTS TALK WHITENESS

Disrupting the grip of white supremacy culture on feminist movement building

Ann Russo

How do whiteness and white supremacy culture manifest in feminist movement building? How might we cultivate an active practice of disrupting, challenging, and transforming the systemic whiteness of white-dominant feminism in ways that could contribute to multiracial and transnational antiracist feminist movement building?¹

This chapter reflects forty-plus years of my participation in antiracist feminist efforts to disrupt systemic whiteness, white supremacy, white dominance, and racism within myself and in feminist spaces and movements. In it, I share some concepts that have shaped my journey. The work of antiracist feminisms continues to be difficult, messy, and complicated, while necessary and urgent. I have come to understand that dismantling these systems requires an ongoing interrogation of the entrenchment of a white supremacist culture of individualism, competition, and binary thinking in our work as feminist educators, organizers, and activists. This culture undermines the possibilities for loosening the grip of racism and white supremacy as we build movements for broad-based social change.

In this chapter, I use both the terms *racism* and *white supremacy* to reflect an understanding of racism as systemic mistreatment, discrimination, and oppression tied to a broader power structure of white supremacy. In 1995, I read bell hooks' essay "Overcoming White Supremacy: A Comment" (1995, 184–195), where she prompted me to name white supremacy in my feminist work against racism. She argued that white supremacy is a historical system that needs to be named and dismantled as a necessary component of antiracist work. White supremacy is rooted in a history of European and US colonialism, the transatlantic slave trade, global capitalism, and imperialism that continues to be developed to this day (Okun 2023). White supremacy

is what produces systemic racism which includes individual, institutional, and structural discrimination and violence against Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, Arab, and other people of color, while systematically privileging white people, particularly those who are middle- and upper-class. While the work of challenging individual racist ideas and actions is essential, for it to truly lend itself toward social change, that work must be tied to a broader analysis of and praxis against the institutional and structural forces that systematically produce these ideas and practices, including within feminist movements. If we don't get at the systemic roots of these ideas and practices and work to collectively dismantle them, we will fail to radically shift power relations and dynamics beyond the individual (hooks, 1995, 194).

I have come to understand white supremacy not as an “extremist” ideology nor an aberration in a democratic and otherwise neutral system, but rather as a system where “white people enjoy structural advantage and rights that other racial and ethnic groups do not, both at a collective and an individual level” (Okun 2023). This structural dominance is maintained by the normative assumptions, spoken and unspoken, that

white people and the ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions of white people are superior to People of Color and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions.... [It] is ever present in our institutional and cultural assumptions that assign value, morality, goodness, and humanity to the white group while casting people and communities of color as worthless (worth less), immoral, bad, and inhuman and ‘undeserving’.

(Racial Equity Tools 2020)

As hooks writes, it is the “ideology that most determines how white people in this society (irrespective of their political leanings to the right or left) *perceive and relate* to black people and other people of color” (*emphasis added*; hooks, 1995, 185). And it is embedded in our culture, language, and norms. Thus, the feminist work of dismantling white supremacy must be both individual and collective, and must be focused, in part, on its social and historical roots. It is not enough to solely challenge individual racial stereotypes, ideas, and language, because the systemic norms, culture, and institutions continue to reproduce these inequities, injustices, and the ideologies that justify them.

White people's racist ideas and actions, and the ways we participate in and/or contribute to white supremacy, are not simply, then, individual flaws, but are reflective of a past and present structure of power that we must consistently critically address in our collective feminist work—thinking, writing, organizing, activism. From this vantage point, the question shifts from “is this person a racist?” to *how* are racism and white supremacy manifesting and shaping our individual and collective feminist work? How might our feminist work be contributing to or challenging systemic racism or white

supremacy or white dominance? What actions might we take to disrupt and challenge the systemic whiteness that manifests in our relationships and projects? What steps toward accountability might we take in relation to the ways that these feminist practices have contributed to systemic racism? These questions create a path toward collective engagement, rather than denial or simple abandonment of any person or project deemed racist.

The often exclusive focus on individual attitudes and actions has created a disconnect in understanding how white supremacy shapes social change movements, including antiracist feminisms. The individualism produced by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (a phrase coined by bell hooks to name interlocking oppressive structures) permeates the ways that many white feminists take up some of the tenets of antiracist concepts. Antiracist feminist efforts often remain focused on individual identity and actions in the context of interpersonal relationships, with less focus on how feminist work often reproduces these deep inequities, injustices, violence, and oppression. This individual and interpersonal focus prevents us from understanding how racism and white supremacy derail feminist movement building toward broader systemic change. Without such an analysis and attendant action, the system will simply continue to adapt with its roots intact.

Who am I—a personal/political genealogy

I want to begin by situating myself within a particular historical context that shapes how I have come to understand the issues, questions, and stakes for feminists talking about whiteness. I came into feminist organizing in the United States in the mid to late 1970s as a white middle-class college student. It was a transformative time for me. When I left for college in 1974, I felt desperate for a way out of the white Catholic conservative middle-class family and community in which I grew up because of the mistreatment, abuse, and violence I both experienced and witnessed. This community was embedded in patriarchal, heteronormative, racist, capitalist systems.

I inherited the dominant frameworks of these systems, and they shaped how I interpreted the everyday realities of oppression, violence, privilege, and dominance. In terms of the mental, physical, and sexual abuse I experienced and witnessed in my family, neighborhood, and schools by white men and women, I was taught that these experiences were either my problem, my confusion, my own discontent, my own fault, or my own bad behavior, while simultaneously I was taught that white people's mistreatment, segregation, and violence against people of color were justified in the name of "protecting our innocence" from what the white community projected as "their" violence. I viscerally felt that there was something deeply wrong with these injustices and violence and the logics that justified them, and yet often felt powerless to address them. I was eager for another way of living in this world.

In college, I gravitated to radical feminist, socialist, and lesbian feminist ideas and organizing. I identified with the anger against injustice and felt compelled by the call to join in a collective struggle for change. I found a language to name the injustices and violence I experienced and witnessed—sexual assault, violence, sexual harassment, child sexual abuse, racism, classism, homophobia—as well as an analysis to understand the structures—capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism, white supremacy—that produced them. Most importantly, I learned that I was not alone and that I could join others in a collective struggle to create radical social change. This understanding was life-saving and has been at the center of my life’s journey since then.

Even so, I struggled with these feminist ideas because I felt deeply implicated within these unjust systems and the dominant culture that justified them. What I was calling out in my politics included the very ideas and actions said and done by me and members of my conservative white middle-class family, Catholic schools, parishes, and neighborhoods, and I also saw threads of the words and actions of my white sister activists and friends. There was little to no room in these organizing spaces to reflect on how we ourselves have internalized and perpetrated homophobia, sexism, classism, racism, and imperialism in our lives as well as in our feminist organizing; we placed ourselves outside of these systems rather than within them, as victims rather than perpetrators. And if any of our ideas or actions strayed from our politics, we were seen as individuals on the “other” side of liberation, and some of us were seen as irredeemable. These contradictions weighed on my mind and heart.

Interlocking systems of oppression and privilege

My understanding of the contradictory understandings and feelings that bubbled up as I participated in these movements began to shift in the winter of 1982 in my graduate feminist theories class at the University of Illinois. Here we read books by radical feminists of color such as Cherrie Moraga’s and Gloria Anzaldua’s *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, bell hooks’ *Ain’t I a Woman?*, Angela Davis’ *Women, Race, and Class*, and Gloria Joseph’s and Jill Lewis’ *Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives*—all published in 1981. These books challenged the core of my white feminist politics and those of my white classmates. I identified with the anger of the writers. I was moved by their analysis of oppression and violence that were rooted in interlocking systems of sexism, racism, classism, homophobia, capitalism, and imperialism.² As a white feminist, I saw myself as implicated in their critiques of feminist ideas and movements. They spoke to the complexities and contradictions in the feminist movement work that I’d experienced, witnessed, and participated in.

The women of color feminisms developed by Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, Cherríe Moraga, Aurora Levins Morales (2019), Barbara Smith, and many others provided a glimpse into a heterogeneous, complex approach to movement building where the differences and the inequitable structural divides between us would be integral to the work for change. I often return to the line in Moraga's and Anzaldúa's introduction to *This Bridge Called My Back* when they write, "We are women without a line. We are women who contradict one another" (2015, xli). Rather than avoid or dismiss the tensions, contradictions, conflicts, and harms, they challenged feminists to address and account for the power lines that created the distortions and harms in relation to those differences. Rather than deny, ignore, or assume that our differences represented inevitable divisions, they named and addressed them.

In their work, they called for a recognition of how all of us are both oppressed and oppressors. In Moraga's essay, "La Güerra," she asks, "How have I internalized my own oppression? How have I oppressed?" (25). What I felt most moved by in the women of color feminisms developed in the 1980s and beyond was a recognition that most, if not all of us, have both been harmed and caused harm, have been both oppressed and contributed to the oppression of others, have internalized oppression and sometimes used it against ourselves. Many called for accountability across these power lines, even within ourselves, as a practice of building collective, coalitional feminist movements.

In other words, they called for building coalitions and alliances through a recognition of the interlocking power systems that structured people's locations, experiences, and relationships to one another within a context of shared and interconnected struggles. They strove to build a heterogeneous fluid feminist movement rather than one committed to absolutist one-size-fits-all frameworks. It would require a practice of naming and addressing the differences among and between us, with the recognition that Audre Lorde offers that "it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation" (Lorde, 2007, 115).

And from a recognition of differences, there's a call for a praxis of accountability that came from understanding that we are both the oppressed and oppressor, both impacted and implicated within oppressive systems, and therefore need to find ways to cultivate accountability in our collective work. Sherene Razack, in her book *Looking White People in the Eye*, aptly defines accountability as a "process that begins with a recognition that we are each implicated in the systems of oppression that profoundly structure our understanding of one another" (Razack, 1998, 10). By centering structural relationships between ourselves and others, we can take responsibility for

thinking and organizing in ways that disrupt, rather than reproduce, these systems. This approach was and continues to be life-changing.

Identity politics as a springboard for white accountability

It was in *This Bridge* where I first read the 1977 Combahee River Collective Statement's take on identity politics as a politics which "comes directly out of our [Black women's] identity" (2015, 212) and I connected it to Moraga's and Anzaldúa's concept of "theory in the flesh" which they define as developing theory "where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity" (2015, 19). The embrace of "identity politics" arose from Black feminists responding to being marginalized in feminism as well as in Black liberation movements. Both "identity politics" and "theory in the flesh" emphasize how people's identities, social locations, and everyday experience are important places of critical consciousness about who we are, what's at stake, what needs to change, and what we want to hold close. This helped me understand the importance of situating my political analysis both within my particular social location and experience (rather than generalizing to a homogeneous group) while simultaneously understanding my interconnectedness across power lines with other groups, communities, and locations.

Like other terms created within the context of radical politics, the term "identity politics" has become individualized, compartmentalized, and flattened. A white supremacist culture of individualism reduces a conversation about identity politics into one solely about which categorical identity we fit into and how that translates into our individual feminist analysis. There's a simplistic assumption that our identity determines our feminism, rather than understanding identity politics as a critical consciousness that we work to develop out of our identities and experiences within an understanding of how historical and social systems of oppression shape our interconnectedness with others (Jones and Eubanks, with Smith, 2014, 53–54).

The focus of identity politics was also not to be exclusively at the level of the individual. The goal was not to simply understand myself, my identities, my experiences, and my ideas, but it was also important not to erase ourselves or others. It provided a way to organize through a recognition of different identities and experiences and yet interconnected contexts and struggles. Naming and addressing the fissures and tensions produced by power lines would be part of the feminist collective work for social change and transformation. Our understanding of our social locations is important within a context of collective movement building with other radical, socialist, left, queer, and eventually trans and nonbinary feminists of color, third world feminists, and white antiracist feminists seeking to coalesce, collaborate, and connect in the struggle against racism, white supremacy, cisheteropatriarchy, ableism, and imperialism, with a recognition that that work will be difficult

given the power lines that also shape our histories and social relationships with one another.

Aurora Levins Morales, in her book *Medicine Stories* (1998), offers one path toward a feminist practice that can hold such a politics. In her work, she illuminates the interconnectedness of individual and collective histories, intimate and social violence, as well as personal and social change. She weaves her multiple identities and political trajectories into historical social structural processes of oppression and domination which she and her ancestors have been impacted by and implicated within. She calls on others to do the same. In her essay “Raicism,” she distinguishes racism from *raicism*:

Racism ignores the actual lives of real people and herds us into categories where the specific truth of who we are is hidden under immense lies about whole populations....Racism, or rootedness, is about testifying to our specific, complex, historical identities in relation to one another. It's about examining exactly who our ancestors have been, with each other and with other people.

(2015, 99)

Morales argues that locating our place within these dominant structures can become a space of accountability, rather than shame, or superiority. Rather than running away from these historic realities, or trying to paint ourselves as innocent, Morales calls us to step into accountability. Upon discovering that some of her ancestors in Puerto Rico had once enslaved African people, she writes,

If I could figure out how to face it and consciously carry it, how to transform shame and denial into wholeness, it would give me insights about how to work with other people trapped in the numbness and guilt of privilege.

(99)

Morales invites us to grapple with our historical and contemporary identities and legacies outside of an individualistic binary of good and evil, right and wrong, victim and perpetrator. It is a liberatory approach where we can see our lives and ancestral histories from a perspective of ongoing struggle, accountability, and change; she writes,

For people committed to liberation, to claim our descent from the perpetrators is a renewal of faith in human beings. If slavers, invaders, committers of genocide, and inquisitors can beget abolitionists, resistance fighters, healers, and community builders, then anyone can transform an inheritance of privilege or victimization into something more fertile than either.

(2015, 102)

This approach to identity politics spoke to me; it motivated me to explore a more complex set of stories related to my family histories of Irish, Italian, and Austrian immigrants, of being Catholic born and raised, of the upward mobility of my immediate family toward upper-middle-class standing in the United States, and of myself as a white feminist radical and socialist organizing for change. Rather than seeing family members, such as parents, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins, as individuals who are either good or bad, I began to situate us in a broader historical set of stories and systems to understand our role in these broader processes and to see how I can shape a different future. Morales, again, offers guidance,

As radicals, we gravitate toward the family stories of the oppressed and of the resistant, but there is an immense reserve of untapped power in seeking out our own inheritances of oppressor stories and learning from them, not because we are called out, but because we are called.

(2015, 101)

For me, I found examples of responding to such a call in the writings of white lesbians and feminists Minnie Bruce Pratt, *Rebellion: Essays 1980–1991* (1991) and Mab Segrest (2019), *Memoir of a Race Traitor: Fighting Racism in the American South* (1999), and more recently in the work of Susan Raffo, *Liberated to the Bone: Histories. Bodies. Futures.* (2022).

As white folks, we are called to develop an identity politics that includes an investigation of our own ancestral roots, to understand who and where we are in relation to others within these interlocking systems, and, from that space, to engage with others across our differences to create social change and transformation. Activist-scholar Margo Okazawa-Rey in her work on transnational feminist solidarity asks, “who must we become in order to live in the world we are seeking to create?” (Okazawa-Rey, 2023). Our individual efforts must be tied to a broader collective politic and vision. Otherwise, we remain isolated, less engaged, distant, and unable to bring our whole selves to the table of collective feminist social change. We remain locked into an understanding of our own individual identities that remain categorical, unidimensional, and disconnected from others, rather than understanding ourselves as contributors to a broader political vision and process.

Making whiteness visible—cultivating scrutiny and accountability

As noted, the focus on individual identities and experiences has tended to shape white feminist responses following the call of feminists of color in the United States and global south feminists to address racism and imperialism in feminist movements in the 1980s and onward. While many white feminists began to name, critically navigate, and challenge whiteness and white

supremacy within ourselves and our feminist work—organizing, activism, teaching, scholarship, writing—the public conversation on whiteness, white racism, and white privilege has tended to focus on the individual.

Many of us white feminists are often preoccupied with ourselves as individuals—our identities, our choices, our oppression and privilege, and our efforts to become antiracists. Many of us get caught up in the question of whether or not an individual white feminist or organization is racist, or who is most privileged, or who is the “better” ally. Individualizing the practice of antiracism has made us less attentive to the systemic ways that whiteness, white power and dominance, and white privilege are being reproduced in our collective work developing feminist ideas, theories, organizations, and movement building. Instead, this work has gotten bogged down in a culture of competition, binary oppositions, and individual righteousness. It is sometimes hard to figure out how to break this cycle of individuation. While we need to do work on our individual selves, we also need to do the work to transform our feminist politics in the service of a broader vision and politics.

In the 1990s, Tema Okun and Kenneth Jackson Jones developed a training collaborative called Dismantling Racism Works.³ Based on their work together, Okun, in 1999, offered up a list of characteristics of “White Supremacy Culture” (Okun 2024) to illustrate major obstacles to moving forward on racial justice agendas in nonprofit organizations. When I came across this listing, it helped me to understand how these norms and logics were rampant in much of the feminist organizing in which I’d been so involved, including within Women’s and Gender Studies programs. Recently, Okun (2023) launched a website project, *(divorcing) White Supremacy Culture*, which offers a more expansive analysis and understanding of this set of characteristics. This project defines white supremacy culture as

the widespread ideology baked into the beliefs, values, norms, and standards of our groups (many if not most of them), our communities, our towns, our states, our nation, *teaching us both overtly and covertly that whiteness holds value, whiteness is value.*

(emphasis mine; Okun 2023)

She lists out core values and relational dynamics such as individualism, belief in one right way, either/or thinking, fear of open conflict, perfectionism, and right to comfort. These normative ways of living, thinking, and acting undermine our ability to build collectively for social change as they are directly tied to white supremacy culture, which is intricately connected with heteropatriarchy, ableism, capitalism, and imperialism. If we are able to collectively challenge and change these norms within our social change work, we might be better able to build, deepen, and expand our collective projects and movements. Rather than engaging in the work as a way to establish our individual

rightness and perfection, as well as our defensiveness and right to comfort and ease, we might lean into the possibilities of deeper and more radical change. In other words, a critical understanding of white supremacy and its culture might better enable us to understand how it shapes our communities, collectives, and projects where we are trying to deepen and expand our reach and to build another way of relating and living as we are in the process of dismantling these systems of power.

Naming white privilege and fragility as systemic white dominance

Building up the critical scrutiny of white people around whiteness was a key goal of Peggy McIntosh's 1989 article, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." By listing out a set of white privileges she had in comparison with her African American colleagues at Wellesley, she sought to demonstrate how systemic racism and white privilege enabled her as a white professional academic to live in ways both unconstrained and uplifted because of her social location. This analysis of white privilege was something many white feminists gravitated toward with a recognition of how white privilege shaped white women's experience, even as we may also face other structural systems such as class, gender, sexuality, and religion. And yet, the phrase "white privilege" took on a life of its own, disconnected from that systemic analysis of what she also called "conferred dominance." The latter phrase—"conferred dominance"—might even be more appropriate given McIntosh's argument that privilege gives white people the "license to be ignorant, oblivious, arrogant and destructive." I doubt the phrase "white dominance" would have taken hold in the same way as "white privilege," since privilege has a positive connotation. "White privilege" as a critical concept became flattened and lost its edge. While McIntosh saw it as a springboard to accountability—"Having described it, what will I do to lessen or end it?"—the listing became an end in itself (McIntosh, 1989). Listing one's "privileges" became the practice without further social analysis. The listing of privileges sometimes buttressed white dominance, rather than acting as a social critique. Some assumed the privileges to be conditions of living that people of color should aspire to rather than a socially produced condition that produces systematic marginalization, exclusion, and mistreatment. And, most importantly, the acknowledgment of white privilege did not necessarily translate into collective *antiracist* feminist efforts toward social change.

Using a lens of *systemic* white dominance would lead us to questions that would get at the structural roots and social impact. For instance, why have the majority of recipients of affirmative action been white women, and why have white women sometimes been at the forefront of challenging affirmative

action policies? Or why is the leadership of Women's and Gender Studies predominantly white or why are white middle-class women in the leadership positions within universities, nonprofit organizations, and social service agencies? Individualism that is so embedded in white cultural logics inhibits an antiracist feminist understanding of the ways that white supremacy culture produces inequities and injustices within our feminist projects. When white feminists talk about whiteness, we must move beyond an individualized understanding of individual racist ideas, or white privileged identities, to cultivating a social analysis as well as accountability around the ways white supremacy and racism, and the cultural norms they produce, shape our experiences, our analyses, *and* our politics (see Aimee Carillo Rowe, 2008).

Similarly, the concept of "white fragility" which is the focus of Robin DiAngelo's 2018 book, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*, has circulated widely as a tool to challenge and upend racism. The book defines white fragility as white people's response when

we perceive any attempt to connect us to the system of racism as an unsettling and unfair moral offense. The smallest amount of racial stress is intolerable—the mere suggestion that being white has meaning often triggers a range of defensive responses. These include emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and withdrawal from the stress-inducing situation.

(2)

While she uses the term "fragility," she argues that these "fragile" responses are not about weakness per se; rather, "[white fragility] is a powerful means of white racial control and the protection of white advantage" (2). It maintains white women's control and advantage within social institutions, including Women's and Gender Studies programs, feminist social services, and feminist policy centers.

As to be expected, "white fragility, as a concept," like white privilege, has been individualized, flattened, and decontextualized from a system of power. I witness this when white colleagues or students will routinely admit to or point out their own individual "white fragility" without linking it to how they are using it—intentionally or otherwise—to derail and undermine antiracist efforts. It has become a descriptive term, rather than a critical tool to disrupt white dominance. In terms of an antiracist feminist strategy to disrupt whiteness, it might be more effective to name it as white dominance, rather than white fragility. And it might be less likely that people would be able to appropriate it in ways that diminish its critical intervention.

In addition, any discussion of the "white fragility" of white women in particular must contend with the historical legacy of the white supremacist weaponizing of ideas of white women's "fragility" in order to contain, control, and

criminalize men and women of color. This weaponizing has a deep history in the United States connected to lynching and ongoing criminalization of Black men, women, queer, and gender nonbinary people, to anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim discourses and policies to arguments for gentrification. And it has been at the heart of dominant white supremacist movement building premised on the idea that white people need to protect “their” women and families from “others.” Most recently, we have the emergent visibility of such weaponizing in the naming of “Karens” who are actively weaponizing their so-called white women’s fragility to demonize and criminalize Black people in the name of “protection.”

This weaponization of white feminine fragility and purity is connected to apathetic and criminalized responses to the mistreatment of and violence against women of color, including transwomen, queer, and nonbinary people. These responses are often not challenged by white-dominant feminist anti-violence efforts which in fact often perpetuate these very same ideas of an innocent white womanhood and criminalization of women of color. As Beth Richie notes, feminist-informed anti-violence organizations do not often name, challenge, and respond to violence against Black women, interpersonal, or state violence (Richie, 2012). Community and state violence against women of color is not at the top of this agenda because the movement is so thoroughly saturated in logics of the “good victim” and the “innocent victim,” which are deeply informed by white supremacy, capitalism, ableism, imperialism, and transphobia.

Whiteness and a feminist culture of individual critique and call-outs

The white supremacist culture of individualism and binary thinking is also evident in feminist collective spaces—classrooms, workshops, conferences, and protests. There’s a culture of competing over who has the best analysis, the correct theory, who is most “in the know” or the “most woke.” We critique each other’s mistakes, ideas, and actions with righteousness, zeroing in on each other’s individual flaws and failures, with the goal and impact of putting others down, and lifting ourselves up. In doing so, we undermine the possibilities of building communities for collective action. This culture of individualistic critique derails, undermines, and weakens our collective organizing, and it ultimately serves white supremacist heteronormative ableist patriarchal capitalism and imperialism. Not already being in the know becomes a sign of weakness or failure, of being on the wrong side, or of being an oppressor. The goal becomes being right while declaring someone else wrong, rather than figuring out how to work through our differences, help one another do better, encourage one another to take accountability for the harms we enact, and process the conflicts we have with one

another. Such practices would have the potential of developing our collective understanding and deepening our relationships and providing the conditions for long-term collective action. Instead, this practice of individualistic critique and putdowns only serves to undermine the possibilities for building movements for change. We need to make more room in feminist spaces to communicate not knowing, confusion, and questions we might have about ideas, takes on issues, and changes in feminist thinking.

Rather than focusing on individual flaws as indicative of a failed person, we might see our mistakes, our complicity, our failures as indicative of the power of these interlocking systems of oppression and power within our minds and hearts as well as within our institutions. The culture of critique within feminist communities makes us less likely to take risks, to learn how to collectively unlearn, and to join with one another, under the fear of being imperfect at the least and at worst perpetrators of oppression. The call-out culture that adrienne maree brown (2020) talks about has come to shape our interactions; this culture undermines the necessary work it takes to continue the processes of collective unlearning and rebuilding toward liberation. As Aurora Levins Morales offers,

Shaming, shunning, and punishing are not tools of liberation. What calling out culture misses is the truth that shedding privilege, while it can be painful, is liberating and ultimately joyful to those doing the shedding. We need to keep ourselves and each other accountable to our biggest visions of liberation, not as self-righteous prosecutors, which is in itself oppressive, but as mutual healers creating a culture of restorative justice for all.
(100)

In this context, I again return to the vision of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* and their vision of a collective of diverse experiences and voices that recognize the realities of existing, living, and organizing through multiple identities and social locations with both oppression and privilege. This understanding is also central to the praxis of transformative justice and community accountability in the context of organizing to end interpersonal, intimate, and communal violence without relying on policing and prisons. Through this praxis, we are called to learn the skills of holding the complexity of those harmed, those who harm, and witnesses to harm, recognizing that most of us have been on multiple sides of harm. This recognition has come from a powerful shift in the feminist anti-violence organizing led primarily by radical women, queer, trans, and nonbinary feminists of color. Central to this praxis has been the importance of skill-building that shifts our responses to conflict and harm away from carceral logics that are individualistic, set in binaries of victim/perpetrator, innocent/guilty, right/wrong, in the ways we try to cultivate communal support, intervention,

accountability, and prevention for all of us rather than only for some of us. Here again there's a need to unlearn carceral logics so embedded in white supremacy and white supremacy culture if we want to transform rather than reproduce the harms of these interlocking systems.

Conclusion

When white feminists talk whiteness, we must be attentive to the broader stakes and goals of antiracist feminist collective efforts to challenge, disrupt, dismantle, and end racism and white supremacy. The goal of the efforts must stretch within and beyond the individual self as a site of racism. Let's think about how to widen and deepen our ability to engage in movement building that retains the vision offered by Moraga and Anzaldúa, Aurora Levins Morales, and Audre Lorde, to name a few. White supremacy culture will keep us focused on the individual, on the logics of binaries, on maintaining its rules of engagement that prevent collective movement building and social change. While we are very much a product of white supremacist patriarchal capitalist imperialism, we can also change and transform ourselves and one another in the process of building communities of resistance and change. Without intentionally changing the ways these systems of power shape our identities, our ideas, our relationships, our actions, and our politics within collective movements for change, the ongoing impact of these systems and the dominant culture will continue to shape a multiracial feminist movement that prioritizes the individual over the collective, the most privileged over the most marginalized.

Notes

- 1 I use the phrase *white-dominant feminism* to mean feminist ideas, organizations, and movements that tend to center the values, perspectives, needs, and vision of white middle-class feminists while speaking as if they were universal.
- 2 The frame of *interlocking* is articulated within the Combahee River Collective Statement, which states "The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular ask the development of an integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking" (in Jones and Banks, eds., with Barbara Smith, 2014, 45). This concept predated Crenshaw's coining of the term *intersectionality* (1992).
- 3 The training collaborative no longer offers workshops but has a web-based workbook that you can find here: <https://www.dismantlingracism.org/>.

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12

BEYOND CHOICE

A dialogue on the whiteness of liberal feminism and reimagining freedom beyond individual choice

Houda Ali and Britt Munro

The dialogue form has a long history in antiracist feminist theorizing. From James Baldwin's intergenerational dialogue with Nikki Giovanni (1973), to "A Conversation between Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich" (1981/2007), to bell hooks and Cornel West's discussions in *Breaking Bread* (2017), feminist and antiracist thinkers have long used the dialogue form as a way to *think together* without erasing the differences that shape their relations to one another and to theory. In refusing to collapse different positionalities into a single voice, the dialogue form embodies Audre Lorde's (2017) commitment to a solidarity forged, not through sameness, but through coming to understand the *relatedness of our differences*.

In writing this chapter as a dialogue, we hope to pay homage to these ideas. As an Arab Muslim woman and a white woman growing up in the Australian settler colony, our different historical relationships to both liberalism and feminism are deeply entangled. Images of white feminist empowerment have long been produced through distance from the racial fantasy of the "oppressed Muslim woman"; at the same time, Muslim women in the West¹ face enormous pressure to demonstrate that they are *not* oppressed by performing the liberal values of individual choice, autonomy, and empowerment. By thinking through our different relationships to these dilemmas, we hope to reach a better understanding of the role of whiteness in mainstream liberal feminism, and to trace some of the ways in which race and class frame the concept of feminist "choice." We do so in the hopes of contributing to a feminist ethic that does not depend on the erasure of non-liberal lifeworlds, one that is adamantly anti-capitalist and that embodies the praxis of deep listening and care that we seek to practice in relation with one another.

This conversation took place via email in early 2021 on unceded Lenape and Wurundjeri lands.

Britt: It's exciting to finally sit down to write out this conversation with you—this is a conversation that we have been having together for years now, and one that has taken us in so many different directions. I think our curiosity about these questions—what *is* feminism and *what can feminism be*, how is liberal feminism tied to whiteness, what is feminism *without* liberalism—all of these questions emerge out of a kind of rupture or a discomfort that we experienced with mainstream liberal feminism, and an attempt to try and find the language to describe that discomfort. And perhaps also an attempt to talk about that discomfort without losing sight of what, for both of us, is also a deep gratitude to certain histories of feminist thought and struggle....

Houda: I'm grateful to be having this conversation with you. I think for me there was not a specific moment of what you describe as a “rupture” with feminism—by that I mean, there was never a time when I ever fully trusted the language of feminism or found myself identifying, and then later dis-identifying, with that language. Instead, my relationship to feminism has always been marked by ambivalence. It is a relationship that has been shaped by anti-Muslim racism or Islamophobia² and then later also, Islamophilia (the objectification of Muslims as objects of love or adoration). From an early age I understood the dangers of identifying with feminism as it had been used as a way to racially “other” people who looked like my mother. The Islamophobic trope of the “oppressed Muslim woman” was familiar to me long before I could give it a name. I remember my mum arriving to pick me up in a hijab at my majority white primary school, and noticing the patronizing and uncomfortable stares. Perhaps it was her assumed lack of a liberal “feminism” that made her subject to the stares of Islamophobes, who sought to “free” her from her subjugation.

Initially as a child, I refused to wear the hijab because I wanted to protect myself from people who wanted to impose this reading on me. I think that is how I would describe my unease with feminism—as the feeling of having a different lifeworld, a different reality and aspiration forcefully imposed on me. I did not fully understand what was being imposed, but I remember identifying it as foreign to my mother's way of being. Not my own, but my mother's. My mother's religious practice and the embodied Islam that she lived was something I knew I had to work toward as a Muslim, although I did not know if I could ever actualize it. When

I did wear the hijab after moving to a new high school, I refused to leave my house in the fear that someone from my old school would notice me. I am not entirely sure what it is that I feared. It may have been that I was not ready to answer questions about why I wore a hijab because I didn't have answers, at least not the "choice" answer expected of me.

Britt: There was something that language didn't capture....

Houda: I understood Islam to be about surrender. My mother's response to why she wore the hijab was always "because Allah ordained it." My reluctance then to find an answer came from a place of struggling to fit the concept of surrender into the liberal language of individual choice—of *feminist* choice—that was expected of me.

Britt: Yes. And I'm thinking—it can be difficult to know when the very language you are being asked to speak back in fails to recognize your way of being. Sometimes, unease—a kind of *bodily* unease—is the only thing telling you that there is something else—something that is being erased through the language that you are required to speak. Maybe silence is one way to refuse that erasure?

Houda: I do experience it as a refusal. I think that is something I appreciate from the writing of US "third world feminists,"³ and/or Black feminists and Womanists; their recognition of embodied knowledge, and the ways in which moments of unease or discomfort can be important opportunities for learning. Audre Lorde once wrote,

Our feelings are our most genuine paths to knowledge. They are chaotic, sometimes painful, sometimes contradictory, but they come from deep within us. And we must key into those feelings and begin to extrapolate from them, examine them for new ways of understanding our experiences.

(2004)

Even my apprehension in writing as a Muslim on feminism is something I can learn from. I am wary of feminism's contested role in the experiences of Muslim women. If I denounce feminism as un-Islamic I risk denying decolonial Muslim feminists any significance in the struggle for gender justice and legitimating exaggerated and often misplaced claims of feminism being the greatest threat to the Islamic tradition. Yet, if I rush to claim that Islam is "the most feminist religion,"⁴ then I translate an Islamic lifeworld into terms that, burdened with their own cultural and historical baggage, may fail to capture its nuance. Both of these positions—of *most feminist* and *anti-feminist*—attempt to resolve a tension in one direction. Yet I'm reminded by Saba (2005) that creating

the kind of space that does not demand an immediate resolution is an important pedagogical practice in that it allows us to open up *other* kinds of questions. Such a practice asks that we leave open “the possibility that the task of thinking may proceed in directions not dictated by the logic and pace of immediate political events” (Mahmood 2005, 196). My unease, then, is perhaps important to remain with, in that it offers a space to highlight tensions that may not always be recognized if I, or we, were to staunchly locate ourselves as feminist or anti-feminist.

Britt: Yes. And just as the *unease* you are describing tells you something important about how the discourse of liberal-individual choice came up against your embodied reality, my own experience sheds light on the opposite. For me, the language of choice came very easily. Growing up in ‘90s white Australian suburbia, I inherited a feminism that was deeply framed by its commitment to individual choice. A bit of background for our readers—the ‘90s signaled the beginnings of Western liberal feminism’s co-optation by the rationality of *neoliberalism*, which reframes the political subject as an *economic* subject, and seeks to extend the logics of free-market relations to all spheres of human life (Brown and Cruz 2016, 72; Rottenberg 2018). What this means is that mainstream feminism in the West began to move away from pushing for freedom through structural reform (right to equal pay, right to birth control, right to safe abortion), and toward a notion of feminist freedom grounded in increasing consumer power and the depoliticized language of individual lifestyle choice. Increasingly by this metric, *any* woman making *any* choice for herself—whether that choice was to get a nose job, attend a pro-life rally, or join the front lines of US imperial wars—was sold as inherently empowering and thus feminist. At that point, feminism stopped looking like a collective movement and became all about individual women’s choice, which, as bell hooks (2014) has pointed out, isn’t really feminism at all.

Whatever we make of neoliberalism’s appropriation of feminist language, however, this was an ideology grounded in a concept of *what it means to choose freely* that fundamentally resonated with the worldview I had been born into—a liberal worldview, with its commitment to a self-transparent, ends-choosing⁵, autonomous individual subject.

Houda: By ‘liberal worldview,’ you mean...

Britt: I mean a worldview that has at its heart a particular liberal idea of the free subject...an idea developed during the Enlightenment in Europe and institutionalized throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries, which has fundamentally shaped the Western social order ever since (Nicolacopoulos 2008, 5; Wynter, 2015).⁶ Historically within liberalism, the free subject was defined first by their ability to separate out their ‘private’ self (their particular raced, classed, gendered, or religious identity) from their ability to freely reason, where reason was considered ‘public’ and universal. The subject whose reasoning could not be separated from her particular identity was, by this definition, unfree. In many ways, this idea continues to shape liberal imaginaries of freedom today—to be free, a person must be able to show that their choice was *theirs and theirs alone*, and that their mode of reasoning was not itself influenced by any *particular* factors (race, religion). The thing is when you start to look at how these divisions (between ‘free’ and ‘unfree,’ public and private, particular and universal) have actually functioned historically within the liberal tradition you start to understand that they are not *descriptions* so much as methods of reproducing racial (and other) boundaries...a common defense of British imperialism by nineteenth-century liberals was that colonized populations were not ‘ready for freedom’ because they had not yet developed the capacity for reason, being trapped in their particular customs and traditions (see Mehta 1999, Losurdo 2011). J.S. Mill, probably the most influential liberal theorist of the nineteenth century, infamously declared that “Liberty, as a principle, has no application to any state of things anterior to the time when mankind have become capable of becoming improved by free and equal discussion. Until then, there is nothing for them but implicit obedience to an Akbar or a Charlemagne, if they are so fortunate to find one” (Mehta 1999, 70).

Houda: Yes—liberalism today likes to imagine that it has transcended this inheritance, but its vision of freedom remains tied to these racial and colonial origins. I am thinking of Losurdo’s “Liberalism: A Counter-History,” in which he explains that the twin birth of liberalism and chattel slavery was no coincidence. At its inception, the political philosophy of liberalism spoke for a community of white property-owning males who understood themselves as the natural inheritors of “liberty,” destined to exercise mastery over racialized and colonized peoples who weren’t considered deserving or capable of freedom. Today, the persistence of whiteness as the unspoken, “invisible” norm in liberal societies means that the exclusion of racialized people continues, but under the guise of some subjects being more “free,” more “rational,” more “able to choose” than others....

Britt: And it seems that at the heart of the relationship between liberalism and whiteness is this invisibility of whiteness as a group

identity, because this is what allows liberalism to frame white bodies as able to transcend their particularity and gain access to universal, ‘public’ reason in a way that others cannot. White bodies are those bodies that are free to imagine ourselves as *outside of power, as outside of culture, as outside of history*. Growing up, I know that I saw “race” (naturalized as *culture* in the post-racial language of twenty-first century Australia) as something that *other* people had. I knew that I had a gender, but I experienced this as something imposed on me from the outside, an obstacle to my *true* self. To be free as a woman meant to be recognized as equal to a man, to be seen *beyond* one’s womanness. And I think this fantasy of the “true self” as something that transcends one’s particular social (historical, cultural, political) relations shaped my idea of, not just freedom, but of *feminist freedom*. The kind of person able to choose freely, I thought, had to be in possession of an *individual* will, and able to separate that will from outside influences or limitations. The kind of subject who I believed was able to choose freely was thus a deeply oppositional subject, pitted against a patriarchal society that sought to limit her freedom. This understanding of individual freedom framed the kinds of feminist heroes I grew up with, from the defiant “Girlpower” idols of my youth to the trailblazing women we learnt about in school. Both fit neatly into the idea that to be feminist meant to refuse the expectations and limitations set upon you by society—to *choose*, individually, to be free. Today, I can see many problems with this reading of feminism.⁷ But what stands out to me most is the understanding of power that sits at its heart—the idea that power is something that comes at you from the outside in and stops you from expressing your ‘true’ self, which was there, fully formed, all along (see Butler 1997, 12–18; Mahmood 2005, 17). Because society and culture, in this reading, were understood as constraining (and not *producing*) the individual, to choose freely meant to act in defiance of your collective identity—to set aside your religion, your race, your gender. Only *then*, free from “outside” interference, could you exercise a will that was *truly* your own.⁸ Of course, this was in bad faith, as racialized people were not seen as able to “set aside” their group identities (only whiteness being considered *universal*), and so it was white people, more often than not, who appeared as truly free, as *truly* able to choose. This was, then, a way of making racial hierarchies appear *natural*. Looking back, it also seems like such an impoverished account of just how deeply *social* our desires, values, and perceptions always-already are....

Houda: This understanding of freedom was always a source of tension for me. Not only because I understood that a body like mine could not be seen as a ‘free’ liberal individual—I would always be tied to a group identity, a racialized identity. But also because I understood that my will was never mine alone. My own personal freedom was lived through the Islamic concept of *Tawwakul*, that is the reliance on Allah. To submit to the will of Allah above not just our own will, but any dominating, supremacist force is crucially empowering for me as a Muslim. By empowering here, I am speaking to the experience of contentment and freedom from worldly concerns, rather than empowerment lived through the assertion of individual will upon the world. But I wonder how much a feminism grounded in a liberal assumption of freedom in individual agency can give space to this surrender without deeming it incomplete or invalid.

Britt: Yes. That question brings to mind Saba Mahmood’s (2005) study of the Islamic women’s piety movement in Egypt during the 1990s, *Politics of Piety*—I will always be grateful to you for introducing me to that book. In some ways, she is posing the same question. The women’s movement that Mahmood is studying is complicated—at least from a liberal-feminist perspective—in that, while it involves women entering previously male-dominated spaces to share Islamic teachings, they do not claim to do so in order to challenge *patriarchy*, but rather to strengthen their agency *as religious subjects* (2005, 15). Many of the qualities that for these women define a pious religious subject (shyness, modesty, submission) do not run contrary to patriarchal norms and structures; in some cases, are even enabled *by* them, scaffolded *into* them, and so by and large the pietists upheld these norms (2005, 5–6). Yet rather than rushing to judge whether the pietists qualify as feminist or anti-feminist, Mahmood instead casts a wider net, asking *what are the sources of meaning and agency in these women’s lives*, and in what ways might their practices be understood as *tools* used to cultivate these particular sources of agency?

Behaviors such as veiling and practicing the virtues of patience and submission are not easily understood as agency from within a liberal-feminist common sense, which looks for agency in demonstrations of direct *resistance to patriarchal norms*. Yet Mahmood demonstrates that, while the participants of the Mosque movement are not engaged in resistance to patriarchal norms, valuable forms of religious agency are tied to the ways in which they *inhabit* such norms. She is careful to point out that this does not mean that gender injustice does not exist in the movement or that this should not

be critiqued (2006, 62). Rather, Mahmood simply demonstrates that viewing the piety movement through the lens of women's freedom or unfreedom is insufficient to understanding its goals, values, and radical non-statist orientation (Mahmood, 2006a). In light of this, Mahmood suggests that a liberal-feminist commitment to abolishing patriarchy in the name of women's "freedom" risks sweeping away the conditions through which some women may come to practice meaningful forms of agency in their lives.

The belief in a universal blueprint for "freedom" that underpins such a commitment is particularly important to question when we consider that the tendency of liberal feminism to locate agency in the figure of the independent, ends-choosing, working woman is *itself* the product of specific (capitalist, colonial) histories, and cannot be assumed to capture the aspirations of all women. I will never forget Mahmood's words at the end of the book (2005, 197–198), when she urges feminists to ask: "Do my political visions ever run up against the responsibility that I incur for the destruction of life forms so that 'unenlightened' women may be taught to live more freely? Do I even fully comprehend the forms of life that I want so passionately to remake?"

Houda: Saba Mahmood's writing was such an affirmation for me. Her study gave me a language with which I could speak back to liberal-feminist sensibilities. I recall a conversation I had with a young student. While pointing to my hijab, she boldly inquired, "Why do you wear that on your head?" I paused before I answered. I could have tried to interpret why I wore the hijab. That it was to protect me? To adorn myself in the image of pious predecessors? That it was for purposes of modesty? That I wore it to guard myself? These were the explanations I had heard before but not ones that ever resonated with me. My mother never gave me a reason to wear it—she wore it out of submission to what she believed to be the word of God: *maa'thiratan ila rabbikum* (Quran 7:164). That was also my reason—the very "*explanation*" that I was actively avoiding in that moment. I was not taught by liberal notions of freedom that surrender was an authentic or real explanation. How could it be? It is either a choice or it is not.

Britt: Yes. And the boldness you describe in your student (a boldness which we know is often expressed as *aggression*) seems to come from the sense that by embodying Islam you are somehow engaged in an act of refusal—a refusal to enter the public sphere, to take up an invitation that has been extended to you. It is seen, I think, as a refusal to become the kind of free, universal ends-choosing individual that liberalism imagines itself uniquely capable of producing

(and thus, as a refusal to validate the universalism of the liberal project). When you decline to defend the hijab in the language of individual choice, that refusal is felt even more acutely. And I think I recognize something of the worldview enshrined in that response. It is a worldview that casts the liberal individual as the embodiment of *freedom itself*, where individual freedom is understood as that which one “cannot *not* want” (Spivak, 1988, 172). It is the same worldview that drives the much-documented arrogance of Western feminists in their attempts to “save” colonized women, not just from patriarchal violence, but *from culture itself* (Abu-Lughod 2013, 31–32). It is the worldview that was present in the novels I read growing up, of girls in distant, third-world places struggling bravely and independently against their supposedly oppressive, patriarchal cultures (see Sensoy and Marshall, 2010). In my mind these girls were just like me, only they needed to be saved. But of course, as Lila Abu-Lughod points out, you don’t just save someone *from* something; you are always at the same time saving them *to* something else (2013, 46–47). Because liberalism has defined the human in its image (Wynter, 2015), saving someone into Western liberal modernity is framed as saving them into modernity—*into humanity*—itself, and so this question (*to what?*) is conveniently silenced. I’m thinking back to 2001 when Western cries to invade Afghanistan in order to “save Afghan women” didn’t pause to ask Afghan women what they might have wanted—because of course they didn’t have to. Only by first “saving” these women into Western liberal modernity could they be seen as full, human subjects capable of making choices *authentically* their own...

Houda: The narrative you speak about is one I recognize and one that is so pervasive in determining which type of Muslim woman is championed by Western liberal feminism and positioned almost as heroic. Part of my distrust in feminism lies in the ways that particular representations of Muslim women have come to be amplified through this narrative. Especially when it comes to campaigns for the “rights” and “freedoms” of Muslim women by human rights groups and others in the West. A particular case that comes to mind is that of Rahaf Mohamed. Rahaf was a young Saudi woman who pleaded with Western nations to accept her bid for asylum after having fled her abusive father on a flight to Thailand, renouncing Islam and the laws of the Saudi Kingdom. She publicly tweeted of having removed her hijab, and later of drinking wine and eating pork (transgressing the laws of Islam). Rahaf’s story garnered the attention of white feminists in Australia who publicly campaigned

in support of her plight. I watched her story unfold through tweets to authorities pleading her case, and a storm of media and public support—within twenty-four hours, she had amassed over 70,000 followers and the hashtag #saverahaf had been retweeted over half a million times. This extreme show of public support made me feel a sense of unease amidst what was supposed to be a moment of women’s solidarity.

If it was really just a matter of championing a young woman’s safety, then why not the same level of support for the thousands of refugee women fleeing the effects of Western-led intervention? Yet even in trying to articulate this unease, I find myself wary of the gaze in which I myself, as a Muslim woman, am cast. For what can I say about the harms of a white femininity in the context of a now “free” Muslim (or ex-Muslim) woman, without appearing to doubt the validity of her experience and risking a denial of so-called feminist ideals? I felt majorly resistant to the show of support from “Secret Sisterhood”—the group of feminists who held a topless campaign for her plight in Australia. In their protest they held placards like “sisterhood hero” and “all women, free and safe” (Giordano, 2019). I did not believe for a second that this was a protest for all women. The precedent for public feminist campaigns had taught me otherwise. For Rahaf’s escape from abuse (read in the West as “culture”), alongside her appeal to Western nations and the United Nations to rescue her, tracked neatly into a dichotomy of oppressed (archaic, “Oriental,” traditionalist, Islamic) and liberated (modern, Western, secular). Her story fits the frame of the Muslim woman as an ideal victim who was forced to wear a veil, punished for cutting her hair, had “her life threatened for renouncing Islam,” and was “abused” at the hands of the Muslim men in her life (Porter, 2019). These common Western tropes of the oppressed, mute, subjugated Muslim woman made Rahaf’s experiences far more “grievable” (Butler, 2004) than those of other Muslims, in the eyes of the public who campaigned for her plight.

Britt: Butler is so effective at showing the political nature of who and what we will grieve. I remember the images of Rahaf Mohammed being met at the airport by Crystia Freeland, Canada’s foreign minister—a white woman—who announced that her embrace was testament to Canada’s policy of “*supporting women and girls around the world*” (“Brave New Canadian,” 2019). Yet at the same time Indigenous Canadian women continue to face murder and disappearance at twelve times the rate of non-Indigenous women (Audette, 2019, 7), children seeking asylum from life-threatening

conflict languish for years on Canada's refugee waiting lists (Pfeffer, 2021), and, of course, Canada continues to export weapons to their number one customer—the Saudi regime (Gallagher, 2020). I mention all this to agree with you that before jumping to the conclusion that Mohammed's case was afforded special attention due to any *inherent feminist consciousness* of the West, we must also consider the ways in which her story fed into particular narratives of Western supremacy.

The importance of this consideration crystallized for me when I started to realize just how *historical* these narratives are. There's a powerful book that comes to mind here—Mohja Kahf's *From Termagant to Odalisque: Western Representations of the Muslim Woman* (1999)—in which the author traces how depictions of Muslim women have been used over time in the West to justify the supposed cultural backwardness of Islam and the Muslim world. What was fascinating to me was that Kahf shows how the image of the subservient, oppressed Muslim woman that we are so accustomed to seeing in the West today is actually a relatively recent creation. If you look into earlier Medieval and even early Renaissance European literature, you are far more likely to find images of Muslim women depicted as rebellious, powerful queens (1999, 4–5). Figures as far apart as the staunch Queen Bramimonde from *Chanson de Roland* (eleventh century), the willful, lascivious Donusa in Massinger's *Renegado* (1630), and the murderous princess Floripa in the *Sowdone of Babylone* (1672) represent Muslim women as strong, ambitious, and cunning. There is a continuity with later representations, however, in that these images formed the inverse of what was considered ideal European femininity at the time—a femininity that was chaste, humble, and confined to the domestic sphere (see Kahf 1999, 4). It was only later, following the arrival of the Enlightenment in Europe with its emphasis on liberal-individual freedom, that Muslim women began to be depicted as tyrannized and oppressed (see Kahf 1999, 6–7). So what we see are Western representations of Muslim women's freedom and unfreedom shifting more or less in inverse proportion to images of ideal European femininity. And as Jennifer Morgan (1997) points out, this does the work, not just of painting the Muslim *woman* as inferior, but of racializing the patriarchy under which she falls. In fact, it is the capacity of Muslim women—and later as Morgan (1997) has shown us, of women who have been colonized more generally—to be plucked out of their cultures and converted, *not just to Christianity but to an ideal white Western femininity*, that was held up as proof of the civilizing effects of Western modernity, and as justification for colonial rule.

So as you were speaking earlier about Rahaf Mohammed and her flight to Canada, I couldn't help thinking about her story in terms of a modern conversion fable. And the West has been telling itself these stories—stories that are essentially stories of Western supremacy—for centuries....

Houda: There are so many ways that these stories are told. There are the sensational stories, like Rahaf's, but then there are also just the everyday ways in which Muslim women are expected to perform our empowerment in ways that justify the assumptions of Western liberal modernity. I am thinking here of a comment by Susan Carland that the hijab on her head is *no more religiously important than the shirt she wears* (Harper 2017). This not only minimizes the role of hijab in the racialization of Muslim women, but also diminishes its religious significance in order to defend it as a dress option to be freely chosen like any other. Campaigns like *My Hijab, My Choice* (Bangcola 2015), and *World Hijab Day's* (WHD) invitation to non-Muslim women to "*hijab for a day*" embody a similar tendency. This reframing of the hijab as a modality of Muslim woman's liberal agency—a way in which she enters the space of the free, choosing liberal subject—strips away the truths of Muslim women wearing the hijab out of fidelity to the principles of Islam. Since, as you wrote above, liberalism in the West has defined what it means to be a free subject, to be considered as such means adopting the language of liberalism even if it erases elements of your being, or in this context, your Islam. This does not just pose a problem for Muslim women, but has also been identified by Indigenous and decolonial women of color writers, many of whom have a similarly troubled relation to liberal feminism. In her interrogation of feminist practice in Australia, Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015) writes that the "liberal position of (women's) sameness evades power and erases race" (2000, 145) and that "sameness is a way of rejecting the idea of white racial superiority and distancing 'race' and 'racism' from the subject position middle-class white women" (138). What she is pointing to, I think, is the tendency for white women to erase women's difference and imagine that all women's empowerment can and should look the same. It is so easy for them to imagine this because they do not bear the costs of what is erased.

Empowerment has become a dirty word for me as a Muslim woman. The Muslim woman who fits the frame of a free, liberal, individual thinker is celebrated in the West as an *empowered woman*. I have lost count of the number of articles, books, flyers, pamphlets, and energies I have witnessed go into Muslim women

proving how even the most banal acts were ones of empowerment. Time and again, Muslim women strive to prove that they too can “go rollerblading” and “teach at university,” in spite of their hijab (Wyndham 2016). That they can be “free,” *in spite of their Islam*. It feels like Muslim women’s ontological⁹ and spiritual beings are turned into caricatures for the consumption of white western womanhood. Our practice of an ethical existence is made hollow and emptied of its spiritual reliance (*tawwakul*) and surrender to the Most High since this is not a subject position that liberal feminism can account for.

Britt: When you say “made hollow”...that sits with me. Because I think there is something about the ahistoricity, the individualism of liberal ideology that hollows out *all* forms of collective being. As Maria Lugones writes, “we were not whole in this independence” (1987, 8). If I were to try and articulate why I feel so invested in thinking and relating beyond a liberal paradigm at this point in my life, it would be because looking back, I can see just how deeply the language of liberalism facilitated my refusal to see how embedded I was in a field of relations, past and present, and thus to *see* my own whiteness. And, despite my deep gratitude to the histories of feminist thought and struggle that have shaped my life, I have to acknowledge that the language of liberalism came to me at least partly, and perhaps even principally, through feminism. Liberal feminism taught me that I was an equal individual, *just like everybody else*—that I was independent and autonomous, in control of my own will, that *I alone* could define my desires, that my body belonged to me and no one else.

Recently, I was scrolling through pictures of conservative anti-mask rallies in the United States when I came across a white woman holding up a sign that read “My Body, My Choice: Trump 2020.” And it struck me how easily this assertion of self-possession can turn into a denial of our collective interdependence (a reality that the COVID-19 pandemic has rendered so clear) and the kind of ethical responsibility that arises from that. A denial of all the ways in which I am vulnerable to others, reliant on others, indebted to others, bound to others. It was French-Algerian activist Houria Bouteldja who declared: “My body does not belong to me. No moral magisterium will make me endorse a law conceived by and for white feminists” (2016, 73). Those words hit me like a brick when I first read them. Because there is something so powerful in what she is saying, something that took me so long to realize. My body is read and responded to through histories of white supremacy that I did not personally author, but

which shape my movement through the world, my sense of self, my ease in certain spaces, what I take as my own: I am responsible to those histories. My body is fed and clothed through the labor of people I will never meet; it rests each night upon stolen land. It has been nourished and loved and made possible by all those who have cared for me, fed me, laughed with me, and to whom I am forever bound. And I think we gain such a richer understanding of what it is to be human and to be feminist in this world when we accept how embedded we are in these histories and relations. I see a deep will in white settlers—I have seen it in myself—to deny this embeddedness, because acknowledging it means accepting our entanglement in the violence that white supremacy and colonialism continue to wreak upon our world. And the language of liberalism so effectively, so insidiously performs that denial. But I think at the same time as accepting our interdependency calls on us to accept responsibility for histories we may not individually have authored, it also allows us—finally—to experience who we are *in relation to others*. And that is the beginning of genuine solidarity. Because without seeking to understand, not just who you are to me but *who I am to you*, I cannot encounter you in a way that does not force my own reality onto yours.

Houda: The denial of that reciprocity—the denial of lifeworlds beyond liberalism that you spoke of earlier—that is why I think my ambivalence toward feminism lingers. Kombumerri and Wakka Wakka philosopher Mary Graham writes, “the world is immediate, not external, and we are all its custodians, as well as its observers” (1999). I share this in the hope that this conversation leaves the reader in a position to think relationally about their feminist practice and to embrace the sometimes uncertain futures that come when we adopt a sense of humility before seeking to translate others’ lifeworlds into our own. As Mahmood describes it: “*a sense that one does not always know what one opposes and that a political vision at times has to admit its own finitude in order to even comprehend what it has sought to oppose*” (2005, 199).

I think often feminist endeavors, in their attempts to include *all* women, run up against the reality of erasing and excluding difference. Mohanty warns against the use of “woman” as a historically reduced category of analysis that collapses our awareness of the ways in which women participate in structures of oppression, while leaving us unable to value forms of agency that fall outside of a singular model of empowerment. I know that choice and the language around choice have long been a source of tension for me. The idea of choosing to be free, of being empowered through the

choices *I* individually make were never ideas that resonated on a spiritual and relational level. My purpose in having this conversation with you was ultimately to “make meaning out of the experience” (Anzaldúa 1987, 73) of this *out of place* feeling that I had, and continue to have, with liberal feminism.

As I read and researched for this chapter, events shifted and so did my priorities for writing. I watched videos of Palestinian women expressing their pain and heartbreak under the injustice of occupation. Haya Abu al-Ouf in Gaza: “It’s with the help of Allah that I am even able to speak. It is Allah who is keeping me put together.” I read of women being “kept together” through their collective surrender to Allah and to the plan of Allah. *Her* empowerment lies in her surrender. I write then to bear witness to the embodied practice of women whose lifeworlds are not so easily distilled into the language of individual freedom, choice, and liberal agency. Those lifeworlds hold much that Western feminists can learn from, but only if they are willing to listen.

Notes

- 1 “The West” is a deeply contested term, which refers first and foremost to a particular fantasy—the fantasy of a coherent thing called “The West,” which is imagined as the birthplace of liberal modernity. Within this fantasy, the West is associated with liberal values of individual freedom, representative democracy, free market capitalism, and, on a less explicit level, modernity and whiteness. While the actual histories of nations considered part of “the West” provide a strong rebuke to each element of this fantasy (for example, it is hard to understand nations that pioneered chattel slavery as defined by a unique legacy of “individual freedom”), the fantasy itself remains powerful today. As Talal Asad (2003) argues, it is the widespread belief in a “West,” as associated with a particular historical trajectory and intellectual tradition that gives this fantasy its concreteness. The West might not be a geographically accurate term (Australia has historically been considered part of “the West,” along with Europe and the United States), but it has profound real-world implications. When we use “the West,” then, it is important to note that we are not referring to a *location*, but rather to a fantasy of Western exceptionalism that continues to shape political alliances, historical narratives, national ideologies, and individual subjects today.
- 2 In this chapter, we understand Islamophobia as a form of racism. Here, we follow the definition adopted by the British All Party Parliamentary Group in 2019, which explains Islamophobia as *a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness*. In response to those who reject this definition on the basis that Islam is *a religion and not a race*, Salman Sayyid (2019) explains that Islamophobia does not target theological arguments, but rather *expressions of Muslimness* as imagined through a white gaze (forms of dress, language, accent, appearance, and geographical markers associated in the white imagination with Islam). Because it targets an imagined group identity and *not* theology per se, Islamophobia is best understood as a mode of racialization rather than one of

purely religious discrimination. The fact that some targets of Islamophobia are not Muslim (Sikhs, for example) reinforces this perspective. In response to those who would protest that for something to be considered “racism,” it must target a “race,” we would remind them that even “race” does not describe actual, pre-existing biological categories but is *itself* the effect of a process of othering (racialization) based on an assemblage of perceived characteristics (linguistic, cultural, physical, social, historical). “Race” as it comes to appear is an *effect* of racialization, not its cause. In this sense, Islamophobia is a paradigmatic example of racism at work.

- 3 US Third World Feminism refers to a feminist movement born in the United States during the 1960s/70s among radical women of color. Reflecting on their use of the term in their 1981 anthology *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, self-identified Third-world feminists Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga explain that they adopted the term in order to differentiate their feminism from dominant white feminism in the United States, and “to align ourselves with countries bearing colonial histories and still suffering their effects, much of today’s Global South. We saw ourselves as ‘internally’ colonized in the United States” (2015, xxv).
- 4 As did Muslim media personality Yassmin Abdel-Magied in 2017 when attacked on live Australian television by a senator claiming that “anybody that supports sharia law in this country should be deported.” In retorting that “Islam to me is THE most feminist religion,” Abdel-Magied collapsed the complexities of feminism’s contested histories and their relationship to Islam. In a bid at winning back her lost sense of self, a self denied to her through the erasure of Muslims as subjects of history inherent in the simplification and generalization of sharia into a trope for “oppression,” Abdel-Magied resorted to her own simplification. This is an example of what Yassir Morsi describes as responses to “the culture talk of the War on Terror” that ratify and legitimate a white gaze (2017, p. 48).
- 5 Where once liberalism was explicit about the racial nature of the liberal “free” subject, today this is coded into ideas about who is more “modern,” who is more “Western,” who is more “democratic”: who is more *free*.
- 6 The will of the individual understood as fundamentally separable from their social and historical context.
- 7 As Angela Davis (2018) points out, this kind of “glass ceiling feminism” necessarily privileges those who are already nearest the ceiling—white, middle-class women, while erasing the collective nature of social struggle.
- 8 See Nicolacopoulos 2008; Mahmood 2005, 8; Brown and Cruz 2016, 84 for more on this idea.
- 9 By “ontological” here I am referring to an Islamic understanding of being as it is embodied by Muslim women. While “epistemology” is the study of different *kinds* of knowledge, “ontology” as a field of study refers to understandings of the *nature of being* and existence that frame any particular type of knowledge.

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AMAZING GRACE (FOR THE CHILDREN OF JOHN NEWTON)

Liseli A. Fitzpatrick

a-maze-ing grace,
how swee...could you
press against the necks
of my brothers
with your crooked knees
and murderous soles
and not expect your buildings
to go up in flames
black blood, and bodies
cannot breathe
 because of the
 nauseating odor
 of injustice and
 ulcerated ozones

a-maze-ing grace, how swee...
bitter the sound of bullets...
and sirens and black male bodies
crying out for their mommies
because 46-year-old black men
 know that life is ordained in the womb
 and not the rib cage
 and mother and God
 are the same

a-maze-ing grace, how swee....
could you kneel before God
and demand that the world
saves your skin from its own cancers
and paper-thin fragility
 see, the God we serve lives in us
 and commands the Sun, and orders
 lightning to strike without warning
 because salvation has no afterlife

see, freedom deferred
is never good
it festers and erupts
like a corpse in the sun

 oya and shango know this
 nanny, nat, cudjoe, harriet,
 malcolm, martin, toni, jimmy,
 angela, assata, stokely,
 garvey, fannie, butler,
 knew this,
 we know this.

a-maze-ing grace,
how sweet the sound
of swift justice, oh Lorde,
how sweet the sound
 of justice!

MY BODY IS A RIVER

Rachel O'Hanlon-Rodriguez

My body is a river
That's why I'm always moving
Never still
Even in my stillness
Always changing
Becoming
Unraveling
Coming undone
And when the light hits just right
They think this bounty was made for them
Just like their forefathers
They've neglected the truth
Some majesties are built
To slip through
Our fingers
Our fissures
Our faith
My body is a river
That's why I'm always running
Toward the liberation of the open sea
Powerful and steady
I am full of places that would never touch
And yet within me they dance
Furiously
In my deepest currents

Grace like water flows
Crashes against dams
Breaks through walls
Erodes foundations so gently
They barely notice being eaten away
Empties me out
Only to fill me up
Over and over
My body is a river
That's why I will never stop

WHAT CHOU MEAN WE, WHITE GIRL, REVISITED

Becky Thompson

Asking them to consider their role
in lynching Black men, Anne Braden
wrote an open letter to southern
white women. We who betray Black
men with false rape charges. We
who took picnics to lynchings,
sized up Black women on auction
blocks, voted for Agent Orange: how
can we not hate the high pitched, little
step, hair flinging lessons we learned
as kids? I grew up sobbing at the zoo,

bereft for the giraffe with no room to
stretch, the elephant with her sorrow
steps. There was no bench big enough
for my tears as my aunt sat me down,
told me to toughen up. Betrayal starts
early by those meant to teach us love
as they step over a man with a cup on
the street, un tip a waitress, keep us
from a piñata birthday party. In second
grade I made a report on slave ships,
pasted a photo on construction paper

of Africans who were chained to each other, children's eyes falling inward. Now I look at white women in grocery lines. Would you cut in front of my daughter, try to touch her adorned braids? Would you protect your purse from my son with his cumin eyes? I want to disown you, but I'm in this trouble too, with my limp wrists at meetings, eyes averted when my boss tells another praise-the-proud-boys story. Must I belong to white women, a place of

dread? What will it take to lean in, carry our bodies from certain white men's beds, go beyond holding up Black Lives Matter signs? To switch our kids from the *good* schools to places where Double Dutch and Mandela matter? In 1979 Lorraine Bethel asked, *what chou mean we, white girl?* We who were raised to believe there are only so many seats at the antiracist table: what's it going to take to earn a *we* worth living our lives for? Let's add leaves, sturdy chairs. Take our seats.

Note

Lorraine Bethel, "What Chou Mean We, White Girl? Or the Cullud Lesbian Feminist Declaration of Independence (Dedicated to the Proposition that All Women are not Equal, i.e. Identical/ly Oppressed)" *Conditions Five: The Black Women's Issue*, Vol. 11, no. 2, 86–92." See also Anne Braden's open letter "Free Thomas Wansley: A Letter to White Southern Women from Anne Braden" in *Southern Patriot* in 1972. See also Anne Braden, "A Second Open Letter to Southern White Women," *Southern Exposure* 6, no. 4 (Winter 1977): 50.

QUESTIONS, ACTIVITIES, AND RESOURCES

Questions for writing and discussion

- 1 The chapters in this section invite readers into an ongoing multiracial conversation, working to understand the structure and impacts of the racial systems we are all immersed in. What concepts do you need to understand in order to join this conversation? As a class, brainstorm the themes of this conversation using the board or a digital platform such as Jamboard. Which of the themes most impacts you? How, and why?
- 2 According to the authors in this section, once we become intellectually aware of how racism is structured, what comes next? Why is “awareness” alone insufficient? How does the awareness feel? Who can walk away from the discomfort of racial awareness, and who just has to deal with it? What does that difference reflect?
- 3 In Chapters 7 (pages 137, 140–142) and 8 (pages 151, 153–156), Bailey and Warmack describe “habits of whiteness” that perpetuate white supremacy and impede antiracist action. In Chapter 10, Ochoa introduces the concept of the “white racial frame.” As a class, try to map out how “white habits” are related to the “white racial frame.” Which of these habits do you recognize, and how do they show up? Can you add other examples?
- 4 Discuss these questions that Tinglin asks (page 162): what does it mean to “automatically belong” or blend in, and what does it mean to automatically stand out or be “different”? What do those experiences feel like? How do habits of whiteness, or the white racial frame, contribute to creating those experiences?
- 5 What does “accountability” mean, and how is it different from “blame”? In the context of whiteness and feminism, what steps, understandings, or

skills do the authors suggest are important components of accountability at the individual, interpersonal, organizational, and systemic levels?

- 6 What are some of the core ideas and manifestations of “white feminism,” or “white dominant feminism”? Find and share examples. What are the benefits of these ideas to people who hold them, and how can these ideas be problematic in antiracist movements?

Learning activities

- 1 Several of the authors use metaphors to describe how white dominance impacts people’s bodies and emotions. Create your own metaphor for how you experience the “weight” of white dominance, given your intersectional identity. How do you carry the consequences of white dominance? What is that physical, emotional, and spiritual experience like for you? Make a representation of your metaphor, either on your own or with a partner, using drawing, mixed media, video, or spoken word poetry. Try to also incorporate imagery related to resistance or healing. Share your work, talking through what the image means to you.
- 2 Warmack refers to Audre Lorde’s 1978 speech “Uses of the Erotic” in her critique of white fear and white terror. Given the common understanding of the word “erotic,” this reference might be confusing. Read or listen to Lorde’s speech (copies are readily available online, and YouTube has several recordings of Lorde reading it), taking note of insights you gain into its relevance for feminist antiracism. Pay attention especially to the ways that Lorde overturns traditional notions of masculinity, femininity, power, and feeling.
- 3 Several of the authors, both BIPOC and white, mention the value of meditation practices for resisting and healing from white supremacy. Guided meditation videos are available online, including some made specifically for antiracist practice. (You’ll find some examples in the Resource list below.) Find one, and practice meditating with it at least once—ideally for several days in succession, either individually or in a group. Write about your experience, or talk it through with others.
- 4 Ochoa writes about how popular culture and advertising encourage BIPOC women to “long for whiteness.” Find advertising images that encourage valuing lighter skin tones and other Eurocentric features, and create ads for a counter-campaign that dismantles this aspect of the white racial frame.
- 5 Most of the authors frame their chapters by reflecting on autobiographical details—including their intersectional identities, their experiences growing up, historical events that had an impact on them, their occupations or activism, and writers whose work has informed their thinking. Create your own account of the historical and personal contexts that have shaped

- your understanding of the issues, questions, and stakes in talking about whiteness. This account can be in the form of a personal essay, a poem, a video blog, or a speech.
- 6 Pair up with another reader of this text and create an addition to the tradition of feminist and antiracist dialogue essays. This can be in the form of a written dialogue or a podcast or video. Craft questions to explore based on central concepts in these chapters; for example, you could ask each other to explain your perspectives on feminism, religion, culture, and individual liberty. Pay careful attention to the differences in your perspectives and experiences, and work through what they mean. Your goal, as Ali and Munro put it, is to “think together...without erasing the differences that shape [your] relations to one another and to theory,” and to work toward an understanding of how your differences are related.

Resources

- Audiovisual Recording. “Full conversation with James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni in London, 1971.” *YouTube* [video].
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PART III

Feminist antiracism praxis

Introduction

Resisting whiteness

Praxis means translating theory into action, and, by doing so, transforming consciousness as well as social structures. Praxis is a *recursive* process; that is, it calls on us to commit to a sustained practice of interlinked activities, which can be summarized as follows (not necessarily in this sequence):

Awareness: learning from reading, listening, observation, life experience, and past efforts to take action

Reflection: deepening awareness of one's embodied reactions and emotions, noticing resistance to new awareness, building skills in working with charged situations; identifying and learning from past misunderstandings and mistakes

Analysis: applying theoretical tools to gaining insight about how systemic values, discourses, and ideologies show up in events, interactions, and power relations; discerning the impacts of these patterns on bodies and how they are interlinked

Dialogue: building connections with others through active listening and bearing witness; discovering linked histories, values, and visions; using new knowledge to identify specific goals and strategies for working toward them

Application: applying what you have learned to action at the individual, group, and systemic levels—then returning to the previously listed steps to evaluate and critique the action and to discern what comes next

The chapters in this section offer examples of these activities, as well as guidance for feminist antiracist praxis and critiques and cautions about how white antiracism can go wrong. Missteps are unavoidable in antiracist praxis. There is no perfect mastery; there is always more to learn.

Chapter 13, *From performing equity to loving equity: Combating whiteness in emerging allyship movements*, analyzes white claims of allyship that erupted in social media and institutional initiatives after the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer during the spring of 2020. Meena Mangat, a South Asian Punjabi scholar, points out that these versions of allyship can be performed at the ally's convenience, fail to capture the call and commitment to sustained action, and may actually do harm. She identifies two problematic trends: *performative allyship*—claiming allyship with social justice movements in order to build one's own social capital—and *marketable allyship*—corporate appropriation of social justice movements to appeal to racialized consumers. To counter these trends, Mangat introduces *relational allyship*, urging white allies to love equity rather than merely perform it. Loving equity requires becoming aware of how whiteness infiltrates our ways of being and doing in the world and displacing whiteness from the center of antiracist practices by seeking a deep understanding of the impacts of systemic oppression through the lived experiences of those most impacted by it.

Chapter 14, *The Ally's tools: Racialized power and privilege within antiracist praxis*, analyzes another example of how allyship can go wrong. Samantha L. Vandermeade, a white scholar based in western United States, conducted an in-depth study of activism for immigrants' rights in Arizona during the 2018–2019 border crisis. During this time, families fleeing violence, repression, poverty, and weather catastrophes in Central America crossed the United States–Mexico border in search of asylum in unprecedented numbers. Caring for the migrants' needs largely fell to nonprofits and volunteers. Vandermeade tells the story of white women allies' successes in ameliorating the conditions under which the migrants were admitted to the United States. Yet they failed to adequately consult or hear members of the Latino/a community surrounding the site of a proposed shelter, thus breaking trust and undermining the community's efforts to organize for neighborhood revitalization. Vandermeade draws on theories of intersectionality, whiteness, and gendered and racialized citizenship, arguing that white allies must apply intersectional analysis to their activism in order to contend with the ways that wielding their privilege on behalf of an other risks reinforcing the systems of domination that produce the oppressive conditions they aim to undo.

Chapter 15, *Whiteness and indigeneity: Feminism as a settler colonial discourse*, models careful listening, study, dialogue, and self-reflection as part of feminist antiracist praxis. As white liberal arts scholars teaching at a Native American-serving college, Ruth Alminas and Cory Pillen center the voices of their Native students, recounting conversations with students about the

complicated and divisive relationship between Native peoples and white feminism and putting those conversations into dialogue with the work of Indigenous scholars. Native feminism was a source of inspiration for the ideals of early white feminists. However, because white-centric liberal feminism is rooted in settler colonialism, it tends to assume whiteness is the norm, and to emphasize including everyone in the existing, white-dominant social structure rather than changing whole systems. This white-centrism perpetuates assimilation and the loss of Indigenous identity, and thereby is complicit with ongoing violence against Native women and communities. In contrast, Native feminism recognizes the diverse cultures, genders, and lived experiences of Indigenous people as it works to end violence and discrimination against Indigenous women. Alminas and Pillen extract from their students' comments four charges that they urge faculty and students everywhere to reflect on and talk about as a means of challenging white supremacy: (1) refuse the erasure of BIPOC and nonbinary people; (2) embrace difference; (3) educate the public; and (4) recognize and hold the feminist movement accountable for the ways that feminism perpetuates settler colonialism.

Chapter 16, *Teaching transgender studies: Experiential knowledge and race*, extends antiracist praxis to queer and transgender studies classrooms, a site of urgent conversations as political backlash against nonbinary genders amplifies in the United States and elsewhere in the world. Dana Ahern, a white transgender scholar, draws on his experience teaching in a research university on the US west coast. Ahern noticed that his students too often understood trans identities only in relationship to victimization. At the same time, despite their identifying as antiracists and activists, he found that they understood the oppression of trans people primarily through the lens of gender, thus erasing the much greater rates of violence against trans people of color. Ahern analyzes mistakes and hesitations in the classroom that produce problematic narratives and limit understandings of what and who count as trans. Building on the traditions of Black feminist pedagogical scholarship, from bell hooks to Jennifer Nash, Ahern calls for a reframing of transgender studies in dialogue with critical race scholarship and a move from a politics based on pain to coalitions that cultivate pleasure and possibility. He closes with a charge to explore what becomes possible when we consider identity and solidarity not as inherent, but as a continual process of action and reflection; and not just as vulnerability to oppression, but as communities we create and sustain.

Chapter 17, *Shame work: Reducing supremacy and the violence of white men*, offers a social work-based praxis for undoing the harm that white supremacist patriarchy inflicts. The author, Cameron Rasmussen, a white social worker, educator, and facilitator, argues that the most important task white men face is coming to terms with and transforming the reality of their complicity in white supremacist patriarchal violence. Combined, white supremacy

and patriarchy constitute a multilayered deadly force against people at the margins—from microaggressions to mass killings—driving systemic oppression as well as everyday violence. Rasmussen argues that white supremacist patriarchy causes harm not only to people who lack white male privilege but also to white men. Drawing on scholarship that seeks to explain white men’s harmful behavior, as well as his own experience working to advance social justice, he focuses on shame as a lens for understanding the forces that lead to violence. He uses *shame work* as a conceptual framework for devising ways to reduce the violence of white men that allow them pathways to healing and accountability.

Chapter 18, Like, share, tweet: Antiracist cyberactivism vs. performative slacktivism, explores possibilities for engaging in effective antiracist praxis online. Sara Blanchard, a speaker, writer, and consultant, and Misasha Suzuki Graham, an attorney, are both daughters of one white and one Japanese immigrant parent. Together they co-host the podcast “Dear White Women,” which presents weekly conversations about social justice topics. In this chapter, Blanchard and Graham look back at the dual pandemics of COVID and white supremacy during 2020, and the mobilization of white allies following the murder of George Floyd. They observe that while open conversations about privilege, bias, and systemic racism quickly increased, by the fall of 2020, many white people had already turned their attention away, not seeing the impact of white supremacy in their everyday lives. The authors unpack why *allyship* may not be the right word for the sustained action that is still needed, and how *accomplice* might better capture the real, tough, long-term work of antiracism. They share practical steps that anyone can implement in their own spheres of influence, offering readers hope for the power of individuals to create change.

Chapter 19, Making mistakes: A conversation, brings feminist antiracist praxis to making and studying art, while modeling a long-term commitment to learning, self-critique, and growth. Peggy Diggs is a white artist whose public and interactive artworks, often created in consultation with marginalized communities, address issues of whiteness. Lucy Lippard is a white scholar of art whose publications, for decades, have challenged the boundaries between art and social issues. In their conversation, the authors share visual and intellectual inspiration from both BIPOC and white scholars, activists, and artists, including Angela Pelster-Wiebe, Toni Morrison, David Roediger, Patricia Williams, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Ryan Lee Wong, Ruth Frankenberg, Maurice Berger, George Yancy, Lorraine O’ Grady, Andrea Fraser, Gayatri Spivak, and Rachel Cargle. They include a series of reflective questions Diggs posed to a multiracial group of interviewees and mounted on artworks and signs. Among the questions are: Denial of racism protects us from what? Why is it so hard to talk about whiteness? Whatever your race, what does being white mean to you?

The three poems that close this volume invite readers to think through the necessity of careful listening and critical self-reflection as part of white antiracist praxis. In *and i am sorry*, Anaïs Peterson, a poet and climate justice activist of Japanese and white descent, narrates the ambivalence, frustration, grief, and wishes of a woman of color responding to superficial gestures of solidarity from a would-be white ally. Poet and scholar Ivy T. Schweitzer, in “White me: A check list,” lists the ways that, as a white woman, she has excused herself from antiracist praxis, and pushes herself not to “check out,” knowing that people of color cannot withdraw from the struggle. In “Miranda waiver for white people,” white poet, activist, and scholar Becky Thompson lists conditions surrounding white people relinquishing their silence about race and racism: not just words, but a commitment to action toward undoing white supremacy.

13

FROM PERFORMING EQUITY TO LOVING EQUITY

Combating whiteness in emerging allyship movements

Meena Mangat

In our current historical and unfolding moment, what has emerged is a *deep call*—a guttural *ragepain* at state violence, systemic racism, and white silence, all of which became centralized on a global stage with the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and before them Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, and countless others.¹ The term *ragepain* aims to signify how the emotions of anger and rage in Black and other racialized folks are invalidated through relentless nonaction after heavily publicized police violence: thus pushing one's rage to become absorbed by the perpetual pain one feels from repeated dehumanization. Perhaps the only way to dislodge from the pain is to mobilize one's rage, as we witnessed in the form of the collective protest that erupted as the globe watched Derek Chauvin kneel on George Floyd's neck for 9 minutes and 29 seconds, eventually murdering the father of three. The *ragepain* further ignited in the streets with reclamations and provocations of resistance, and in this national reckoning, we saw an emerging notion of allyship identity. Specifically, this inception sparked within popular consciousness as a response to an irritation in the fabric of comfort and complacency when it came to privileging what lives mattered and what lives did not. Yet this rush to claim the positionality of ally has come at the price of authenticity, humility, and furthering harm over healing. As a result, allyship in its popularized manifestation has become susceptible to the dehumanization of others, for there is no real requirement to *act* as an ally (Bourke, 2020). The opportunity to cultivate allyship dispositions and practices which intentionally transgress whiteness only arises through building the capacity for critical awareness.

This chapter will problematize the emergent rhetoric of allyship in popular consciousness by grounding critique through whiteness studies and exploring

performative and marketable allyship, while offering ideas about how one might reorient themselves from equity-*doing* to equity-*being* and, by extension, equity-*loving* accomplices. The equity that is referenced here is racial equity, which “is a process of eliminating racial disparities and improving outcomes for everyone. It is the intentional and continual practice of changing policies, practices, systems, and structures by prioritizing measurable change in the lives of people of color.”²

Current manifestations of allyship

The question of why one claims ally as an identity marker is as significant as what actions one takes to sustain the role of ally. Although the intention of prospective allies may not explicitly be to enact harm, the fear of being labeled a racist or an inability to work through inherited guilt often ignites a reactive need to claim the cultural capital³ that comes from stating an ally identity (Bourke, 2020). What emerges from these motives is performative and marketable allyship. According to Washington and Evans (1991), “an ally is a person who is a member of the dominant or majority group who works to end oppression in [their] personal and professional life through support of, and as an advocate for, the oppressed population” (195). Additionally, Waters (2010) defines an ally as “an individual who consciously commits to disrupting and ending cycles of injustice” (180). Both renderings call for a commitment to action, which is not necessarily apparent in current manifestations of allyship, in which you can “choose when and how to express [your] ally-ness” (Bourke, 2020, p. 180).

Performative allyship

Performative allyship exhibits this presumption of choosing when and how to *show up* as an ally. As global responses to the killing of George Floyd shifted from silence and neglect to public outrage, there emerged a move to publicly declare one’s *goodness*; essentially, to create distance from the discomfort that arises in facing and dismantling how one benefits from the oppression of racialized folks and, by extension, to avoid being viewed as racist. If we return to the question of intention, the performative ally is one who wears the “ally name badge...to deflect attention from their privilege, especially when interacting with members of underrepresented groups” (Bourke, 2020, p. 180). Thus, the intention to perform one’s allyness hinges on alleviating one’s fear and guilt, which is ultimately an oppressive act (Twigg, 2019), for no real risk and no action is taken to dismantle racism and oppression. The performative ally walks away with a covering to assuage feelings of inner conflict. As a result, the self-proclaimed ally identity becomes a shield against deeper

antiracism work. Twigg (2019) offers a nuanced perspective on performative allyship by suggesting that this kind of allyship is a form of protectionism, where one passes as an ally as an act of self-preservation. Commenting on higher education, Twigg (2019) showcases how the “explicit demands on faculty to identify [themselves] as allies incentivize expressions of allyship that are safe for the institution, including those that protect the university, its administration, and its faculty from deeper reflection and concrete antiracist action” (10). She deepens this by pulling from Kenji Yoshino’s (2007) theory on “covering”, which is explained as a “strategy of assimilation available to all groups [when the] desire to be perceived as allies may lead to covering behaviors” through one’s *appearance*, *affiliation*, *activism*, and *association* (Twigg, 2019, pp. 16). Covering across *appearance* concerns how an individual physically presents themselves to the world; covering across *affiliation* means engaging with only some aspects of minoritized folks that are viewed as more acceptable; while allyship that covers across *activism* is a way in which one exorcizes white guilt or exercises white savior impulses. Finally, covering across *association* “sees itself as a one-sided service to perform, a good deed for ‘marginalized’ people more than an alliance built on mutual respect and earned trust” (Twigg, 2019, pp 18–23). Ultimately, this is performative manifestation of allyship.

For example: consider a white educator using *ally* as an identity marker. They have it listed on their social media bios, wear clothing with slogans like *Black Lives Matter* and *Antiracist Educator*, participate in low-risk activities like multicultural celebrations and putting up posters in their classrooms of well-known racialized folks; hence, outwardly *appearing* as an ally. With the further attempt to identify as an ally, the white educator *affiliates* with the most trending cause. Perhaps they solely amplify the slogan *Black Lives Matter* by reposting trending news topics yet fail to engage in higher risk calls to action like *Defund the Police* in which questions of economic redistribution are engaged. In some cases, the white educator may cover through seemingly meaningful *activism* and *association*, by advocating for selective racialized youth in the form of enacting prescribed care that fails to engage the entirety of their humanity. They may “help” Black youth in their classroom by “pushing them through” or forcing material in class that limits the Black experience as one of suffering and violence. Through these actions, the white educator may feel like they are doing a good deed and being a strong ally, while actively enacting a racism of low expectations by choosing not to teach struggling racialized learners and pushing them to simply pass a course, or by stunting the humanity of Black people by showing them in a singular, limited narrative. While the white educator may curate a strong ally identity, their covering behavior only further ensures a covert centering of whiteness and more intricate dehumanization of racialized folks whose sustainable safety and success relies on systemic, economic, and relational transformation.

Performativity is exceptionally palpable in online spaces in the form of virtue signaling; principally, public declarations of outrage which keenly outline what one is against. In this posting/reposting, one can position themselves in the center of discourse against white supremacy and oppression, without the desire and follow-through of taking actions to dismantle it. Broad examples include individuals placing the Black Lives Matter hashtag (#BLM) in their online bios, posting and reposting Black and Indigenous women without crediting their continued labor in liberation movements, and sharing media of murdered racialized folks, contributing to further harm and traumatization of the minoritized groups with whom they are claiming to be allied. In June 2020, mental health therapist Alishia McCullough alongside dietitian and activist Jessica Wilson created the #amplifymelanated-voices movement, as a response to social media activism, which McCullough delineates as

just another movement that has become whitewashed and appropriated... that centers white narratives while making white people feel like the ‘good white person’ or ‘the woke white person’ [whose] content and offering have been co-opted and appropriated from the lived experiences of people in black and brown bodies, which they have used to make a profit and increase their social capital...[while often,] the original black and brown creators are not given credit and are pushed further into the margins of social justice work as white people continue to center themselves.

(McCullough IG post, 2020)

As Wilson and McCullough shared their call to #amplifymelanatedvoices by muting the accounts of white folks who create content about social justice, while following and posting or reposting accounts of BIPOC activists, individuals jumped on a concomitant trend of posting black squares with the intention to show solidarity for the Black Lives Matter movement. However, without clear intention and research about the movement, what resulted was a plethora of black squares on social media with the hashtag #blacklives-matter, further muting necessary information and content for the movement on the streets, which was protesting the murder of George Floyd by Derek Chauvin. This example is significant for building criticality and nuance into an understanding of allyship, for it reveals the intensity of harm which is possible when one’s allyness is activated through white guilt, white fragility, and white interests. The superficial circulation of symbols from the movement for Black lives is an example of what Ricketts (2021) calls “disavowal,” a place where people get stuck, for although they are able to name the specific harm, they are simultaneously distancing themselves from it and disavowing their role in the harm that is being spoken to; a performative, covering, and deeply dehumanizing manifestation of allyship.

Marketable allyship

Marketable allyship creates false proximity to social justice movements as a covering strategy for companies; essentially getting close to allyship movements without actively mediating the harm that their racialized employees and consumers experience. Whether by issuing curated public statements denouncing racism or by marketing the revolution itself, companies' rendition of allyship is a profitable one. In this context, allyship became a noun as opposed to a verb, a singular destination that evokes a comfortable sense of arrival, another visible thing to consume. Through this drive for political and economic correctness, allyship can remain caged in a redundant rhetoric of self-preservation. Organizations and companies became *good* at stating what they are against, while conveniently sidestepping what they are *for*, a much more complex task that requires a reimagining of values and transformation through action. Hence, a plethora of "I stand with you," "[insert company name] has no place for racism and discrimination," "a donation will be made to [insert justice organization name]" statements. Concomitantly, in education, we saw the formation of EDI (equity, diversity, inclusion) positions as a response to public calls for action. Although these positions hold potential opportunities to transform organizations, EDI position holders may be limited in what actions they can take, as well as remaining limited to symbolic roles as representatives for antiracism.

As an extension of company-ready statements and emerging EDI positions, we have begun to witness a brandification of anti-oppression movements, which renders popularized allyship as symbolic at best. Although creating and selling merchandise can be a source for Black and Indigenous folks to be paid for their labor and promote Black and Indigenous knowledge, joy, and celebration, it becomes problematic when brands commodify narratives of injustice and victims of state violence. An example of this is the memeification of the slain Breonna Taylor, a twenty-eight-year-old woman remembered as kind, goal-oriented, and passionate, remembered by her mother Tamika through countless stories, in one of which she touchingly recalls the numerous times her daughter would call repeatedly from the grocery store. Breonna was taken away from her mother Tamika, sister Juniyah, boyfriend Kenneth, and extended family and friends, who are now left with the guttural ragepain of such a devastating loss. And yet, the outcry prompted by her death ignited an allyship that moved away from her stories and humanness. What started as calls to action against the police officers who stormed her doors without announcement and shot her as she slept soon morphed into a moment to be commodified and consumed in the guise of solidarity. Social media became flooded with memes that used the initial outcry to arrest Breonna's killers into a reusable punchline, including people posting selfies with the caption, *it's a great day to arrest the cops that shot Breonna Taylor*.

This cooptation exemplifies the ways in which Black women continue to be objectified in social justice movements. With every reposting of the hashtag and meme, the self-proclaimed ally (both individual and organization) gains instant gratification as a member of an exclusive social justice movement, while creating a greater distance from acting to dismantle the systems that allow Black women to be victims of state violence. This clamoring toward ally-induced social capital is pertinent, for “social capital provides access to physical capital and social networks” (Bourke, 2020, p. 184). In short, this form of commodification contributes to the sustained dehumanization of Black and Indigenous women, causing much more harm than good.

Allyship grounded in whiteness

Naming whiteness creates the opportunity to dislodge its pervasive prioritization of white experience as universal experience, meaning that when we critically engage with manifestations of whiteness, we can disrupt the centrality of it. As Otto and Perkins (2011) insist,

by failing to interrogate what one does not know - what is not visible from one's position - a white community loses the normal human capacity to self-critique and create space for its own learning and growing. The failure to engage in a normal level of self-questioning results in significant levels of ignorance....

(2)

which in turn creates greater pathways for enacting harm on racialized communities.

In deepening understandings of allyship and solidarity, creating visibility and critical understanding of the role of whiteness is vital to avoiding the lure of using it to shape meaning, action, and nonaction. By understanding the moral implications of whiteness, we create space to engage with unspoken privileges that further the agenda of white supremacy. To ground the ways in which whiteness infiltrates allyship identity and action, Feagin's work on the *white racial frame* (2010) is useful. He describes the white racial frame as a “dominant frame that shapes our thinking and action in everyday life situations [which is used] in accenting the privileges and virtues of whiteness and in evaluating and relating to Americans of color” (Otto & Perkins, 2011, p. 1). This concept is particularly significant in understanding performative allyship because the white racial frame holds up for white folks an “accented view of white virtue [which] overrides the actual reality of racist performances” (Feagin, 2010, p. 126). A continued interrogation of this framing is necessary, because the symbolic capital that whites hold protects them “from

bearing the brunt of society's violence, such as profiling by police, injustice from employers, oppositional responses from important institutions, disapproval and exclusion from social networks, etc." (Otto & Perkins, 2011, p. 1–2). When one assumes the role of ally without this interrogation of whiteness, it becomes increasingly difficult to cultivate the mutuality and trust that is vital in solidarity movements. The failure to racially self-examine results in

a white community [losing] the normal human capacity to self-critique and to create space for its own learning and growing...[and] because the ignorance is not visible from within the white racial frame, whites do not perceive the seriously problematic nature of their understandings.

(Otto & Perkins, 2011, p. 2)

The result is performative and marketable allyship.

An additional concept useful in exploring the implications of whiteness for allyship identity and action is Derrick Bell's (1980) *interest convergence theory*, which outlines how justice and civil rights for Black folks manifest only when they converge with the interests of white people. That is, Black pain and liberation is only tended to when white interest deems it worthy of engagement. In the context of allyship, interest convergence means that white individuals and organizations activate their allyness when personal and economic interests are at stake. Corporations rush to make antiracism statements to avoid public questioning, organizations are immediately prepared to allocate funding for EDI positions after declining previous opportunities to build equity, and individuals use social media to feign solidarity in dismantling white supremacy. Performativity and marketable allyship become products of a white racial frame that universalizes white virtue as an uninterrogated truth while orienting toward potential action only when white interests converge with pursuing racial justice. As a result, white individuals and groups seize center stage, while Black and Indigenous women are often the ones erased from their personal narratives of racial injustice and their leadership in liberation movements.

Only through a critical analysis of whiteness does counter-framing (Feagin, 2010) to the white racial frame become available, making calls to revolutionary action and opportunities for solidarity possible. Without this counter-framing, the "challenge for allyship rest in allies viewing members of oppressed groups as needing to be saved...[which] further reifies the power differential between allies and members of oppressed groups and does nothing to disrupt the status quo" (Bourke, 2020, p. 185). One provides a counter-frame by first creating space to deconstruct and then dislodge the ways in which whiteness is a universal lens to mediate our experiences and learning, including one's humanity and self-worth. It is only through this

critical examination of how we *be* and *do* in the world, that we can move toward holistically *being* equity, instead of seemingly *doing* equity.

Equity-doing to equity-being

In understanding the implications of an allyship that is fueled by performativity and marketability, and rooted in whiteness, we become attuned to potentially two overarching dispositions to equity work: *doing or being* states. People from dominant groups who enmesh themselves with ally identities tend to occupy the movements through centering themselves to uphold their control and comfort, over engaging in deep listening and reflection to transform both internal and external manifestations of white supremacy. Both performative and marketable allyship lean toward *doing* states, where allies from dominant groups perform solidarity through occupying spaces (often at the expense of Black, Indigenous, and women of color whose wisdom from the margins is either erased or appropriated). Specifically, this state of allyship is devoid of mutuality and relationships, obsessed with self-preservation and protectionism, accessed through a cognitive space that minimizes or ignores deeply internalized white supremacy, is self-determined, without accountability, and operates from what Owens et al. (2016) refer to as the “Mind of Whiteness.” Explaining it in detail, they state,

just as the ego-mind is a construct that constantly reinforces itself—building structures and systems of control and developing attitudes and views that maintain its primacy and sense of solidarity so that it can substantiate its validity—so, too, does this construction of whiteness...one could call it the Mind of Whiteness.

(xxvii)

What’s uniquely poignant is Owen et al.’s comparison of the “Mind of Whiteness” to the ego-mind, a consciousness that cannot be used as a tool to work its way out of the constructs it creates. Similarly, Owen et al. (2016) urge that “the Mind of Whiteness [cannot] be used to see through the veil of its own construct... [that the] lens of awareness must be placed outside of the construct” (xxviii).

One way in which allyship movements are coopted by remnants of the very oppressive systems they intend to abolish (as understood through the “Mind of Whiteness”) is through a hyper-focus on creating loud visibility for one’s allyness. An example of this is the ways in which white allies engage with the discourse of intersectionality. Originally coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) to “call attention to the fact that black women are often made invisible when race and gender are separately analyzed,” intersectionality “is now often used to signal the idea that people simply have different identities, experiences, and

histories” (Kramarae & Winkelmann, 2018). This appropriation not only erases the work of Crenshaw but whitewashes a nuanced concept that aims to centralize the oppression and harm Black women face. Through the “Mind of Whiteness,” what is in front of you becomes translated through white interests, and in this space, deep listening is limited or non-existent, while further harm is perpetuated. For without engaging in “profound self and social transformation” (Kramarae & Winkelmann, 2018, 47), we remain limited to cognitive understanding, furthering ourselves from the compassion and humanizing interdependency which is required in order to truly show up as accomplices in dismantling white supremacy.

As mentioned earlier, this *doing* state manifests in online contexts as #BLM in bios, posting black squares, appropriating materials from Black and Indigenous activists, all while avoiding actions that effectively create opportunities for liberation and bypassing the deep inner work that is required in dislodging white privilege and power. As a racialized educator, I observe self-proclaimed teacher allies fill their curriculum with texts from Black, Indigenous, and other racialized artists, commemorate singular days of solidarity by wearing specific colors and emblems, or more harmfully, lean on racialized students to affirm their allyship through instances of paternalistic, white saviorship. Concomitantly, these same white allies continue to enact harm to colleagues of color through added labor, microaggressions, and picking and choosing which aspects of oppression are worthy of engaging with (ignoring the experiences and asks of racialized colleagues), by occupying places of power, and ultimately, by avoiding any potential discomfort from authentically shifting how they *be* with racialized colleagues and students. As a racialized woman myself, I have seen this in my South Asian community with self-proclaimed allies being vocal about issues that concern their own racialized groups, while avoiding difficult conversations about how anti-Blackness manifests in their own communities or compassionately connecting with the truth that until Black and Indigenous women are free, we are *all* unfree. In this sense, although equity-*doing* sounds as good as the self-proclaimed white ally seems, the posturing remains hollow, sustained only through loud and ultimately harmful occupation. Thus, *equity-doing* requires interrogation to uncover the covert ways in which allyship gets repackaged to serve the ego—the “Mind of Whiteness.”

This is different from equity-*being*, which is relational, humanizing, critical, what Kerschbaum refers to as “yet-to-be” or Bahktin describes as an “‘unfinishedness’ of being” (Twigg, 2019, p. 26). When in an equity-*being* state, the ally identity is not claimed, for the “lens of awareness” is outside the “Mind of Whiteness” (Owen et al., 2016); meaning one’s intention to show up for the seeming other is no longer fueled by a desire to be seen, but rather rooted in a deep belief that each and every public and private moment holds the potential to invoke liberation for all beings. It is also essential to

clarify that the *being* state is a disposition that creates pathways for authentic, effective, and sustainable actions. It prioritizes a transformation that engages both internal and external beingness; meaning, when one is able to acknowledge and interrogate how white supremacy permeates their inner and outer worlds, the “lens of awareness” is placed outside dominant constructs, and the ubiquitous nature of whiteness is challenged. Therefore, if the *doing* state is occupied with limited or non-existent action, the *being* state prioritizes the need for deep introspection as a pathway to effective action.

One way in which allyship can take up this orientation is through engagement with contemplative practices. If one’s intention is to authentically engage with solidarity movements, grounding or stillness practices like meditation and mindfulness

can help [one] recognize, internalize, and integrate [a] sense of our human interconnection...foster loving-kindness for the self and others...move us to deeper senses of the isolation-generating dangers of white privilege and, contrarily, the joy of human connection that can sustain us for the long-term struggle against the oppression of others.

(Kramarae & Winkelmann, 2018, p. 49)

Instead of reverting to performativity to cover discomfort, white guilt, or fragility, contemplative practices can allow for a leaning toward

uncertain wisdom, a way of being open to what arises in the moment, [letting] go of opinions, expectations, fixed ideas, the desire to explain or be right... [and refraining] from whitesplaining, white defensiveness, white sensitivity, white tears, [and] white rage.

(Kramarae & Winkelmann, 2018, p. 49)

When white folks can remain open and ready to engage with what is happening or being voiced by racialized folks, they enter a *being* state from where their actions hold the intention to humanize and liberate through trust, mutuality, and respect. The “yet-to-be”/“unfinishedness of being” (Twigg, 2019) is significant, for it grounds equity-*being* as a life-long engagement where consistent interrogation of whiteness and potential blind spots is vital in dismantling white supremacy.

Shelley P. Harrell’s (2018) SOUL (Soulfulness-Oriented, Unitive, and Liberatory) Centered Practice (SCP) framework aims to “contribute to the utilization of contemplative practice for the elevation of our collective well-being as an interconnected human community in the context of ongoing struggles for liberation and social justice” (p. 9). The framework is grounded in the suggestion that “breaking out of your mental and emotional prison and deepening the range of perception enables you to link inner reflection and

vision—the mental, emotional, instinctive, imaginal, spiritual and subtle bodily awareness—with social, political action and lived experiences” (p. 20–21). For allyship movements, this framework is a potential tool that can be used by white folks to engage in deeper introspection about their own whiteness through a mind, heart, body, and soul approach (Harrell, 2018). If “the soul of [a] person refers to contact with the deepest core of being where one feels personal and collective truths—where individual, communal and transcendent aspects of identity are experienced and embodied in a single person,” then

facilitating this aspect of soulfulness means tuning in to the soul of others and the soul of the world...it involves a sense of responsibility for others as well as for the social and physical environment. The engagement element reflects a moral imperative emerging from a realization of our interconnectedness that demands liberation and justice.

(Harrell, 2018, p. 15)

In practice, this may manifest as a white person who wants to be an ally for their community first setting a commitment to inner work by naming and confronting their own privileges and biases through mindfulness practices and critical self-reflection. As they sit in practice, they become attuned to the truth that advocating for another being’s humanity expands their own humanity; that until each and every being’s humanity is realized, their own humanity remains limited. With continued tending to their inner world (thoughts and somatic sensations), they can truly listen to what racialized communities are reaching for in their own liberation. In response, they are able to set and follow through on sustainable antiracism work without centering themselves through performative or marketable allyship. Hence, engaging one’s inner and outer worlds to transgress whiteness by engaging in a “deeply visceral sense of our human connectedness” (Kramarae & Winkelmann, 2018, 48). As a result, one is able to shift from equity-*doing* to equity-*being* in a move toward becoming accomplices in challenging oppression, which is fundamentally about “putting yourself out there (taking risks), not because you want to have a clean conscience or be able to say that you dabble in advocacy as an undergrad, but because it the right thing to do” (Bourke, 2020, p. 190).

Conclusions: Turning to an equity-loving praxis

All allyship, solidarity, and anti-oppression movements must be grounded in humility alongside a deep love for all of humanity, which makes one seek risk as a manifestation of commitment to all beings. When one can shift from *doing to being*, and then *loving equity*, one engages in a mind, heart, body,

and soul path to liberation. One holds one's solidarity in sacred regard, forever becoming and unbecoming as interrogations of manifested white supremacy become more nuanced. The "Mind of Whiteness" is regularly examined from a holistic, love-centered "lens of awareness." One holds space for the guttural *ragepain* that I spoke of at the start of the chapter, which is central, for solidarity work must hold the deepest respect for the sacred grief so many Black, Indigenous, and racialized peoples feel from racialized trauma. In this equity-*loving* state, one sits with heavy emotions with a "radical openness," which can be imagined as "a margin—a profound edge, [and] locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a safe place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance" (hooks, 1989, p. 19). Equity-loving allyship calls for a return to the question of intentionality in allyship movements. Therefore, the individual mindfully engages with their inner world with an intention to extend love to all beings. As one becomes more deeply aware of their privilege, power, intention, and actions, they open more deeply toward loving equity for equity's sake. This understanding of equity-*loving* allyship serves as a reminder to be mindful not to turn toward the urge to perform, to quell discomfort and guilt, to consume or be consumed for profit, and ultimately, turns one from becoming entrapped by the lure of whiteness. As we continue to engage in this ever-unfolding journey, the following questions can support an attunement toward life-long solidarity work, with the intention to cultivate and sustain equity-*loving* allyship. It is only when we enter and re-enter into these reflective and love-attuning spaces that solidarity work is impactful in liberating all beings.

What is my definition of allyship?

Why do I feel compelled to label myself an ally?

How might I benefit from labeling myself an ally?

How do Black, Indigenous, and other racialized peoples benefit from my allyness?

Where does my allyship manifest (primarily online, through mutuality and respect with racialized peoples, in private spaces with people of my own race)?

Does my manifestation of allyship relinquish social/economic capital, power, and privilege?

How do I hold myself accountable as an ally? (What are my intentions? do I regularly check in with my intentions?)

How do I actively interrogate the ways in which white supremacy infiltrates my ways of being, doing, and meaning making in the world?

Do I engage with whiteness studies as a part of my allyship work (deepening awareness of white guilt, white fragility, white privilege, and white rage)?

Do I engage in equity-being and loving states through an inner and external transformation that activates the mind, heart, body, and soul?

*Do I engage in contemplative practices that cultivate radical openness, decentering, and stillness (listening to learn)?
As a result, what does my allyship do? What are specific actions that I take and follow up on to ensure healing over harm?*

Notes

- 1 <https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/2020/know-their-names/index.html>—the interactive link from aljazeera.com highlights multiple murdered Black Americans at the hands of police. The link includes the location and year of the incident, what the victim was doing at the time of the police violence, an overview of how the police violence was enacted and actions taken afterward. The link does not include the more comprehensive list of Black Americans impacted by police violence.
- 2 <https://www.raceforward.org/about/what-is-racial-equity-key-concepts>
- 3 Pierre Bourdieu (1977) coined the term *cultural capital* which references the cultural knowledge one acquires as currency to access degrees of acceptability and power. In this context, we have seen ally used as a public identity marker to acquire degrees of acceptability and power as an informed and *good* person without doing the deeper work of naming and dislodging internal, relational, and systemic white supremacy.

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14

THE ALLY'S TOOLS

Racialized power and privilege within the antiracist praxis

Samantha L. Vandermeade

Between late 2018 and mid-2019, the state of Arizona faced an unprecedented humanitarian crisis.¹ Tens of thousands of asylum-seeking Central American migrants were flocking to the United States–Mexico border. Some migrants queued at ports of entry in California, Arizona, and Texas, claiming a place in line for a hearing with a US immigration official.² Others crossed the border in remote stretches of the Sonoran desert and were later picked up by Border Patrol. Economic, sociopolitical, and climate conditions in the “Northern Triangle” (a common term for these migrants’ home countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras) spurred their migration in large caravans through Mexico toward the United States.

The US immigration system, which is largely controlled by White men, was ill-equipped to absorb the shock of these families’ arrival for a number of reasons. First, migration from Central America to the United States has been on the rise for years, but in 2018 and 2019, those numbers spiked. Decades of ineffective and harmful US intervention in the Northern Triangle directly contributed to corrupt governance, widespread poverty, and rising gang violence. Additionally, increasingly punishing droughts and other natural disasters driven by climate change had been devastating Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras for years and hitting poor farming families the hardest. Then, Andrés Manuel López Obrador was elected president of Mexico in December 2018 after campaigning as a friend to the poor and a defender of the downtrodden. The new president made clear he would be more friendly to migrants from the south, and Central American migrant caravans formed almost overnight.

Second, the vast majority of Central American migrants arriving at the border during this time came in family units, most often one or both parents

and at least one child under the age of eighteen. US law requires that migrant children and families be treated humanely,³ but the sheer volume of migrating families quickly overwhelmed Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) ability to process and detain. Increasingly squalid conditions at the ports of entry along the border were exacerbated by politicized negligence on the part of immigration officials taking direction from the unabashedly White supremacist Trump administration.

In Phoenix, Arizona, chaos ensued. Local and state officials reacted sluggishly. Polarized politics at the state and national levels muddied the waters, while the financial and logistical burden of temporarily housing thousands of migrants and meeting their immediate needs largely fell on local nonprofits, churches, and community groups. Several organizations took responsibility for the burgeoning number of migrants in the city and prevented a public health crisis of massive proportions. Networks of volunteers quickly formed, and community leaders marshaled resources at an astounding pace. Ultimately, this grassroots movement served thousands of migrants on a collection of shoestring budgets and was fueled by sheer collective force of will, for many months. However, misinformation and inconsistency from ICE made meaningful progress toward a government-community partnership to solve the "migrant problem" in Phoenix feel like a distant possibility. Local organizations were overwhelmed, and organizers were exhausted.

While Latina/o⁴ congregations and community members bore the brunt of meeting migrants' immediate needs, White women leaders in the pro-immigrant solidarity movement consistently dominated local conversations about this issue. Often, White-led organizations were publicly lauded for their efforts, while Latina/o churches continued to go underfunded, underacknowledged, and underappreciated. Despite this, both groups worked together successfully for months before a possible long-term solution presented itself. That possible solution, the lengths White organizers went to make it a reality, and the aftermath are the subject of this chapter.

As a pro-immigrants' rights organizer, a White antiracist, a feminist scholar, and a member of the predominantly White pro-immigrant solidarity movement in Arizona, I occupy an insider-outsider position as a researcher in relationship to my research participants (Collins 1986). I am uniquely positioned to analyze the operation of White privilege, White womanhood, and White (anti)racism in the pro-immigrant solidarity movement—so long as I am attentive to my own Whiteness and its biases. The events described and analyzed below are a result of a multi-year-long ethnography, during which I collected interviews, engaged in participant observation, and documented the pro-immigrant solidarity movement's progress toward its goals.

In this chapter, I apply an intersectional analytical lens to a specific event that took place in July 2019: the rezoning of a local, defunct elementary

school into a nonprofit-run shelter meant to temporarily house asylum-seeking migrants after they were released by ICE. During the rezoning hearing, local White organizers successfully wielded their collective gendered, racialized, and classed privilege as citizens to address and alter the unjust and unethical conditions under which vulnerable and marginalized non-citizens are admitted into the United States. However, in doing so, these organizers effectively steamrolled a community of Latina/o citizens who live in the immediate vicinity of the school and harbor a different dream for the empty campus. In their haste to marshal their social and financial resources on behalf of asylum-seeking migrants, White-led organizations and individual White allies threw their energy and support behind a strategy that ultimately pitted the interests of one marginalized group against another (slightly less) marginalized group: Central American migrants against Latino/a community members.

Below, I unpack how, and why, well-meaning White activists wielded their privilege in ways that ultimately produced harm and explore how Whiteness asserts itself in counterproductive ways within racial solidarity movements. In the first section, I discuss feminist *intersectionality*, feminist analyses of *Whiteness*, Audre Lorde's critique of using the "master's tools to dismantle the master's house," and how these theories can help us understand White women and their racialized solidarity work (Lorde 1984; 2007). Next, I retell and analyze the events of a local civil procedure in which a group of mostly White organizers petitioned for the rezoning of the Anne Ott Elementary School in order to illustrate the complex, complicated, and contrary operations of Whiteness within the pro-immigrant solidarity movement. Finally, I argue that the rezoning hearing exemplifies the challenges and pitfalls that arise when White antiracist allies try to use the master's tools (in this case, their gendered and classed White privilege) against the master's house (the injustice of current immigration practices). I conclude the chapter by asking the reader to reckon with the ways in which wielding privilege on behalf of less marginalized people risks reproducing and strengthening systems of domination that rely on that same privilege to maintain racial oppression.

Intersectionality, Whiteness, and the master's tools

Intersectionality is the single best analytical tool we have at our disposal as feminists in the study of White womanhood. The theory was developed over decades of struggle by Black women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, termed "intersectionality" by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989, and subsequently expanded by many Black feminist thinkers (Truth 1851; Crenshaw 1989; May 2015; Collins & Bilge 2016). Intersectionality is a theory of power and oppression that considers the ways people are socially categorized along lines of race, gender, class, sexuality, disability, age, religion, nationality, citizenship status (and more), and the impact this categorization has

on their experiences in the world and their relationships to structures and institutions of power.

While intersectionality was conceptualized as a tool to understand the sociopolitical positionality of Black women, it can also help us understand *White* women, who are simultaneously marginalized by their gender and privileged by their race. Unlike Black women who are doubly oppressed, White women are alternatively, or even simultaneously, oppressor and oppressed. History provides numerous examples of this: Louise Michele Newman (1999) argues racism has been center stage in the US feminist movement since its earliest days. Kathleen Blee (2002) describes how women in White racist hate groups articulate and enact their racism in gendered ways. More specific to the progressive White women of this study, numerous feminist scholars have shown that White women conducting social uplift, municipal housekeeping, or community activist work have long drawn upon gendered and racialized scripts to simultaneously justify their work and reproduce racial hierarchies (Thompson 2001; Johnson 2017; McRae 2018). Thus, an intersectional lens can aid in the analysis of White women, how they enact their citizenship, and how they show their solidarity.

Intersectionality's focus on the *systemic* informs my analysis of Whiteness and White womanhood. An intersectional analysis of Whiteness-as-sociopolitical-system reveals that Whiteness is not a singular location, but rather "a set of locations," the experience of which varies along lines of gender, class, sexuality, disability, politics, region, religion, and culture. Yet all these locations remain intrinsically linked to domination. In other words, while intersectional differences shift and shape the ways they experience the world, White women still share a distinct social location. This shared location endows them with a shared, normative, and invisibilized racial privilege, granted to them by way of the myriad civil, legal, and social institutions that were built on White supremacy and govern everyday life in the United States (Frankenberg 1993).

Often, White women are most comfortable enacting their citizenship and showing their solidarity by working within the social institutions that favor them. Yet the racialized privileges these institutions grant and the systemic racism that laces their foundations are the master's house that Audre Lorde worried would never be dismantled. In her famous speech that became the essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" (1984), Lorde demanded to know, "What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable." The master's tools, according to Lorde, "will never allow us to bring about genuine change" (1984; 2007, 110–112).

I use the metaphor of the master's tools and house as a guide to better understand how White allies seek to use their White privilege, social and

financial clout, and sociopolitical standing as citizens to materially improve the circumstances of asylum-seeking migrants and to advocate for reform of the US immigration apparatus. Because White women's privilege, clout, and standing are all products of their gendered middle-class White respectability, when these allies attempt to use their advantages to disrupt the status quo and challenge the very system of White supremacy that endows them with value, they use the master's tools against the master's house. Yet, as Lorde points out, these tools are flawed, and White allies must be cautious of the complicated and unforeseen ends to which we wield these tools.

The events and aftermath of the Anne Ott Elementary School rezoning hearing

At 2 p.m. on July 2, 2019, over sixty people converged at Room 10E of the Maricopa County Courthouse. Each of us came to 251 West Washington Street to attend a routine civil procedure that rarely attracts an audience of this size: a zoning hearing.

When I entered Room 10E, it was instantly clear that the vast majority of people present were there to support the last agenda item of the day: the rezoning of the Anne Ott Elementary School in south-central Phoenix. While many were present in professional capacities, representing their various non-profits, faith organizations, or elected employers, even more were unpaid volunteers, activists, advocates, and organizers who were there simply to cast their personal support behind the rezoning petition.⁵

As was my experience at these types of movement gatherings, especially those that take place during the middle of a weekday, a disproportionate number of attendees were middle-class and upper-middle-class White women. While there are certainly exceptions, most of the highly active (but unpaid) organizers either have non-traditional jobs, careers in which they make their own hours, or they are retired. To some extent, then, most of the White women active in the pro-immigrant solidarity movement enjoy a level of socio-economic security and status that endows them with a valuable resource: time. Without time, these White women could not have participated in this civil proceeding, thus enacting their citizenship by exercising their political voices. Time is a resource they have in greater abundance than their fellow Latina/o organizers for many reasons, most of which are gendered, racialized, and classed.

However, lack of time and/or money are not the only factors potentially preventing others from attending. Latina/o organizers, particularly undocumented ones, have good reason to distrust the authorities, fear making themselves visible at civil or legal proceedings, or avoid situations likely to have high concentrations of law enforcement officials present. The policing, surveillance, violence, and harm that too often accompany contact between

undocumented or marginalized Latina/o people and government officials (particularly law enforcement or immigration officers) should not be underestimated. I cannot say for certain whether any Latina/o community members felt barred from the hearing; what I *can* say is that the ease with which White women navigated the courthouse and participated in the hearing was due, in part, to their gendered and racialized citizenship. As White citizens, they are largely free to interact with the government and the law without fear or discomfort (McIntosh 1989; López 1996).

The room emitted a low thrum of activity and conversation when I arrived. People greeted one another enthusiastically; this is a small community, and everyone was abuzz with cautious excitement. Many attendees wore T-shirts advertising their immigration politics in English and Spanish: “*Ningun ser humano es ilegal*,” “Refugees Welcome.” Representatives from the White-led non-profit organization spearheading the effort to rezone the school, AZRRI, passed buttons to new arrivals that read “We Stand by Migrants.”

The presence of the White organizers at the hearing was a tangible manifestation of that sentiment. In spring 2019, as temperatures rose in the Sonoran desert, which stretches from northern Mexico to Phoenix, danger to northbound migrants mounted. The local Latina/o churches that had been providing the vast majority of hospitality services to recently released migrants were overwhelmed and financially overburdened. White organizers saw this and began organizing among themselves to envision long-term solutions. Organizers—mostly White women—from several White-led organizations began building capacity and searching for a location that could support what would become known as a migrant welcome center. They dreamed of partnering their organizations to design and run a permanent shelter dedicated to welcoming migrants humanely as they were released into the city by ICE. During their temporary stay at the center, migrants would receive assistance from staff and volunteers, who would arrange their travel to their sponsors in other parts of the United States. After this brief pitstop, migrants would be sent on their way with clean clothes, hygiene supplies, and food for the journey.

Through this full-service welcome center, organizers hoped to provide a stark contrast to the harsh treatment migrants experience at the hands of US immigration officials. They sought to restore basic human dignity to the process of entering the United States to seek asylum and keep migrants safe from the mounting threats to their safety they would face if forced to navigate the release process alone. Untold hours spent negotiating with the city and the school board, lobbying local elected officials, and developing a donor base that could support a sustained effort as ambitious as a 24/7, 300-guest welcome center had led to this first official step: getting the Anne Ott School rezoned so it could function in its new capacity.

After hours of hearing petitions on retaining walls and alcohol permits, the zoning officer finally turned to the Anne Ott petition. A White man in his

sixties rose from the front row, buttoned his expensive suit jacket, and began to speak. Unlike the contractors and business owners who preceded him, this man—an attorney, we learned—ceremoniously presented an enormous packet of paper to the officer. He came armed with two tripods displaying maps and charts. He delivered a thirty-minute speech, full of legalistic language better suited to a judge and jury than a zoning official. I suspected our spokesman was a friend of an influential leader in the solidarity movement (an attorney herself). His presence stood testament to the sociopolitical clout many White organizers bring to the movement.

The zoning officer listened carefully to the attorney's presentation, then raised a stack of green cards. Each attendee had filled out one of them when they arrived, indicating the relevant petition number, whether they supported or opposed it, and if they would like to speak. The officer announced that he held thirty-nine cards supporting the rezoning and seven opposing it.

Thirty-nine people began craning their necks and murmuring, drowning out the officer's next words. *Who is here? Is it protestors? Is it the Patriots?* A group of far-right White nationalists identifying themselves as the Arizona Patriots had threatened organizers on numerous occasions, and now many organizers seemed braced for violence.

Instead, when the officer called the first name opposing the rezoning, a middle-aged Latina stood and ceded her time to a community spokesperson. A stocky Latino in his forties stood and made his way to the front of the room. He had salt-and-pepper hair, a kindly face, and a cell phone holster clipped on the belt of his khakis, which he hitched up nervously as he approached the podium. The room quieted, but confusion and suspicion hung in the air. *Who is this guy?*

Guillermo told us that he was the leader of a local coalition of Latina/o neighborhood organizations and was there to represent the residents of the neighborhood around the school. In his presentation, the attorney had assured the room that AZRRI had reached out to the largely working- and lower-middle-class residents living nearby—he even had a map with color-coded stickers indicating whether they had achieved contact with the residents at each address and whether they were in favor of the welcome center.

Guillermo's story differed from the attorney's in spirit, if not much in detail. He acknowledged that AZRRI had reached out, but only to those residents whose properties abutted the school—all the zoning petition required. "The future of this neighborhood does not belong only to the community members whose property lines touch the school," Guillermo reasoned.

And worse, AZRRI didn't reach out to even those residents until ten days ago. These are working families who live here. It takes time for them to connect with their organizations, with us. Time, to make arrangements to come to a zoning hearing on a Tuesday afternoon. And

he continued,

so you stop by, you knock on a door, you ask a few questions—of course members of this community want to help immigrants. We are a community of immigrants. But we need time to think, and to talk, and to do our own research. A sticker on a map means nothing. What about everyone you didn't talk to? This is their neighborhood too.

He continued, a hint of desperation creeping into his voice,

Our neighborhood had plans for this school. It was going to be what we are calling a spark site. We have been negotiating with the school board, we want to revitalize our neighborhood, and the school is the center of it all.

In years past, elected officials and other more powerful citizens had advocated for state and corporate land deals that had left the neighborhood around Anne Ott decimated. More than half of the homes in the area currently stood empty, first bought out from under the community and then left to fall into dilapidation after a development project fell by the wayside. The city had declined to demolish them, and as the empty homes fell into disrepair so too did the well-being of the community around the empty school. But the community dreamed of revitalization. They imagined a “spark site” capable of drawing business and tourism, which in turn will bring prosperity, opportunity, and a brighter future. Their neighborhood may be humble, a small enclave in the shadow of the freeway and directly beneath the airport's flight path, but it's home. Guillermo grew up there, and his mother still lives there. The school board had seemed amenable. Now this.

“We are not against you,” Guillermo said. The pride in his voice when speaking about his community contrasted sharply with the tone he took as he pleaded, on that same community's behalf, to a White zoning officer and a largely White audience. “We support your work. Many of us have been immigrants; we know. But why should our community shoulder the burden of supporting these immigrants?” Left unspoken was a harsher indictment: *We have never seen any of you, not until you needed something from us; then, you do too little, too late. You don't care about our community and what we need. Why should our community care about you, and what you now need?*

I looked around and saw a few people shifting in their seats. I heard someone murmur, “He's not wrong.” Then, “This isn't good.” I recognized their discomfort taking up space in the room. I recognized it because I felt it too. I was thinking the same things: *What have we done here? And, What do we do about it now?*

Just then, Guillermo paused. Then he said, “And besides all that, what are your plans for medical personnel and resources?” Organizers looked around, confused. “We don’t know where these people are coming from or where they have been. What if they bring some disease?”

The room fell apart. Sharp exhales of disgust collided with discordant groans in the charged air. Just like that, a house of cards fell in on itself just as the last card was about to be placed. Guillermo had lost the room.

“Ugh, fearmongering,” I heard. “What ignorance.” What was left unsaid, but what I nevertheless heard among their words was, *You of all people should know better. We do not fall prey to such nonsense. We know better.* To the White women around me, this whiff of what they perceived as an expression of an all-too-common xenophobic fear of disease from the Latino community leader reeked of the kind of anti-immigrant racism, exclusion, and oppression that they have consciously chosen to reject and repudiate as liberal and progressive antiracist White people.

Guillermo had nearly convinced the White organizers in the room if not to withdraw the petition, at least to consider what it meant for a group of largely White organizers to co-opt a public space in an economically struggling neighborhood of color, make that previously public space private, funnel money into its renovation, and then fail to make any plans to contribute to the well-being of the community in which it is located. A few still looked troubled. But most White organizers just shook their heads in disgust at what they perceived to be an outrageous expression of xenophobia. To many, he was now an opponent—both to the progress of the migrant welcome center and to meaningful change to the current climate of anti-immigrant prejudice and fear.

In a moment of painful irony, White organizers’ wholesale rejection of Guillermo’s case following his comments about disease was an act of racialized power. Except, rather than using their racialized power and privilege to scapegoat, dominate, or discriminate against immigrants—as is common among White people with anti-immigrant sentiments—these White people attempted instead to enact a progressive form of White antiracism through their racialized rejection of Guillermo. While rejecting him and his perceived xenophobia, they also ultimately rejected the Latino/a neighborhood residents’ case as well and privileged their own agenda.

The other neighborhood residents who had attended the zoning hearing—the authors of the six remaining notecards opposing the petition—all yielded their time to Guillermo as well. They wanted the neighborhood to speak with one voice. However, when Guillermo stepped aside, his words were (White)washed away by the words of dozens of largely White women organizers who had *not* yielded their time to a collective spokesperson and instead desired to speak personally and individually in favor of the rezoning.

One after another, they stood and spoke: about the will in *their* community to solve this problem, of the inspiration *they* feel every time they work with

migrants, and of the migrants' right to be here and be treated humanely. They mentioned the precautions they would take to ensure the welcome center was safe, inconspicuous, and respectable. They listed the expensive tools (cameras and private security, for example) they would use to ensure the center remains so. I noted that these options are likely only available to the welcome center, thanks to the large, predominantly White, wealthy donor base that White organizers had cultivated, and that their focus on "respectability" is one often singular to White organizers appealing to other middle-class White people.

I listened to each organizer's speech, some brief and articulate, others long-winded and meandering. The zoning officer listened too. I wondered if the Latina/o residents would have been granted the same lax time limits or if their teary pauses would have been likewise indulged. Given that they had ceded their time to Guillermo, there was no way to know. I also wondered if they regretted ceding their time when they saw the number of White women lining up for their turn at the mic.

Quite a bit after the official end of business at 5 p.m., the zoning officer announced that he would approve the rezoning of the Anne Ott Elementary School into a shelter-style welcome center. Organizers erupted with excitement and turned to offer one another wide smiles, claps on the back, and exuberant hugs.

The exercise of their White privilege and sociopolitical clout had left White organizers feeling good about their efforts on behalf of asylum-seeking Central American migrants. In their eyes, they had achieved an ethically worthy and racially just goal. They felt united as a community and proud of themselves. As White people, they felt a reprieve from feelings of shame or White guilt—which often plague White activists in racial solidarity movements (Ioanide 2014; Sullivan 2014). Instead, they felt elated, for the first time since this crisis had begun. They believed they had wielded their privilege for "good," and felt a sense of solidarity with the migrants they sought to aid.

Meanwhile, Guillermo and the neighborhood residents filed out of 10E, subdued and quiet. Guillermo would later tell me that they were disappointed but not surprised. Once more, a legal system characterized by gendered, racialized, and classed inequities weighed the rights, responsibilities, and needs of his community of color against those of a White community on a rigged scale (Crenshaw 1989; López 1996).

The costs and consequences of using the master's tools against the master's house

On that July afternoon in room 10E, organizers and allies, the majority of whom were White women, wielded their racialized, gendered, and class privilege and power on behalf of Latina/o non-citizen migrants to great success. White women used their sociopolitical connections to mobilize an enormous

and financially well-endowed group of supporters to initiate significant change, and they created a migrant welcome center out of an abandoned school. However, in doing so, they also drowned out the voices of socioeconomically impoverished and structurally disadvantaged citizens of color living nearby. By all accounts, White organizers never considered the impact the creation of a welcome center might have on the surrounding community. They simply assumed that their vision for the future health and well-being of migrant families was the best one and proceeded to make that dream a reality.

The consequences of forging ahead unreflexively and using their White privilege as a blunt weapon would be profound. The zoning hearing set a largely negative tone for the relationship the welcome center now has with the neighborhood. The welcome center offered the neighborhood space within the building to hold community meetings, but Guillermo and other community leaders declined; the trust necessary for the community to feel comfortable sharing a space with privileged White organizers had already been lost. Yet, as far as most White women organizers were concerned, the tangible results of the hearing—the rezoning of the school and the eventual creation of the welcome center—validated White organizers’ approach and legitimated White organizational leadership.

The origins, events, and aftermath of the rezoning hearing offer us several insights. An intersectional analysis of middle-class White womanhood shows the racialized, gendered, and classed dimensions of time, civil participation, and sociopolitical connections. Maintaining intersectional attention to differences of gender, race, class, and citizenship reveals how the civil and legal systems that govern our lives and our communities favor White, middle-class respectability. Analysis of the intersectional differences in power between White women organizers, the Latina/o neighborhood residents, and non-citizen migrants reveals precisely how the privileging of Whiteness can cause significant harm even when White *people* mean well. Relationships between liberal and progressive White allies and the marginalized communities they claim to support are hamstrung when Whiteness asserts itself in ways contrary to solidarity. Using the master’s tools may, then, generate change; however, the consequences of doing so are always complex, seldom without unforeseen cost, and never wholly within our control.

Before we, as White allies, too quickly jump to exercise our privilege on behalf of those more marginalized than ourselves, we must account for and reckon with how that privilege is only enabled by the disadvantage of others. If we don’t, we risk not only failing to meaningfully challenge injustice, we also risk bringing continued harm, unintentional or not, to communities of color. White women’s access to resources, both material and social, is power-laden, and power is always racialized, gendered, and classed. Wielding that power on behalf of more marginalized people risks reproducing and strengthening systems of domination that rely on that same power to maintain racial

oppression—a diametrically opposite outcome to that hoped for by most White allies. Before White allies attempt to use the master's tools, then, we should first reckon with how wielding them risks reifying and bolstering the very systems of domination we purport to oppose.

Many of the White women organizers working on issues of immigration in Phoenix during 2018 and 2019 believed that they had a responsibility, based on their commitments to racial and social justice, to leverage their gendered White privilege, sociopolitical clout, and standing as citizens on behalf of marginalized citizens. Should other White allies decide that we have a responsibility to do the same, then feminist intersectionality *must* be a critical piece of our activism and practice. Feminist intersectionality offers a mechanism with which to anticipate, confront, mitigate, and reckon with the unforeseen consequences of wielding White privilege as a part of racial solidarity. It prompts us to interrogate the gendered, racialized, and classed power and privilege undergirding White-led racial solidarity movements, which too often goes unrecognized by the White allies in those movements (Levine-Rasky 2011; Hughey 2012). Intersectionality provides the means to question dominant ideologies across context (May 2015) *and* guides activists as they “cultivate flexibility and negotiate dynamics of difference and solidarity” within local movements for social change (Zavella 2017). Intersectionality gives us many of the tools necessary to build a stronger, more just, antiracist allyship and praxis.

Had the White-led organizations pushing for the rezoning been more consciously *intersectional* in their approach, they might have achieved better outcomes. An intersectional praxis would have prompted them to seek guidance and leadership from Latina/o community organizers before forging ahead with the plan to rezone Anne Ott, to realize the significant differential in racialized and classed power between their organizations and the residents of the neighborhood at the hearing, or perhaps even to perceive Guillermo's comments about disease differently. White organizers may have been less quick to condemn Guillermo as xenophobic if they had taken into account the intersectional differences that complicate individuals' relationships to the state, migration, and health and disease. Poor and working-class communities of color are long accustomed to government officials—who are often affluent White men—dumping problems in their backyard because those officials know that these communities lack the power to resist. Highways crosscut historically Black neighborhoods, coal slurry flows downriver into Indigenous communities, and slashed social programs remind all US people of color that their communities are dumping grounds (Cole & Foster 2001). Furthermore, first- and second-generation Latina/o American communities know better than most the nature of the difficult journey from the Northern Triangle through Mexico to the US border, as well as the unhealthy and unsanitary conditions along the journey and in immigration holding facilities. Finally, in a forgotten working-class neighborhood of color with high

percentages of undocumented people, it is not unreasonable for residents to fear illness. Poverty and lack of healthcare resources mean that if they fall ill, they are less likely to receive affordable, quality care and more likely to suffer negative outcomes (Institute of Medicine Committee on Understanding and Eliminating Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health Care, 2003; Washington 2008; Hoberman 2012).

Instead, White organizers' reaction to Guillermo was largely without nuance. They both failed to see their collective race and class-based privilege relative to the neighborhood residents and inaccurately concluded that Guillermo, and by extension the working-class Latina/o community he represented, was oppressing migrants. This example shows that even well-intentioned, progressive middle-class White women trying to act in racial solidarity risk misunderstanding entirely the dynamics of power at play in their advocacy work when we fail to apply an intersectional analysis to our work and our places in it *as* White women.

Now that we have seen the ways in which wielding the master's tools—racialized economic power and sociopolitical clout as well as gendered White privilege—on behalf of less marginalized people risks reproducing and strengthening systems of domination that rely on that same privilege to maintain racial oppression, what do antiracist allies, like the White woman organizers in Phoenix, do now? Perhaps, we are best served envisioning an alternative. How might those of us who are White begin to build an antiracist feminist toolset that allows us to draw upon our racialized privilege, when necessary, to enact positive change within a deeply flawed system that White people know and understand is weighted in our favor? How do we, as White feminists, do this work in the immediate term, while supporting people of color-led efforts to transform that system in the long term? How might middle-class White people wield their sociopolitical clout in service of justice, yet anticipate and mitigate any unintentional harm that may result from our doing so?

I challenge you to consider these questions. While fully answering them is outside the scope of this chapter, what I can do is propose that the first item we can and should place in that toolkit is feminist intersectionality. Audre Lorde was right; the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. So White antiracist allies need a stronger framework for contributing to racial justice, and an ally's toolkit and antiracist praxis informed by feminist intersectionality can provide White people invested in antiracism and solidarity movements a way forward that is both feminist and just.

Notes

- 1 I describe below the events of the migrant surge of 2018–2019. The details of the surge, and its impact on the city of Phoenix, were gathered over a period of nearly two years. My description and analysis are informed by participant interviews,

- my research notes from months of fieldwork, and innumerable documents, emails, and phone calls I was privy to, both during the surge and following it.
- 2 When seeking asylum in the United States, one of the first hoops migrants are instructed to jump through is called a credible fear hearing. During this hearing, immigration official(s) ask migrants to articulate the threats and dangers that await them should they return to their home country. Officials then decide if the migrant has a “credible fear” that warrants continuing with the asylum-seeking process.
 - 3 The Flores Settlement Agreement of 1997 sets the standards for the minimum care the federal government is required to give the (im)migrants it detains and specifically sets standards for the ethical treatment of families and children.
 - 4 Throughout this chapter, I chose to refer to migrants, volunteers, and individuals with roots in Mexico, other Central American countries, and South America as “Latino/a.” In an effort to be more gender-inclusive/expansive, it has become common to use more gender-neutral terms to refer to these populations, such as “Latinx” or “Latine.” I myself am usually inclined to use these terms when speaking broadly about Latinx/Latine communities. However, I found that the Latino/a people I worked with regarding (im)migrant rights’ advocacy in Phoenix (whether they were undocumented residents of the United States; first- or second-generation citizens of the United States, or newly arrived migrants) rarely used these newer terms to describe themselves. In fact, especially in the case of incoming migrants, they had rarely even heard the terms used before. Instead, most Latino/a people I encountered identified themselves as precisely that—Latino or Latina—by their country of origin—Honduran, Nicaraguan, etc. In an effort to respect the terms they use to self-identify, I have chosen to use Latino/a, while recognizing that there are of course non-binary and transgender Latines among the larger populations I discuss.
 - 5 I chose to refer to the Anne Ott school by its proper name, rather than a pseudonym. This is because a quick Google search of “migrant welcome center, Phoenix” will turn up a wealth of articles and information on the welcome center and the Anne Ott location. However, the names of all other individuals and organizations referenced in this chapter have been anonymized.

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15

WHITENESS AND INDIGENEITY

Feminism as a settler colonial discourse

Ruth Alminas and Cory Pillen

White women benefit more from mainstream feminism than anyone else, even though mainstream feminist ideals were taken from Haudenosaunee peoples. Natives were already feminists, then settlers came and colonized us, forced us to be Christian or Catholic, and now the settlers are trying to be feminists and take our ideals away from us, which we weren't allowed to have in the first place.

*(Anonymous survey respondent;
identifies as Indigenous, female, and feminist)*

This chapter starts from the position that feminists hoping to mount a meaningful challenge to white supremacy and heteropatriarchy must acknowledge the role feminism plays in legitimating the ongoing project of settler colonialism. *Settler colonialism* refers to the persistent structures of domination through which a group of invasive colonizers come to stay, claiming Indigenous lands as their own by displacing, eradicating, or subjugating Indigenous populations and asserting supreme and exclusive authority over the territory. It is important to note that settler colonialism is not a singular event that took place in the distant past, but rather a process that is continually perpetuated through the narratives and the political and legal institutions imposed by the colonizers. The goal of this chapter is to frame and generate meaningful dialogue about the complicity of feminism in upholding settler colonialism, and the possibilities for a just path forward.

We write as two white women-identified scholars in the disciplines of art history, gender and sexuality studies, and political science teaching at Fort Lewis College (FLC), a Native American-serving institution in southwest

Colorado that occupies the ancestral lands and territories of the Nuchu (Ute), Apache, Pueblos, Hopi, Zuni, and Diné Nations. We were both trained in a white, liberal academic tradition, in which the most vocal critiques of “feminism” came from those interested in defending the heteropatriarchal status quo. In our classrooms at FLC, we became cognizant of a very different form of resistance to feminism from Indigenous students very much opposed to the political status quo, resistance informed by a recognition of the various ways mainstream white feminism¹ is complicit in the perpetuation of settler colonialism. Dialogues about settler colonialism are common at FLC, with its origins as a military fort turned Indigenous boarding school. These dialogues have also transformed our own understandings of feminism and the ways we approach issues of social justice both in and out of the classroom, occupy a central place in how we conceptualize systemic change, and prompted our engagement with these ideas in this chapter.

The relationship between settler colonialism and feminism is a complex and nuanced area of inquiry with many facets, not all of which can be addressed here. We have shaped this chapter around the concerns and lived experiences of our students at FLC, aiming to place their ideas into conversation with the work of Indigenous scholars and activists in the North American context. During the spring semester of 2021, we conducted a qualitative survey of students from disciplines across our campus to gather their anonymous perspectives on the connections between feminism and settler colonialism, individual versus collective conceptions of rights, the relative importance of tribal and gender identities, and ways forward for non-Indigenous feminists interested in addressing the concerns of Indigenous peoples. In addition to a set of five open-ended questions on these issues, we also asked our respondents for demographic information as to their gender identity, major, year in school, and whether they identify as Indigenous and as feminist. Sixty-six students filled out the demographic portion of our survey, forty of whom submitted responses to all five qualitative questions. The majority (68 percent) were in their junior or senior year, representing a variety of majors in education, arts and humanities, social sciences, and STEM. Of the students who completed the survey, 56 percent identified as Indigenous, 67 percent identified as women, and 77 percent identified as feminists.

In the next section, we discuss the argument that mainstream feminism continues to prioritize white voices, experiences, and needs. Then, we turn our attention to the imposition of heteropatriarchal norms upon Indigenous societies by settler colonialism. Next, we consider how feminism has served to legitimate settler colonialism and undermine Indigenous claims to sovereignty. We conclude by inviting our readers to consider the next steps for feminism committed to transformative change rather than the perpetuation of settler colonialism. Unless otherwise cited, all the quotes presented in this chapter come from student responses to our qualitative survey questions. We

discuss some trends in our students' orientations toward particular issues, but it is crucial to note that our students do not speak for all Indigenous communities, which are varied in terms of cultural norms and belief systems. Some of the issues that our students address parallel concerns raised by Black feminists and other women of color, although these connections are beyond the scope of the present chapter. Many of the quotes presented have been edited for readability and grammar.

Feminism and whiteness

Many of the issues that Indigenous women face today are directly rooted in racism, so if they are saying that the issues they face are not feminist issues, rather they are racism issues, then I think we need to listen to them and address the problems they identify for themselves.

(Anonymous survey respondent; identifies as an Indigenous cis-gender woman and feminist)

Feminism's problematic history with respect to racial equity has been well documented (see Ware 1992). Until recently, historical narratives have failed to foreground the role people of color have played in the movement, both as individuals and in conjunction with groups like Women of All Red Nations and the National Black Feminist Organization (Thompson 2002). Likewise, the mainstream feminist movement has often focused on the needs and goals of white women to the exclusion of others. As Louise Michele Newman explains, "White women's expressions of resentment over the enfranchisement of [B]lack men and these women's subsequent decision to keep the movement clear of 'race' questions were part of a larger post-Reconstruction retreat from support of racial justice" (1999, 5). Mainstream white feminism, in other words, became a mechanism for perpetuating certain hegemonic power structures (i.e., racism) while simultaneously challenging others (i.e., patriarchy).

Recognizing the need for change, contemporary feminists, many of them feminists of color, have begun to redefine the goals and paradigms of the movement. As a part of this process, they have focused on addressing intersectionality, acknowledging the dynamic relationships among different categories of identity, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability (see Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013). Some have also embraced the notion of *feminisms* (Gluck 1998, 32), foregrounding the fact that feminists come from diverse cultural backgrounds, hold various ideological positions, and have different lived experiences, all of which shape how they understand the movement.

Despite these efforts, mainstream white feminists need to go further in addressing the racist practices, structures, and ideas that continue to shape the movement and oppress people of color. As Indigenous scholar Devon Abbott

Mihesuah (2003) has observed, many Indigenous people have a strong aversion to feminism, seeing it as a movement that prioritizes the voices, needs, and interests of white privileged women. Our Indigenous students have articulated similar concerns in classroom discussions and their survey responses. Some have suggested that white middle- and upper-class women continue to dictate the boundaries, goals, and narratives of feminism, reinforcing inequitable power dynamics that are reified in media representations.

Relatedly, addressing the increasing prevalence of “tokenism,” one student commented that “You have mostly white activists and leaders using the few ethnic participants as proof of their diversity and inclusion. And sometimes that feels a little bit strange.” Underlying this statement is the recognition that among white activists, inclusion itself, rather than a fundamental shift in systems and paradigms, has become the goal. As scholars have noted, this trend often involves the control or suppression of dissent and is particularly problematic when considered in the context of settler colonialism, which seeks to make select systems and norms appear both natural and inevitable (Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill 2013, 14). Peggy McIntosh, a white antiracist feminist, explained that white people “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 work is seen as work that will allow ‘them’ to be more like ‘us’” (1988, 63).

Consistent with these critiques, many students noted that the experiences, opinions, and goals of Indigenous people continue to be excluded or marginalized within the movement. Multiple survey respondents mentioned that issues of concern to them, including Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls² and the forced sterilization of Indigenous women, are rarely addressed in mainstream feminist discourses. Likewise, Indigenous women differ from many white feminists in their orientation toward both gender norms and the nation-state, issues that will be explored in greater depth in the next two sections. As one student summarized, “Indigenous people have a different idea of how feminism should play out and a different understanding of gender roles within their community.”

Several students attributed the continuing marginalization of Indigenous people in feminist circles to settler colonialism. Echoing the comments of Indigenous scholars like Joyce Green, who suggested that “colonialism is a primary cause of the difficulties endured by Indigenous women in their personal lives and social relationships” (2017b, 10), one student noted that “settler colonialism covered up Native lives so well that feminism didn’t look to include the biggest issues Native women were and still are facing in the colonial world.” Expanding on this, another student remarked that there is a “push and pull” between feminism and colonization, between “what is known and what is trying to be redefined.” This quote alludes to the idea that white feminism, while making strides to resist the patriarchal ideals that

inform colonialism, has also perpetuated the oppression of Indigenous people and other people of color by excluding them, invalidating their experiences, and expecting them to conform to white norms and ideals.

The settler colonialist roots of heteropatriarchy

Colonialism brought toxic masculinity. Due to colonialism, women do not have equal rights.

(Anonymous survey respondent; identifies as Indigenous, woman, and feminist)

Laguna Pueblo scholar, poet, and activist Paula Allen Gunn observed that “feminists too often believe that no one has ever experienced the kind of society that empowered women and made that empowerment the basis of its rules of civilization” (Allen 1992, 196), yet the evidence is clear that many (if not most) North American Indigenous peoples experienced precisely such societies prior to the arrival of European settlers (Allen 1992; McGowan 2006; Donaldson 2010; Gearon 2021). Historically, Indigenous women held positions of great political, spiritual, and even military power. Several of our Indigenous students referenced the matriarchal nature of their traditional societies, highlighting the influence and security women enjoyed as a result. One Diné (Navajo) student explained the matriarchal structure of her society by saying, “the woman of the relationship or family is the one who addresses and resolves many issues..., takes care of any funding situations, and is the owner of all items including the house, livestock, and much more.” Although there was generally a clear division of labor based on gender, these gender roles were understood to be balanced and complementary (Tsosie 2010; Shoemaker 2012). As one student put it, “Traditional Indigenous systems see gender as holistic as opposed to dualistic, which does not create the same inequities we see in western societies.”

Another distinction between most Native American and European cultures prior to contact was in their attitudes toward individuals who transcended anticipated gender roles (Tsosie 2010). One student explained that

while men and women both had their roles in the community, it wasn't hard fixed, especially in my Yupik culture. If a woman wanted to be a hunter, she was allowed to. It was a little different, but it wasn't frowned upon.

Gender was viewed by many Indigenous communities as non-dichotomous and socially constructed rather than dichotomous and biologically determined (Shoemaker 2012), but processes of assimilation have changed those norms. A two-spirit Indigenous student lamented that in both Indigenous and white society today, “there's this immense obsession with [the] genitals

you must have...and by that you are a man or a woman or you have to take the masculine role or feminine role.” Prior to colonization, traditional gender roles were often assigned based on variables such as proclivity, temperament, dreams, or a child’s choice in companions or toys (Allen 1992). There is evidence that many Indigenous communities were accepting of gay men and lesbians as a natural and necessary part of society (Grahm 1990), and that many recognized genders beyond male and female (e.g. two-spirit). Moreover, individuals expressing a transgender or non-binary gender identity often occupied highly respected social and ceremonial roles (Blackwood 1984; Walters et al. 2006). According to one non-binary Indigenous student:

At one point in Native Americans’ lives, we were open to the idea of two-spirit [people]... this idea that a person can embody both female energy and male energy, and we saw it as sacred. Yet because of colonialism [many now] see people who are two-spirit as ‘not normal’.

To subjugate Indigenous peoples as settler-state citizens, the settler nations took a variety of measures intended to eliminate Indigenous norms of governance, kinship, and gender. Assimilation measures included requirements to adopt written constitutions and centralized, “democratic” institutions of government, blood quantum laws, allotment acts (Hoxie 1989), and boarding school programs. In the words of a student who identifies as Indigenous and two-spirit:

There are records of third-genders who were put into the [boarding] schools and were ridiculed and singled out because of their gender. Because they wanted them to assimilate—I want to specifically emphasize that word *assimilate*—to masculine and feminine roles.

As this student suggests, boarding school administrators and staff enforced binary gender roles informed by white European cultural norms.

A potential implication is that a return to the cultural traditions of pre-colonial Indigenous societies—not the attainment of gender equality on the white settlers’ terms—offers the most promising path for the emancipation of Indigenous women. Whereas mainstream feminists are often perceived as seeking the destruction of their traditional family structures and obligations, many Indigenous women hope to reconstitute their own traditional family structures and obligations (Chiste 1994). Some of our Indigenous students supported a return to the traditional ways of their peoples to increase opportunities for women and lower rates of violence against women. However, others expressed skepticism or discomfort about the possibility of a simple return to traditional ways. One student commented, “we’ve got to recognize who we are today and how we got here. If we were to bring back the old

gender system rules from pre-colonization, I feel like it wouldn't be conducive to our society today." Another student, acknowledging the "pervasive presence" of settler colonialism in many Indigenous communities today, stated,

we too have fallen victim to patriarchal systems.... It would take conscious effort to deconstruct those ideas and rebuild [Native men's] worldview in a way that values all genders, including non-binary or two-spirit identities that have been oppressed but were traditionally respected in Indigenous societies.

These students, along with some self-described Indigenous feminists, hold that Indigenous feminisms are useful, perhaps even necessary, if decolonization is to become a reality. We end this section with the voice of one more student, an Indigenous woman, who echoes this call for distinctly Indigenous forms of feminism.

I think a Native feminism in particular needs to be focused on the issues within our own tribal communities. I think Native people are hesitant to address the patriarchal structures within our own societies because it's protected under the guise of culture and tradition, and I think that's created a lot of really toxic dynamics in which men are taught that they are the leaders and the future and are not really held accountable to their own actions and the way that women are.

Sovereignty matters

I am a Navajo woman. I first identify myself as a Diné person, then as a woman. I think this idea of placing your gender first erases the fact that I am Native. I am not the same as a white woman, although we are both women, and to identify myself first as a woman takes away from my experiences as a Native person. I can think of many times that I was told to support my fellow women simply because I am a woman, yet many times white women do not have my best interest in mind as a Native person.

(Anonymous survey respondent; identifies as Indigenous, female, and feminist)

To take the concerns of Indigenous peoples seriously, feminist scholarship and activism need to consider how to pursue emancipatory goals that do not depend on the authority of the state or its constitutional order. As reflected in the student quote that opens this section, there is a sense among some Indigenous women that white feminists, as the beneficiaries of settler colonialism, do not have the interests of Indigenous communities in mind. As Janet McCloud, co-founder of Women of All Red Nations, stated, "Since you're

standing on our land, we've got to view you as another oppressor trying to hang on to what is ours." She expressed deep concern that the feminist movement could lure Indigenous women "into participating as 'equals' in our own colonization" and "leave us colonized in the name of gender equity" (McCloud quoted in Jaimes 1992, 314). This reflects the sense among some Indigenous feminists, scholars, and activists that mainstream feminist politics are in direct conflict with a politics of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination (Skenandore 2002; Smith and Kauanui 2008).

The mainstream understanding of sovereignty as disseminated by the European nation-states (i.e., Westphalian sovereignty) understands the state as sovereign, which is defined as *supreme and exclusive authority* over a territory. According to this tradition, the state's sovereignty exists to protect the individual's inalienable rights and liberties, with particular emphasis on private property rights. This understanding of sovereignty has shaped US federal Indian law, which holds that Indigenous tribes have been divested of full sovereignty as domestic dependent nations incorporated into the United States (Tsoie 2010). According to this understanding, the United States has the responsibility to protect the rights of tribal members from being violated by their own tribal governments (see the 1968 Indian Civil Rights Act, 25 U.S.C. §§1301–1303).

Indigenous conceptions of sovereignty differ in important ways from the Westphalian. Indigenous sovereignty is understood to be an inherent attribute of a people, which cannot be granted, negotiated, or taken away. Indigenous sovereignty is not supreme authority vested in the hierarchical structure of the state, but rather a recognition of interdependency, consensus-seeking (Bauder and Mueller 2021), and communal stewardship (not ownership) of the land, which is understood as the sacred source of life (Venne 1998).³

A case study that addresses the complexity of sovereignty in concrete terms is *Martinez v. Santa Clara Pueblo* (1978). According to Santa Clara Pueblo's membership ordinance, children born of marriages between a male member and a non-member are eligible for tribal membership, but those born of marriages between a female member and a non-member are not. Julia Martinez, a Santa Clara Pueblo member who married a Diné man, filed suit in federal court asserting that the ordinance discriminated on the basis of gender. The Supreme Court found in favor of the Pueblo, reasoning that determination of tribal membership is a fundamental attribute of tribal sovereignty.

In the survey we distributed, we summarized this case and asked our students to weigh in on the holding. Students who disagreed with the court's ruling in this case tended to feel that the Pueblo's membership ordinance was discriminatory on the basis of gender and thereby morally wrong. As one student put it:

I think the rights of the individual should be given priority... There may be similar situations to Martinez's and this denies people their right to

being a part of the Pueblo tribe. Morally, I think that there should be some interference to protect the rights of Martinez.

If tribal membership and the benefits it endows are construed as rights, in other words, it is logical (according to the norms of contemporary American society) that questions about the unequal protection of those rights should be a matter for the courts.

A plurality of the students we surveyed, however, expressed support for the court's decision in this matter. In the words of one Indigenous man, "Not that I'm saying restricting women is good, but...the idea of maintaining tribal sovereignty is for the greater good." Informing this statement is the idea that the central issue confronting Indigenous people today is survival, both cultural and biological, and that tribal sovereignty is crucial to that struggle.

Indigenous feminist Kate Shanley (1984, 214) explains that Indigenous women prioritize tribal sovereignty "in order to maintain a vital legal and spiritual connection to the land, in order to survive as a people." From this perspective, using the system of courts erected by the settler colonial state to battle for individual women's equal rights can be understood as a threat to the survival of the tribe. One of our students, an Indigenous woman, stated, "It makes sense that [Indigenous women] are reluctant to join a movement and an ideology that...is rooted in white western ideals of gender equality." Indigenous scholar Joyce Green argues that "the language of equality and inclusion has been deployed to blunt the critical force of Indigenous claims to sovereignty and to rights, which challenge the legitimacy of settler states" (Green 2017a, 185). Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill (2013) likewise charge that the liberal multicultural discourses on rights amount to a legitimization of settler colonialism by envisioning justice as something to be achieved within the context of the settler colonial state and its imposed constitution. In other words, working for justice within a system responsible for the injustices you are facing is futile.

Looking forward

I think a more inclusive feminist movement acknowledges that there are cultural differences in perceptions of gender and equality and that it's okay for feminist movements to look different and advocate and fight for different things depending on the needs of that population and their specific contexts.

(Anonymous survey respondent; identifies as Indigenous, cisgender woman, and feminist)

As this chapter has indicated, many Indigenous scholars and activists have addressed the viability of feminism for Indigenous peoples, offering various

critiques of the movement. Although some reject the term, others have embraced new forms of feminism that foreground intersectionality, decolonization, and the goals and concerns of Indigenous women. Cheryl Suzack (2010) and Shari Huhndorf, for instance, note that

Indigenous feminism...has arisen from histories of women's activism and culture that have aimed to combat gender discrimination, secure social justice for Indigenous women, and counter their social erasure and marginalization – endeavors that fall arguably under the rubric of feminism, despite Indigenous women's fraught relationship with the term and with mainstream feminist movements.

(2010, 5)

Despite their numerous critiques of mainstream white feminism, 73 percent of the Indigenous students who completed our survey identified as feminists. In discussing the movement, many challenged the notion that embracing feminism is necessarily tantamount to assimilation or consenting to an agenda dominated by white goals and values. Noting that “people of color fight for equal rights as well,” one student implied that equating feminism with whiteness denies the role that BIPOC have played and continue to play in the movement. Others suggested that feminism, as a movement that addresses social equity and oppression, is ideally suited to analyzing the relationship between colonial social, political, and economic structures and the people who have been systematically oppressed by such systems. As one Indigenous student explained, “Feminism as I understand it, is not the promotion of specifically white women. I understand feminism as equality for all..., whether male, female, non-binary, etc.”

Many of these same students, however, stressed the fact that mainstream white feminists need to go much further in addressing misconceptions about the movement and bridging the divide between theory and practice, a process that will require critical reflection, dialogue, and a commitment to structural change. Their specific suggestions, although varied, coalesced around several important ideas. As they suggested, the movement should make greater strides to:

- *Refuse the erasure of BIPOC and non-binary people.* White feminists, students argued, must do a better job of acknowledging the ideas and lived experiences of BIPOC and non-binary people. This means abdicating the floor, engaging their concerns, and valuing them as leaders in the movement. As one student proclaimed, feminists must “listen, acknowledge, and empower.”
- *Embrace difference.* As the quote at the beginning of this section exemplifies, students stressed the fact that feminism can encompass a range of goals and ideas. Elaborating, they extolled the transformative potential of an intersectional approach that empowers people from different racial, social,

political, economic, and spiritual backgrounds. As one student asserted, thinking about intersectionality would “do a lot to repair some of the damage caused by settler colonialism and be a good building block for returning to our traditional ways and beliefs in a modern contemporary context.”

- *Educate the public.* The importance of education was stressed repeatedly. Specifically, Indigenous students underscored the need for more education on the breadth and goals of the feminist movement, cultural sensitivity, intersectionality, issues of concern to Native women, and Native feminisms. As one student noted, however, this information must be presented in an accessible manner to avoid alienating people or reinforcing hierarchies informed by socioeconomic status.
- *Recognize and hold the feminist movement accountable for the various ways feminism perpetuates settler colonialism, with the goal of transformative change.* Central to comments made by Indigenous students was the understanding that the often-overlooked relationship between feminism and settler colonialism must be addressed for feminism to “fully evolve.” As one student explained:

Settler colonialism and feminism are inextricably united, particularly in their intersectional implications. Settler colonialism is arguably the catalyst for American racism as it exists today, which further paved the way for discrepancies in the feminist movement to exist between different racial (and therefore, different social) classes. Simply put, the feminist movement wasn't initially created to support the rights and social mobility of all women—but rather, upper-class white women, which is...an entire contradiction to the goal of the movement. To me, this is why understanding the implications of settler colonialism is important—as it helps individuals further understand the essential duty of also implementing intersectionality in their practice of feminism.

As Indigenous scholars like Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck, and Angie Morrill (2013) have suggested, Indigenous feminisms offer models for integrating these various goals and interrogating the implications of interconnections between settler colonialism and the heteropatriarchy. As one of our students warned, however, it is important to bring awareness to Indigenous feminisms without subordinating them to the broader movement. As she explained, “This could mean that women's history month has an emphasis on Indigenous feminism rather than trying to incorporate it into the general idea, where it would potentially get lost in other messages.”

As noted at the outset of this chapter, the relationship between feminism and settler colonialism is a complex and nuanced issue, not all of which can be addressed here. Our goal was to offer a starting place for further dialogue and critical reflection. Having these difficult conversations, we contend, is one way to mount more powerful challenges to white supremacy.

Notes

- 1 In this chapter, “mainstream white feminism” refers to a westernized, individualistic, Euro-American, middle- and upper-class perspective.
- 2 For more information on Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) see: Baker, Carrie N. 2019. “Making Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Visible.” Ms. Accessed February 6, 2023. <https://msmagazine.com/2019/12/02/making-missing-and-murdered-indigenous-women-and-girls-visible/>. See also Resource Library, National Indigenous Women’s Resource Center. Accessed February 6, 2023. https://www.niwrc.org/resources?field_resource_topic_target_id=576
- 3 For more information on Westphalian sovereignty see: Bauder, Herald, and Rebecca Mueller. 2021. “Westphalian vs. Indigenous Sovereignty: Challenging Colonial Territorial Governance.” *Geopolitics*, 1–18.

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16

TEACHING TRANSGENDER STUDIES

Experiential knowledge and race

Dana T. Ahern

The topic of “transgender” issues—trans lives, trans studies, trans medicine—is often primarily talked about through proximity to death and violence. While transgender identities are included in celebrations of pride during the month of June, one of the only transgender-specific “holidays” is the Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDOR). The Transgender Day of Remembrance, originally called “Remembering Our Dead,” was created in 1998 by Gwendolyn Ann Smith, a white trans woman, after the murder of Rita Hester, a Black trans woman (Smith 2008). The official TDOR website logs each death as it occurs throughout each year from anti-trans violence. While transgender people are often discussed in relation to their significantly higher risk of murder versus their cisgender counterparts, data demonstrates that this risk is largely only true for trans people of color; in one study of data from 2010 to 2014, white trans people actually had *lower* rates of murder than cisgender people of all races (Dinno 2017).

In this chapter, I explore the urgent issue of whiteness in queer and trans pedagogy in the university during a rise of fascism throughout the world, and—notably for this chapter—in the United States, using my own experience, teaching an introduction to transgender politics in a university classroom. The experience I discuss was further impacted by my own white transness, as well as the university’s reputation for both rigorous scholarship and radical activism, with alumni such as Huey P. Newton, a founder of the Black Panther Party, and Gloria Anzaldúa, author of *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) and co-editor of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981). Using and exploring the trajectory of foundational feminist pedagogical scholars, such as bell hooks, and moving

into more recent scholarship from theorists such as Jennifer Nash, I analyze the problems, misreads, and hesitations in a present-day transgender studies classroom that result in problematic narratives and limited understandings of what and who count as trans and what that means for trans liberation.

Transgender identity is individually, personally discovered and, in many ways, is a question of knowing oneself. As such, trans identity is often not easily parsed out as definable or visible; rather it is something felt. When transness so often is framed through vulnerability to violence, *feeling* transgender becomes secondary to *appearing* transgender. In other words, transgender identity risks becoming something that can only be recognized through some kind of tangible “evidence” of transness. Unfortunately, because so much popular discourse surrounding trans lives centers our precarity, particularly with the recent surge of anti-trans legislation in the United States, recognizable “evidence” of transness begins to look primarily like pain. I investigate the focus on pain in transgender discourse, examining what that pain looks like, who embodies it, and how pain moves. Where transgender politics often are organized around shared vulnerability, I think more carefully about who denotes a body as “vulnerable” and for what purpose. In other classes covering topics of awakening identities or rising consciousness—such as queer and women of color feminisms classrooms—discussions are sparked by pride or pleasure in newly or more deeply understood identities. In contrast, pleasure often became almost an impossibility within transgender discourse and in the transgender subjects being considered. An emphasis on the authority of experience often results in the flattening of “experience” into something synonymous with “pain,” resulting in the hypervisibility of racialized *bodies* at the expense of their voices and personhood. I argue for a more nuanced understanding of identity and coalition—what our identities mean for ourselves and each other—allowing for the radical potentialities of pleasure and opening up a way of knowing grounded in joy and ecstasy. Most urgently, I call for accountability to the ways that race collapses into transgender identity discourse, making transgender identity homogeneous (and by extension white), and defining it by the ways trans people are subjected to harm instead of by the ways transness can be understood as radical, queer, and hopeful.

First, I contextualize the transgender studies classroom, setting up the framing of my class as well as the student population. I discuss the expectations of these students, namely the ways that they expected the class to center questions of human rights and access to social and material resources, and describe my attempts to nuance these ideas with attention to Black trans studies. Using the framework of activism for the “most vulnerable,” I move into an analysis of how transgender identity becomes determined through visibility and pain and how this ultimately serves the least vulnerable while making those most vulnerable hypervisible. I end the chapter with an exploration of

women of color feminisms' call for coalitional politics between and across different groups and women of color feminists' attention to pleasure as an analytic. I analyze what might be possible for transgender activism by using these discourses and political frameworks. Ultimately, I call for transgender studies and pedagogies to emphasize a more intersectional lens in greater conversation with critical race scholarship.

Setting up the transgender studies classroom

I taught my first course in transgender studies as a graduate student at a university with a large and enthusiastic activist population, during the middle of the forty-fifth president's term in office. The course was offered under the feminist studies department, drawing interest from its sharp and critically minded majors who have often been at the front lines of the many protests in the university's history, supporting union workers, undocumented students, and Black students, among others. These students care deeply about injustice, and work on the ground to make change in their community. It was with them in mind that I designed the class. I wanted to make a space where students could be introduced to a foundation of queer of color and transgender theories that they could bring to their activist work, pushing them to critically consider what intersectional transgender studies—and by extension, activism—can look like.

I designed the class to engage questions of transgender rights and progress to allow the students to process and move beyond the “identity-based movement” that is critiqued by white trans scholars like Dean Spade (2015) and Aren Aizura (2018), which fight for white trans inclusion and recognition from institutions like capitalism and the military, instead of advocating for broader systemic change. As Aizura describes, “identity-based movement ... often demands legal and social recognition that consolidates the institutions that create injustice rather than deep social transformations.” Put another way, by emphasizing personal and individual identities, we risk losing the power for collective action and demands (10). To help address this and offer an analysis beyond simply inclusion, the course explored histories of antiracist transgender organizing and how intersectional projects and organizations, like Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson's “Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries,” challenged assimilationist political actions that privileged white gay people over poor trans people of color. I also included texts on transnational transgender experiences, delving into explorations of how different states manage transgender lives and exploring the construction of different nations as supposedly “trans-friendly” and “progressive,” or as dangerous and transphobic.

The transgender studies classroom is similar to many classrooms that engage topics of race, gender, and sexuality, where students, particularly those who are cisgender and had limited personal familiarity with the topic, spoke with caution. They prefaced contributions to class with hedging statements

like, “I can’t know exactly what this means because I’m not trans,” or simply sat quietly, speaking only when absolutely necessary or in one-on-one discussions. The centrality of identity to the class often resulted in cis students’ fear of speaking because they were concerned it would be inappropriate to speak on things they did not experience and to discuss identities they did not hold, uncertain of their authority to speak. Where in most spaces discussing gender and race, a lack of identification with the material may elicit moments of hesitation, these hesitations in transgender studies became outright silence. In struggling to find the right words to ask questions, cisgender students would abandon their thoughts and would stop mid-sentence.

bell hooks’ *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994) argues for nuancing our understandings of “the authority of experience.” Although this phrase had offered hooks a way through which to attribute value to her knowledge as a Black woman in feminist spaces that prioritized whiteness, she became “acutely aware of the way [the term ‘authority of experience’] is used to silence and exclude,” where an individual experience (most often a white experience) stands in for objective truth. How do we acknowledge the importance, the imperative even, of experiential knowledge—the valuable knowledge of our own intersectional lives—in a time when white claims to certain experiences are used to silence, exclude, and foreclose conversations in a classroom? More urgently, why does this happen in transgender studies classrooms, and to such an intense degree?

I have been on testosterone long enough to not quite remember that I used to look quite different until I am reminded by old pictures. To someone whom I am meeting for the first time, I appear to be a six-foot-tall white man whose feminine qualities might be written off as effeminate rather than womanly. The things that mark my body as a queer one are usually only visible (albeit hypervisible) to myself. The disconnect between how I know myself to look and how I feel myself to look strike a strange contradiction in my head as I stand in front of a trans studies classroom full of students who assume, not without precedent, that they are being taught trans studies by a cis person—someone who does not and cannot know the *feeling* of trans identity. The experiential knowledge with which I am armed comes not from a place of hypervisibility, a hypervisibility that is often problematically assumed that most trans people will have and maintain throughout their lives, but rather through my lived experience that I have the privilege of asserting or not. This is not to dismiss the realities of more permanent trans hypervisibility influenced by race, class, and nonbinary gender, but rather draws attention to the ways that what specifically makes a trans person more visible is often assumed to be primarily transness itself, instead of its specific intersections with things like race, class, (nonbinary) gender. In other words, racist transphobia or classist transphobia becomes simplified into just transphobia.

In a special issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, “We Got Issues: Towards a Black Trans*/Studies,” the editors wrote, “*Black* is a modifier

that changes everything. The power of blackness to change all that comes after is part of its close relationship to death. To be preceded by death is to pull meaning into ‘dense and full space’” (Ellison et al. 2017, 166). In my course, I centered Black transgender studies with works by Treva Ellison, Kai M. Green, Matt Richardson, and C. Riley Snorton, who asked, “in what ways does transgender studies always already depend on the abstraction of the racialization of space as foundational to the production of gender and sexuality?” (163) In other words, how does transgender studies depend on the flattening or erasure of race? With this question, these scholars bring to the fore the urgent exploration of the intersection of race and transgender identity while simultaneously calling attention to the ways that transgender studies and discourse have taken the knowledge and experience of trans people of color and applied it to white trans people. These abstractions that Ellison, Green, Richardson, and Snorton bring to our attention became a central question for the course, as they were increasingly visible in the understandings students brought to the space of the classroom and the topics we navigated there together, such as the implications of losing military benefits for a low-income family with the transgender military ban.

As I began my first day of the term, I started the way I begin every course: by asking each student why they were in the class. Many were enrolled in the class for political reasons. They understood transgender lives to be in a state of danger and wanted to make change, centering the question of *access*. In its many considerations on questions of access (to transition medicine, legal documents, or institutional/governmental recognition), alongside discussions of visibility, authenticity, and safety, modern transgender discourse has evolved such that it is almost impossible to disentangle transgender identity from conversations on human rights, where the ability to transition becomes seen as inherent to a trans person’s life, liberty, and security of person. In entering transgender discourse via this question of access, my students wanted to understand what, in short, marks a person as transgender—or, put another way, who “counts” as transgender. Who “counts” as transgender is self-determined, but this becomes complicated when who “counts” is asked through the question of “access.” If transgender people become primarily understood as those who do not have access to rights, then transgender people become a homogeneous group, figuratively embodied *as* the most vulnerable among them. In short, the most vulnerable transgender people become used by the least vulnerable to acquire access that is unequally distributed, or sometimes even weaponized against that same vulnerable population. For example, anti-hate crime legislation, rather than acting as a preventative measure to violent crimes against communities of color, often are enacted through increased policing that predominantly *targets* the communities of color the law claims to protect (Ellison 2016). With this understanding in mind, I shifted my

pedagogical approach to explore the construction of “vulnerability” and “pain” in relation to transgender identity.

Identifying pain

I began our first meeting with informal introductions. Instead of announcing pronouns with names as is increasingly typical in classrooms, I offered students the option to write them down on notecards with other relevant information for my own records. In navigating pronouns this way, I attempted to create an organic feeling to the space, where the use of a student’s pronoun by the instructor would allow others to absorb the information without an act of confession. In this classroom, however, transgender students were eager to assert their pronouns, to make visible their transness, or to assert their allyship. However, for those students who preferred to be quiet, whether from a fear of being hypervisible in their transness or from a simple uncertainty about what they wanted their pronouns to be, the act of sharing pronouns became unnecessarily stressful. Every trans person has a different relationship to pronouns, making a completely inclusive pronoun exercise difficult to impossible, and the insistence on the opposite—that asserting our pronouns is universally the best practice—privileges the *desire* to do the right thing, rather than the needs of the trans person/people. What might best suit the most people in the room might be uncomfortable, and it might not allow anyone to *show* that they want to be inclusive. In essence, this—somewhat ironically—results in the trans ally’s desires becoming privileged.

Moments of attempted trans allyship and conversations about the importance of transgender rights sometimes result in unintended consequences. Transness is often discussed in proximity to fear, pain, death, and transnegativity (Hayward 2017). Further, transgender pain and vulnerability are most typically discussed as experienced primarily or even exclusively by Black trans women. This group is frequently *named*—both in my classroom as well as across many transgender rights campaigns—but almost never actually discussed with any specificity. Instead, the figural Black trans woman became the symbol of all trans oppression. When we discuss “pain” in transgender studies, *transmisogyny*—a prejudice specific to the experience of trans feminine people—is the key analytic students deployed; it is almost synonymous with transgender pain, oppression, and lacking rights. Elías Krell critiques the term “transmisogyny” for its reinforcement of gendered dichotomies and its failure to address race (Krell 2017). This failure to address race results in a dismissal of racialized transmasculinity, and subsequently what Krell terms “racialized transmisandry.” *Racialized transmisandry*, or the prejudice specific to transmasculine people of color because of their racialized masculinity, is a position of vulnerability to different kinds of violence, most notably state/police violence, such as Tony McDade, a Black trans man killed

by police in May of 2020, just two days after the murder of George Floyd (Letcher 2021). Krell's analysis problematizes the framework of pain that remains so central to transgender discourse, even as it obscures the specificities of racialized transgender experiences. Here, the trans woman is always-already of color (and thus in more pain), and the trans man is always white and—in that assumed whiteness—safe. This framework whitewashes transness at the same time that it makes trans women of color hypervisible for the benefit of white trans people.

In assigning Krell's text, I hoped to engage and problematize the hypervisibility of trans women often critiqued in transgender studies and the hyperfocus on their deaths and pain. However, grappling with these concepts is an uncomfortable task. It makes clear that asking for access to medicine and the state *requires* that pain remain central to our stories; in order to have *access*, these institutions require that we must be visible, or we must be willing to mobilize those who are more visible and more vulnerable at their expense. As the class continued, almost all students named trans women of color in their assignments as critically needing “access to resources,” vaguely determined as general medical and financial support. However, although trans women of color were (correctly) cited as being particularly vulnerable to violence, this increased vulnerability became a wider commentary on *all* transgender lives, where transgender women of color's vulnerability was retroactively applied to the entire category of “transgender” (Dinno 2017).

Visualizing pain

This frequent naming of trans women of color as vulnerable is particularly troubling in the context of the desire to continually *name*, but never substantively engage, the specific vulnerabilities faced by trans women of color and Black trans women. These women become metaphorical instead of real people. Her specific race is only named when it serves to optimize her vulnerability, obscuring larger issues of transmisogyny and, more specifically, racialized transphobia. By continually naming trans women of color without specifying their experiences, they become problematically depicted as always-already victims of maximum violence. Because her specific experiences are not discussed, the Black trans woman is able to be deployed by white trans movements that trans people of color are unable to then access (Snorton & Haritaworn 2013). In 2015, Caitlyn Jenner, a white wealthy former Olympian and Kardashian affiliate, came out as transgender, and subsequently received the Arthur Ashe Award for Courage, an award named for the prominent civil rights activist and only Black man to win Wimbledon, the US Open, and the Australian Open. In her acceptance speech, she described the murder of Mercedes Williamson, a young transgender woman of color, with a plea to “accept people for who they are” (2015). Yet six years later,

Jenner began a campaign for California governor based on a firmly anti-trans Republican political platform, with one of her most interesting stances being against the inclusion of trans girls and women in sports. The ways that Jenner was able to mobilize these moments of violence against trans people of color at the same time that she escaped the same danger, and then perpetuated it, has become emblematic of white trans feminism.

As discussed, transgender discourse often emphasizes pain—most frequently, the pain and struggle of Black trans women who remain figural and non-specific. Part of what positions the Black trans woman as this pinnacle of pain is in the ways she is hypervisible, both in her Blackness and in the problematic assumption of a permanent inability to pass as a woman. This hypervisibility and the violence and pain that come with it become understood as inherent to the transgender experience, regardless of race. Put another way, an instance of racist transphobia becomes understood as an intensification of transphobia as opposed to an intersectional experience of racism and transphobia (Nash 2014). The Black trans woman becomes contradictorily both acknowledged and unacknowledged. By naming Black trans women broadly in a way that simultaneously obscures their experiences, the impacts of hypervisibility go beyond the violence of exposure; they also risk silencing. In the attempt to not speak *for* groups to which we do not belong, the less risky approach becomes broad gestures of naming that enable silence. In this classroom, there were a wide variety of gendered and raced experiences, but there was no one who occupied the positionality of being a Black trans woman. Speaking up and nuancing this conversation without occupying this identity risked being perceived as enacting violence and being called out, a risk which became too great for white students, as well as cisgender students of color. Cris Mayo (2016) discusses this phenomenon:

[A]ctivists make mistakes when they overly assert their political/epistemological superiority to engage a deficit in their interlocutors that may or may not be there. What the “call out” culture of activism accomplishes is to misrecognize complexity of identity and action in stabilizing the position and intentions of those who are called out or found wanting in advance of any experience of them.

(Mayo, 88)

Mayo critiques the impulse to “call out” as a way of educating, arguing that it comes from a place of assumed expertise over those being called out that also misreads their identity, politics, and intentions. In this, we see the development of a central question in transgender studies which is: in what ways does race become subordinate and accessory to gender? Similarly, how do these questions of identity become modes of silencing? How do we honor experiential knowledge while holding generosity for misunderstanding?

Much of transgender political discourse centers conversations of access to rights and resources from medical and political institutions that require identity to be fixed and legible. In the case of transgender discourse especially, the need to describe transgender identity as stable and clear problematically prevents a conversation that leaves open the possibility that a currently cis person might be trans in the future. It harkens back to the trope within transgender medicine that one must have “always known” in order to be “authentically” transgender. Jack Halberstam (2005) writes on queer time, saying,

the constantly diminishing future creates a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now, and while the threat of no future hovers overhead like a storm cloud, the urgency of being also expands the potential of the moment and...squeezes new possibilities out of the time at hand.

(2)

When conversations about transgender identity are centered around rights, like institutional protections and access to resources, the trans body gets forced into a narrative that trans people always know they are trans early in life in order to access care, and if we “always knew,” then there is no risk that transness will spread, or pop up unexpectedly, especially if, by expanding access, we make it more possible for trans people to claim their transness earlier. This narrative simplifies a rich and varied identity category, essentially preventing any possibility of future transness. Understanding the histories of knowledge that make transgender studies possible and the ways these knowledges caution against identity politics allows radical possibilities to emerge from transgender discourse. Ultimately, fixating on the pain of one’s identity emphasizes an ownership to pain that makes pleasure something that threatens futures instead of making them possible. Understanding Black trans womanhood solely through the lens of pain ignores the full breadth and complexity of Black trans women’s identities and lived realities. Further, in insisting upon a hierarchy of pain to determine who is in pain enough to be allowed a voice, the same structures of power that harm us become reproduced. In other words, when people who are not Black trans women will not discuss Black trans women’s specific experiences of oppression, racist anti-trans beliefs and systems of power prevail in the silencing and erasure of those experiences.

Women of color feminisms and queer possibility

Our conversation on transgender rights so centers pain that we are oblivious to the hopeful and radical queer possibilities that exist when we are *not* made into extreme, hyper-vulnerable versions of ourselves. Jennifer Nash (2013), drawing from José Muñoz’s (2019) analytic of ecstasy that insists

on a political and scholarly framework of hope, argues for organizing “around the paradoxes of pleasure rather than woundedness or the elisions of shared injury, around possibilities rather than pain” (3). Nash’s argument opens up larger methodological and structural questions of Black feminist politics. In particular, Nash’s critique illuminates the need to examine how transgender rights discourse often relies on the hypervisibility and hypervulnerability of the figural Black trans woman as an object through which to articulate transgender experience and pain. Teaching and thinking in relation to transgender pain mobilizes race in problematic ways that must be interrogated in our classrooms and research.

In considering Nash’s call to understand the paradoxes and coalitional possibilities of pleasure, I attempted to enter the classroom from a position of queer futurity, which tries to reimagine a hopeful future with a queerness that José Muñoz describes as “a relational and collective modality of endurance and support,” but I was met with hesitation, even distrust. Students, particularly white cis students, were fearful to acknowledge pleasure because to acknowledge pleasure seemed to risk denying the realities of epistemic violence and pain, as if joy could negate the urgency of calls to action for trans of color lives. Pain is defined within the realm of experience and authority; pleasure remains intangible, ephemeral, and unnamable. In these attempts to center pain, I ask, must one “have” pain in order to speak? Why is pleasure so risky? What does the naming of pleasure jeopardize in our search for security and recognition?

Conclusion

Temporality and fluidity rather than a fixed cisgender versus transgender experience must be kept possible; simply put, *we do not yet know who we will continue to become*. What happens when we have students who do not yet have what bell hooks identifies as “the passion of experience” because they are not *yet* transgender? (hooks, 90). Alternatively, what does it mean when we have the “ownership” of experience given by students only months (or weeks) into their own self-realization? How do we manage identity politics in a classroom when the identities we are studying are only just beginning to come out? These questions of identity ownership versus a more gradual process of realization speak to the ways identity in transgender studies classrooms becomes processed through logics of ownership and consumption via capitalism. Put another way, identity risks becoming something you *own* instead of something you *are* or are allowed to *become*.

One of the biggest limits in an all-white or majority white transgender studies classroom is one very familiar to all-white or predominantly white women’s studies and feminist studies spaces, which is simply a discomfort in talking about race. And again, similar to the early days of women’s studies,

there is a belief that women of color have more in common with white women than women of color have with men of color. As discussed, and as scholars of LGBTQ studies such as Cris Mayo point out, much of these debates around inclusion are “rearticulations” of diversity conversations had in the 1980s. With this in mind, I argue that similar to how a universal (and thus by default white) “womanhood” was central to the early stages of women’s studies and second-wave feminist movements, this universal white gendered subject is re-articulated in transgender studies classrooms, ultimately reproducing the same limits of early feminist organizing. Whiteness risks shaping transgender studies in the same ways that it shaped early women’s studies. We continually see the prioritizing of a colorblind sisterhood across these conversations that insists on its own intersectionality simply *because* of (assumed preexisting and stable) trans-ness. Further, white trans movements and white trans studies continue to use the figural “trans woman of color” either to mobilize (white) trans rights, or as a way of voicing commitment without action for trans women of color. By not just *naming* the transgender woman of color as a symbol of pain, but by considering instead what might be possible in the engagement of multiple and varied identities within the category of “transgender,” more intersectional and politically radical possibilities open up that are antiracist, abolitionist, and overall revolutionary.

So much of my classroom became marked by fear and silence in a way that I had never before experienced. As a multiracial group of transgender scholars—educators and students—we have to ask ourselves what kind of pain we are willing to endure. We are in this place where the fear of hurting our community comes at its own cost. Is community simply the identities which we hold? Or is it in conjunction with our actions? How do we identify each other? How do we understand and know each other? Are we still ourselves if we are not in pain?

In transgender discourse especially, pain becomes something asserted not just for the self, but on behalf of others, as seen in the continual claims of pain for the trans woman of color. Transgender identity is complex and nuanced, existing outside the logics of linear time and flattened identity positions. We must grapple with the complexities of what it means to *become* our race/class/gender/body. What is made possible when we shift our understandings of identity and solidarity away from an inherent quality, but instead move to consider identity as an *action*—that we must always be in a state of being/doing/thinking ourselves and each other—that identity is not simply the oppressions that *happen* to us, but the community that we *enact*. I end then with this ongoing question, building on what was first posed by M. Jacqui Alexander (2006): How do we and will we use transgender studies to *know* one another’s history, to teach fluency in the possibilities of becoming? In other words, how can trans studies make solidarity more possible by challenging assumptions of whiteness?

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17

SHAME WORK

Reducing supremacy and the violence of white men

Cameron Rasmussen

White supremacy, racial capitalism, and patriarchy—structures of supremacy—are dehumanizing, deadly forces to people at the margins. Physical violence, particularly the violence of white men, is engendered and protected by these structures of supremacy. Still, understanding structures of supremacy neither offers sufficient explanation for why white men in the United States commit so much violence nor does it provide necessary pathways for responding to violence in the near term. While there are varying explanations of violence and harmful behavior against others and against oneself, several scholars and practitioners have coalesced around shame as a primary cause of violence (Gilligan, 2001; Scheff & Retzinger, 2002; Sered, 2017). Though shame alone does not explain the violence of supremacy, a focus on shame as a driver of violence opens up more possibilities for developing transformative responses that both diminish the power of structures of supremacy while also reducing the everyday violence of white men.

Employing the work of Gilligan (2001), this paper explores shame as a way to explain the causal connections between structures of supremacy and violent acts committed by individuals, white men in particular. Understanding this relationship has led me to the idea of *shame work*—a term and framework that challenges the systemic causes of shame (supremacy) while supporting individuals in developing healthier relationships to shame—as a means of reducing both individual acts of violence, and structures of white supremacy, racial capitalism, and patriarchy. This chapter offers concrete ideas for *shame work*, including bolstering access to social welfare, reducing social isolation, increasing capacity for vulnerability and connection, and advancing restorative and transformative justice responses to violence. While

shame work has relevance for all people, this chapter is focused on the use of *shame work* focused on white men and reducing the violence of white men.

As a white cisgender man, social worker, and facilitator, I have worked with men, including white men, around healing and accountability for nearly a decade, while organizing against policing, incarceration, and the prison industrial complex. My identities and positionality, combined with the last ten years of study and practice, have led me to believe in the necessity of working to dismantle systems and structures of domination while supporting myself and other men, in particular white men, in uprooting dominating beliefs, behaviors, and ways of relating to ourselves and others. Through research and practice, I have come to see shame as a generative focus in working toward these two intersecting goals when it comes to white men's violence.

Confronting the violence of supremacy

Over the last decade, there has been a growing demand that the United States reckon with its legacies of white supremacy, racial capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism. Social movements for justice, accountability, and transformation have pressed on society not only to bear witness to the violence of the United States but also to more fully address the roots (systems and ideologies), rather than simply contend with the symptoms (individual behavior) of violence. From the ongoing theft of land and resources from Indigenous people, to the police killings of Black people, to the harassment and rape of women in the workplace and beyond, to the mass incarceration and criminalization of poor people of color, particularly those who are Black, and to the murder of trans people of color, most of them Black trans women, there is an increased awareness of the systemic nature of these injustices. Black Lives Matter and the MeToo Movement are the most visible forces within a larger ecosystem of social movements that have been pushing back against all forms of supremacy and demanding a transformed world for Black people, for women, for trans people, for Indigenous people, for people at the intersections of these identities, and ultimately, for everyone.

Any number of indicators of social, economic, and political power demonstrate how we live in a society in which white cisgender men prosper at the expense of and in ways that harm BIPOC, women, trans and non-binary people, people who are undocumented, and anyone who exists at the margins. From access to quality schools and healthcare, to wealth and income inequality, to who holds political office, white people and white cis men in particular have more access, more wealth, better pay, and more political power (Asante-Muhammad and Sim, 2021; Lardieri, 2017; Weir, 2016). White male power and white male supremacy are two terms that have been offered at various points in time by scholars and activists to define the intersections of

white supremacy, patriarchy, and racial capitalism (Bederman, 1995; Liu, 2017, Oluo, 2018). While the mainstream discourse on white masculinity centers on privilege, it is more precise to understand this as power. It is power that begets privilege, including more privilege to commit violence, and more protection from the violence of the state.

At a time of increasing white nationalism and white supremacist violence, it is important to note the violence of explicit supremacist groups that actively work to promote and maintain supremacy. In this chapter, I am less focused on explicit white supremacist violence, and instead, offer ideas relevant to the commission of violence by all white men. I am concerned with *mainstream white male supremacy*, or rather the structures of supremacy that empower and protect all white men, and that create the conditions for white men in particular to engage in physical violence.

Understanding the context of structural oppression and systems of white male supremacy, while difficult for some (white men) and perhaps obvious to others (those with marginalized identities), is a critical starting place when reconsidering both how to respond to individual violence, as well as how to transform structures of supremacy. Social, economic, and political arrangements constructed around hierarchies of human worth based on race, gender, class, and other intersecting identities are central forces in generating violence, and in permitting certain people to commit violence while criminalizing the violent acts of others. Thus, while white men are responsible for a significant portion of physical violence in the United States (FBI, 2020; RAINN, 2020; National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2021), Black men are much more likely to be perceived as violent (Gibran, 2010), and are disproportionately incarcerated with a range of social and economic consequences (National Research Council, 2014). Structures of supremacy similarly decide who will be protected from state violence in part by designing laws that codify that protection. There is a long history surrounding race, gender, and violence in the United States. Since its inception, the violence of white men has often been permitted, codified as legal, and celebrated. From the violent lynchings of Black men and women at the hands of white men throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to the lack of any accountability for Darren Wilson, a white policeman, after he killed Michael Brown, a teenaged Black male, or to Kyle Rittenhouse, a white man exonerated for shooting and killing two white men and permanently disabling another, there are numerous examples throughout the country's history. At the same time, the violence committed by BIPOC men has been seen as criminal, evil, and something to be punished. This history and this contemporary reality shape the terms of this chapter: that reducing the violence of white men must be more central to anti-violence work.

In a society where white male supremacy remains a central force in shaping the people's welfare, all white men are in some way proximate to and

complicit in the harms enacted by this social order. The privileges afforded to white men in the United States have been made possible by the sustained othering, criminalization, punishment, and suffering of others, in particular BIPOC. These privileges are many and include less targeting by the criminal legal system, more access to jobs and better pay, and more access to well-resourced healthcare and education. Regardless of the degree to which any white man benefits from this social order, all white men do. And thus, all white men, or at least those who want to live in a fair and just society, have a responsibility in the work of uprooting supremacy and domination, in ourselves, in our communities, and in the systems and structures that reify the myth of human hierarchy. Examining the violence white men commit makes clear why actively engaging in this lifelong uprooting is necessary and urgent.

White men, supremacy, and violence

While structures of supremacy provide a crucial context for understanding white male power and the violence committed by individual white men, it is important to identify and name the routine violence itself. This section will look at some key examples and statistics of white male violence that illustrate both the high levels of violence committed by individual white men in the United States, as well as larger patterns of white male violence. The following section will further explore shame as a primary cause of violence and the intersections between shame, supremacy, and white male violence.

In what is now known as the United States, white men have been the standard bearers of violence, both interpersonal and institutional. From colonization to chattel slavery, to sexual assault and mass shootings, they have championed violence and domination. While a full accounting of the violence enacted by white men would be an immense undertaking and not the aim of this chapter, even naming key examples of the contemporary violence enacted by white men in the United States allows us to identify patterns, and to assess the individual and structural conditions that lead to and sustain such violence. Significantly, in surfacing the patterns and conditions, we are better equipped to identify points of intervention for both prevention and transformation. It is evident that all violence enacted by white men is in some way linked to patriarchy, white supremacy, racial capitalism, or some combination of the three. Yet, there is a distinction between individual acts of violence and the violence committed through organizations, whether they be white nationalist¹ or white male chauvinist groups² or law enforcement that is mostly populated with and controlled by white men. Identifying the relationship between the act of violence and institutions of power clarifies the point of intervention. Individuals who enact violence on behalf of explicitly supremacist groups, or on behalf of the state, are connected to violent

institutions. The work of supporting transformation in individual white men committing violence on behalf of violent institutions may be possible, but it is far from where the work of uprooting supremacy should begin. Holding institutions accountable for structural and white nationalist violence requires organized power, whereas the work of individual transformation requires organized care.

Crude statistics of violent crimes committed by white men are a window into deadly consequences of supremacy and point to the core drivers of violence. Though the social construction of crime is well documented, and what is considered “violent crime” is fertile soil for politicization, these numbers nonetheless invite inquiry into connections between white men and violence. Constituting 30 percent of the total US population, white men commit most of the country’s violent crimes and therefore do so disproportionately (Srikanth, 2021). In 2019, the year for which the most recent data exists, white men accounted for 60 percent of violent crime, which included 46 percent of murder and manslaughter offenses and 62 percent of aggravated assault (OJJDP, 2020). White men commit the majority of sexual violence in the United States. More than 90 percent of people who commit sexual violence are men (US Sentencing Commission, 2018), and 57 percent are white (DOJ, 2013). White men also account for the majority of mass shootings in the United States. While definitions of what qualifies as a mass shooting vary, and not all databases track race, it is clear that almost all mass shootings are committed by men, and one study revealed that white men were responsible for 53 percent of mass shootings between 1982 and 2021 (Follman et al. 2012; Smart & Schell, 2021).

Of course, white men are not immune from violent victimization. For example, in 2019, white men accounted for 34 percent of all homicide victims (FBI, 2020). White men also experience significant levels of sexual violence, including childhood sexual abuse and rape (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2021; RAINN, 2020). Still, white men experience far less physical and sexual violence than white women, and Black, Indigenous, and Latinx people of all genders (Warnken & Lauretsin, 2019). And while the experience of violent victimization can partially explain the violence people commit (Sampson & Lauretsin, 1994), white men commit violence more often than they are victimized by it.

Structural supremacy, the power over others, is easy to identify in the violence that white men inflict on others or that they themselves endure; however, the ideology of domination has implications for the vast majority of acts of individual violence, whether committed against others or against oneself. In 2019, white men accounted for 69 percent of suicide deaths in the United States (AFSP 2022). This was the highest number of white men who died by suicide since data has been collected, coming after a steady increase over the last twenty years.

Supremacy alone offers a partial explanation of why white men commit such high levels of violence. Still, understanding the linkages between structures and people requires some understanding of the experiences of the individual. As the next section will illustrate, shame, together with supremacy, helps more thoroughly explain the significant relationship that white men have with violence, and understanding shame as a core driver of violence not only illuminates the link between the internal, interpersonal, and institutionalized violences committed by white men, but broadens pathways of individual and systemic transformation.

Shame, supremacy, and violence

“I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.” James Baldwin (1963) offered these words in *The Fire Next Time*, suggesting the disruptive notion that hate is rooted in pain, not evil, inviting empathy rather than judgment. While Baldwin was talking specifically about anti-Black hatred, the racist expression of white supremacy, his idea that “harmed people harm people” is core to the theorizing of shame as a primary cause of violence, and one that provides a connection between individual acts of violence and the violent structures of supremacy.

Few of the many theories that attempt to explain the causes of violence allow us to contend with both the individual and structural determinate forces of violence. The theorizing of shame as a primary cause of violence addresses the psychological and social causes of violence, recognizing both the individual agency and responsibility of people who commit violence, as well as the ideologies and institutions that drive people toward violent behavior. This intersecting understanding of individual and structural violence allows us to get closer to the roots of violence, rather than simply addressing the symptoms. We can also begin to extrapolate how and why shame is a central emotional reality in cultures of supremacy and domination.

Shame as a cause of violence

There is ample scholarship that has sought to make causal connections between shame and violence (Rochlin, 1973; Kohut, 1977; Luckenbill, 1977; Retzinger & Scheff, 1991; Thomas, 2000; Anderson, 2000; Gilligan, 2001; Gadd & Jefferson, 2007). Of these works, Gilligan’s (2001) text *Preventing Violence* is particularly effective in drawing out the links between structure and individual agency, between the social and the psychological, and will be the central theory employed here. Gilligan’s theorizing clarifies the connections between supremacy, shame, and individual violence, and offers a lens through which to consider how to reduce the violence of white men

and the supremacist cultures that mold, condition, and define us. It is also important to note that at times Gilligan's work obscures white male violence in particular, and in doing so can reinforce racist stereotypes about who does and doesn't commit violence. This review of Gilligan's work is focused on translating his theorizing to the violence of white men.

James Gilligan is a white male psychiatrist and scholar who for twenty years worked in Massachusetts prisons, primarily with people convicted of committing serious violence, including homicide and rape. While his practice and scholarship have not been exclusively with and about white men, much of his work has been. He has written extensively about shame as a cause of violence, as well as prevention and intervention efforts to reduce violence (1997, 2001, 2004). Gilligan (2001) argues that any theory that seeks to understand and prevent violence must first disregard the traditional legal and moral terms that are at the heart of the criminal legal system. For Gilligan, understanding violence as a moral evil, and state responses to violence as just legal punishment, leads to questions of morality that cannot be answered through scientific research. It is not just a matter of study, but a matter of strategy for interrupting violence, because the criminal legal system's emphasis on morality and legality have not led to a reduction in violence, and instead have reproduced it (Gilligan, 2001). Having studied and witnessed violence reduction in Massachusetts prisons, Gilligan offers two principles and a disciplinary framework, upon which he builds his theory of shame as a cause of violence. The first principle is that violence *can* be prevented, and the second recognizes that the successful prevention of violence depends on the degree to which the moral and legal approach can be discarded. He conceptualizes violence as a disease and employs a public health framework of primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention, and provides a series of remedies to address the social and psychological causes of violence.

The premise for Gilligan's (2001) argument is that

the basic psychological motive, or cause, of violent behavior is the wish to ward off or eliminate the feeling of shame and humiliation—a feeling that is painful, and can even be intolerable and overwhelming—and replace it with the opposite, the feeling of pride.

(p. 29)

While his argument surely cannot apply to all violent behavior, it is a plausible explanation for much of the violent acts committed by white men. Gilligan agrees with others who have studied shame (Retzinger & Scheff, 1991; Gadd & Jefferson, 2007) that shame is a family of emotions, which includes humiliation. In naming this emotional family of shame, Gilligan (2001) offers “feelings of being dishonored, disgraced, disrespected, disdained; feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, and incompetence; and feelings of

being weak, or a failure, or being treated as inadequate or worthless” (p. 30). Pride, for Gilligan, is also a family of emotions that include “self-esteem, self-love, self-respect, feelings of self-worth, dignity and the sense of having maintained one’s honor intact” (p. 30). The theoretical basis for his argument rests on his own work through practice and scholarship, and builds upon the work of sociologists, psychoanalysts, and a broad range of interdisciplinary thinkers (Rochlin, 1973; Kohut, 1977; Thomas, 2000; Luckenbill, 1977; Anderson, 1999).

Gilligan’s interdisciplinary approach (2001) clarifies why shame is a necessary but not sufficient cause of violence, given that the vast majority of people experiencing shame do not respond with violence. He argues that two additional conditions must also be present for the feeling of shame to lead to violence. First, the person experiencing shame has not yet developed the capacity for feelings that can prevent violence, such as guilt, remorse, empathy, love, and concern for others. The second condition is that people “do not perceive themselves as having non-violent means by which to maintain or restore their self-esteem and self-respect” (p. 37). All three of these conditions point to both social and psychological forces driving shame and violence.

The social causes of shame and violence are critical to Gilligan’s theory, and he offers the two primary structural ways that shame spreads through social and economic systems. The first is the hierarchical ordering of society, primarily through class, caste (race in the United States), and age. The second is asymmetry of social roles, in the gender roles assigned in cultures of patriarchy.

Gilligan argues that relative poverty and unemployment are the strongest structural predictors of violence. This is true for white men. As Dilwar (2018) argues in explaining why most mass shootings are committed by white men, there has been a trend of downward social mobility for white men, including less economic opportunity and increased incarceration, leading to increased white male violence. In his analysis of inequality, he adds caste stratification, which in the United States is based on race and ethnicity, as another major driver of shame. Here Gilligan addresses the racism of the social and economic systems in the United States, in particular the criminal legal system, but fails to apply his thinking to the high levels of white male violence. I agree with Dilwar (2018) that it is at least in part the downward social mobility of white men, or rather their failure to succeed in a society built for white men, that creates feelings of shame. Age discrimination, too, for young men especially, also causes shame. Gilligan argues that older men—older white men, I would add—have much greater access to sources of pride, including power, wealth, and honorific titles and positions. Young people are socially given significantly fewer sources of pride, and for young men this is coupled with expectations of gender roles in which pride is highly

valued. Still, middle-aged white men have the highest suicide rates, which again offers evidence for the shame caused by the failure or downward social mobility of white men.

Gilligan's (2001) theorizing on gender roles, violence, and shame explains why, even though women in patriarchal societies are largely treated as inferior, they commit significantly less violence. He argues that patriarchal gender roles have created the conditions under which only men can relieve feelings of shame through violence. While Gilligan again misses the opportunity to think through the intersections of gender and race, there is a clear line between the violence of white men, from all economic backgrounds, and a patriarchal society and gender roles. White men with lower income commit high levels of violence, while white men with middle and higher incomes have high levels of suicide.

Gilligan's (2001) theorizing on gender roles also includes homophobia as a source of shame, and thus violence, for cisgender heterosexual men. While Gilligan again misses the opportunity to think through any of the intersections of sexuality, gender, race, and class, his theorizing on homophobia remains relevant in understanding the violence of white men. Normative masculinity, or hegemonic masculinity as more thoroughly theorized by Messerschmidt (1993), is heterosexual, and pride is achieved through toughness and "manliness" as opposed to the weakness and femininity represented by homosexuality. The fear of being perceived as gay can thus be a great source of shame and a cause of violent behavior. Gilligan's thinking here has two important implications. The first is that as a result of homophobia and the socialization that feelings are feminine, men's capacities to acknowledge their feelings is diminished. As Gilligan points out, even acknowledging anger, the only emotion that is socially acceptable for men, is difficult as it signifies that you have feelings to hurt. Still, the anger of white men is considered more acceptable than the anger of men of color, especially Black men. The second is that homophobia is a means for men to achieve their masculinity and pride, within a logic such that violence against men proves that they hate men, and violence against women, through rape, shows that they love women. While Gilligan's (2001) theorizing on shame as a cause of violence does not focus explicitly on the violence of white men, his work goes a long way in explaining why and how white men commit so much violence.

Shame, supremacy, and the violence of white men

Gilligan's theorizing offers the following framework: structures of supremacy are core drivers of shame, and shame is a primary cause of violence, thus supremacy, shame, and violence are deeply interconnected. His work around masculinity demonstrates how for men living in a patriarchal society, relief from shame can come from committing violence. This explains much of the

violence of white men. Still, contending with the intersections of gender and race offers a more complete understanding of the violence of white men.

While the power of normative masculinity is achieved through explicit perception of dominating presence and physical strength, the power of white supremacy is contingent on social, economic, and political power, which is often a more implicit, invisible strength. When a white man fails to dominate others, whether socially, economically, or politically, in a society where his domination is expected, he can feel shame, creating potential for violence. Glaring possible examples of this include the disproportionate rates at which white men commit mass shootings, sexual violence, and suicide. Structures of racial, gendered, and economic supremacy make everyone vulnerable to shame, including white men. This not only helps to explain why and how white men commit so much violence against others but may also point to why white men account for so many of the suicides in the United States.

Identifying the interconnection between supremacy, shame, and violence opens up more complete approaches for reducing the violence of white men. That is, reducing the violence of white men must include shrinking and ultimately dismantling structures of supremacy (and thus decreasing levels of shame), while also supporting white men to develop healthy relationships with the shame they experience. This understanding informs the framework of *shame work*, which has relevance for men and people more broadly. Yet the focus here is on the violence of white men for several reasons. The first is because of the significant amount of violence white men commit. White men's violence is often ignored, likely because structures of supremacy have racialized criminality such that white men's violence receives limited attention from the academy and news media, and because the institutions tasked with responding to violence are often controlled by white men. The second is that because white men have so much power, confronting their violence and their relationship to shame offers the potential to reduce both supremacy and their individual acts of violence.

Shame work and reducing supremacy and the violence of white men

Shame work is a term and framework I have conceived of and engaged in my own work, in both efforts for structural change, as well as interpersonal and relational work. Shame work takes into account both the systemic causes of shame and individuals' relationship to shame, and seeks to reduce systemic causes of shame, namely structures of supremacy, while also supporting individuals in developing healthier relationships to their experience of shame. A focus on shame allows us to address both the systemic and individual drivers of violence, and importantly, informs violence-prevention strategies.

Employing a public health prevention model helps to guide a variety of shame work approaches.

The public health prevention model (primary, secondary, and tertiary) is used by Gilligan (2001) to conceptualize violence prevention and reduction. In this framework, primary prevention is concerned with preventing violence before it happens, which often necessitates societal interventions. Secondary prevention is work that is focused on communities where violence is most likely to occur, and tertiary prevention addresses violence after the fact. This model will be used here to realize differing approaches to *shame work*. It is worth noting that the proposals below are not exhaustive, nor can they be considered a panacea for all violence. However, reducing supremacy and supporting healthier relationships to shame are central to each of these proposals, though to greater or lesser degrees. In addition, many of these proposals are relevant to violence reduction more broadly, while others are focused specifically on white men.

The proposals for primary prevention are focused on four areas: access to social welfare; moving away from a punitive justice system; transforming education; and rehabilitating history. While these are broad interventions seeking social transformation, they are nonetheless critical in the longer struggle to reduce violence, and the violence of white men in particular. One of the most fundamental approaches to reducing shame, and therefore violence, is ensuring that all people can meet their basic needs. This includes access to quality healthcare, housing, education and, for many, employment for a living wage. Equitable access to the things that make people healthy and whole can not only reduce and prevent white men's feelings of shame, but also minimizes white men's need to turn toward violent behavior as a means of achieving that sense of security, health, and wholeness, and reduces exposure to the punishing criminal legal system.

As discussed earlier, Gilligan (2001) and others have demonstrated how punishment causes shame (Sered, 2019). Thus, moving away from a punitive system of justice toward one rooted in healing, accountability, and prevention should be a central feature of white men's *shame work*. Furthermore, punitive legal frameworks and systems have been central to justifying, actualizing, and maintaining white male supremacy, and thus moving away from them is critical to reducing the legal power of white male supremacy and the violence it has allowed.

Similarly, wholesale transformation of education at all levels of schooling offers another far-reaching prevention strategy. Education should include learning about race, gender, identity, and power, developing emotional intelligence, consent, and sexual health, and restorative practices—learning that is critical for white men as the perpetrators of most violent crimes. As recent history has shown, there is a white-led movement to purge schools of critical race theory, which they incorrectly associate with antiracist education

and education about BIPOC experiences, making the fight for education transformation all the more pressing. Finally, rehabilitating history could happen through education in schools about the history of white violence in the United States, memorialization of the violence of Indigenous genocide and chattel slavery—campaigns of violence organized and carried out overwhelmingly by white men, and through concrete and cultural reparations to Black and Indigenous people. In this way, rehabilitating history helps to transform white people and white men's relationship to violence, racism, domination, and ultimately shame.

While primary prevention efforts would likely have the largest impact on violence reduction given their far reach, they are, of course, the most difficult to realize. Secondary prevention efforts, which take place in communities where violence is most likely to occur, allow us to focus on white men specifically. The secondary prevention proposals include targeted public education campaigns, as well as increased social support and access to therapeutic services. The majority of white men are likely unaware of how much violence white men commit against others and themselves, nor that they are part of and benefit from a violent structure of supremacy. Structures of supremacy have created racialized categories of who is seen as safe and who is seen as dangerous based on your proximity to whiteness and Blackness. That is to say that white men have generally been defined as heroes and innocents tasked with policing and controlling violent non-white and, in particular, Black communities. A public education campaign directed at white men could invite new societal understanding about who commits violence and change how white men understand who is violent, and would thereby contribute to the long work of chipping away at the structures of white supremacy.

For more interpersonal strategies, *shame work* calls for increased access to healthy social supports and therapeutic care. Men, and white men in particular, experience social isolation, face challenges in being vulnerable, and are confined by the limits of heteronormative masculinity (APA, 2018). Developing healthy and trusting relationships with other men through men's groups offers the possibility for increased social support. Affinity groups specifically for white men, whether educational, supportive, or therapeutic, allow for a more precise focus on the realities, behaviors, and healing and accountability needs of white men. Affinity groups for white people and for men are now commonplace in social movements, classrooms, and some therapeutic settings. While these kinds of affinity groups for white men do exist, they are few and far between. In addition, increasing access and usage of therapy and mental healthcare with a focus on identity and power offers a way to both reduce shame and support white men in divesting from structures of supremacy. The Critical Therapy Institute in New York City is one example of an organization that offers this kind of therapeutic approach.

Tertiary prevention efforts focus on white men who have committed violence. The criminal legal system is a core fixture in the structures of supremacy, with patriarchy, white supremacy, and racial capitalism baked into its every layer (Davis, 2003; Alexander, 2010). The proposals here are focused on divesting from punishment, and to the degree possible, from the existing criminal legal system. Making proposals focused on white men is not without contradiction, given how much white men have gained from the criminalization and incarceration of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people (Gibran, 2010; Blankenship et al., 2018; Gandnoosh, 2023). Thus, these proposals are not aimed just at white men, but all people who have committed violence, including white men. The two proposals are focused on changing responses to violence and approaches to justice, specifically, to advance and grow transformative and restorative justice responses to violence.

Restorative justice is both a paradigm as well as a set of approaches to justice that move away from punishment and toward accountability. Restorative justice is focused on the needs of survivors, accountability for those who have caused harm, and healing and transformation for everyone involved in a harmful act (Zehr, 2015). Restorative justice approaches can include but are not limited to circular processes,³ dialogues, and conferencing between perpetrators of violence and those they have harmed. Restorative justice is used in communities as well as in and around institutions like schools and the criminal legal system (Shah, Stauffer & King, 2017). *Transformative justice* shares many of the same values as restorative justice and yet has its own lineage that has grown out of grassroots anti-violence movements led by women of color. Transformative justice is both a political framework and a varied set of responses to realizing safety and justice without creating more violence and harm. Transformative justice is explicitly opposed to state intervention through police and prisons, is intentional in not reproducing oppression and domination, and instead relies on practices around healing, accountability, and resilience (Mingus, 2019). The practices of transformative justice are many and include community accountability processes, pod-mapping,⁴ safety planning, political education, and countless others.

Shame work understands that advancing and growing restorative justice responses to violence broadly, including violence committed by white men, can reduce supremacy, shame, and ultimately, violence. The nuances of implementing restorative and transformative justice responses to violence can be found elsewhere (Impact Justice, Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective, Transform Harm). Still, it is important to note that these approaches, as much as possible, should be led by the communities—disproportionately communities of color—that are impacted by white men's violence, and as far away from the criminal legal system as possible. For those approaches in and around a white supremacist criminal legal system, power must be held by communities of color.

Everyday shame work for white male college students

The aforementioned shame work proposals represent a spectrum of nearer and long-term interventions and social change efforts aimed at reducing the violence of white men. Still, there are millions of white male college students who can take more immediate action to reduce violence on campus and in their own lives and communities. To conclude this chapter, I offer several things that white male college students can do to reduce white male violence. The majority of these offerings are ones that have been central to my own process of uprooting whiteness and patriarchy, and to becoming a more healed and accountable white man, committed to ending the violence of white men.

- Develop relationships and community with other white men that are explicitly formed around understanding and addressing patriarchy, whiteness, and violence, and developing vulnerability, healing, and accountability. This can include forming or joining men's groups and white affinity spaces, developing a pod with other white men to talk about these issues, and participating in therapy or counseling to develop your own capacity for reflection, feeling, healing, and accountability.
- Develop embodied practices. Whiteness and patriarchy have taught most white men to be disembodied, to be disconnected from the feelings in the body that lead us to act harmfully and violently. Developing practices that allow for being in our bodies, and to feel, can go a long way in reducing harmful behavior. These can include things like meditation, yoga, and mindfulness, and somatic practices more generally.
- Continually study and learn about and the intersections of white supremacy, patriarchy, and racial capitalism, and the many efforts working against these forces and for a more just world. We should be predominantly studying thinkers, organizers, and activists who are most impacted by these forces.
- Participate in groups and initiatives that are challenging whiteness, patriarchy, and violence. These can include on-campus bystander intervention programs, anti-racist groups like Showing Up for Racial Justice, and anti-racist men's organizations like Men Against Sexism.
- Support feminist anti-racist organizing efforts fighting against white supremacy, patriarchy, and white male violence. Just a few of the many groups include Survived and Punished, the National Council of Currently and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls, and Girls for Gender Equity.
- Develop an ethical value and practice of solidarity. Whiteness and patriarchy have taught white men that most interactions are transactional: I give you something, you give me something. Working against domination and for a more safe and interdependent world means working against a transactional way of being, and toward a caring and transformative orientation to relationships.

Notes

- 1 White nationalist groups believe in the superiority of white people and advocate for an all-white nation.
- 2 Male chauvinist groups are often majority white or all white, and advocate for male supremacy.
- 3 Circle processes, derived from practices of Native Americans, First Nations, and Indigenous peoples, bring together people in a circle, to share stories, and when appropriate, address conflict and harm (Pranis, 2005).
- 4 Pod-mapping is a concept and practice developed by Mia Mingus and the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective to intentionally create communities of care and support to prevent and intervene in violence (Mingus, 2016).

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18

LIKE, SHARE, TWEET

Anti-racist cyberactivism vs. performative slacktivism

Sara Blanchard and Misasha Suzuki Graham

What comes to mind when one hears the word “activism,” or tries to picture an “activist”? For many, these words are tied to a concept of physical activism, such as the marches during the Civil Rights era, or the more recent protests, rallies, and large gatherings of people for causes like Black Lives Matter and Stop Asian Hate. Activism often calls to mind images of people using their voices and bodies to raise awareness for causes they believe in, and injustices they want addressed. But, as we’ve increasingly seen in this past decade, the rise and prevalence of social media, when considered along with its low barrier to entry, its ease of use, and its ability to reach thousands—or millions—of people without the users ever stepping outside, has created a new form of activism: cyberactivism. Take, for example, the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, which transformed the use of hashtags and social media into a wide-reaching movement around a cause that many users of social media may have never heard of—or understood—until they were personally tagged. Cyberactivism has grown in intensity and power since March of 2020 when COVID-19 affected the world and led to an enforcement of social distancing; we saw hashtags, shares, likes, and retweets provide grassroots support for movements and causes that were often outside the scope of our country’s dominant narratives. Different forms of social media provided different ways to reach groups separated by age, race, profession, and more—but it provided a forum for multiple thousands of individuals to connect and have their message be heard by an equal number of listeners, including journalists, influencers, politicians, and people in positions of power who could make (or stand in the way of) real change.

At the same time that we witnessed the strength of cyberactivism, in a time period where physical organizing was effectively shut down through

city, county, and state laws due to COVID-19, we also learned about its limitations. Specifically, cyberactivism and the ability of social media to provoke real, measurable change in both attitudes and action has been hampered by *slacktivism* and other forms of performative allyship. Instead of getting more involved with the grassroots movements, protests, rallies, and other ways of organizing through social channels and apps, this form of social media use centered the poster, rather than the cause behind each claimed allyship post, often in order to further that individual's social status or reach. Again and again, we'd see a "one and done" type post from these individuals, which amounted to nothing more than a blip in a carefully designed Instagram feed, or a retweet from a celebrity on Twitter designed to get them noticed—and nothing more. In this chapter, we address the differences between these two uses of social media activism (which we refer to as *cyberactivism* and *slacktivism*, to highlight the differences between the two), how to get past slacktivism to true cyberactivism and allyship, and the ways in which we can each use our own spheres of influence to raise our voices when we're not actually saying anything out loud.

Cyberactivism can be defined as the use of the Internet and digital media to "help movements for change reach broader audiences and start important conversations without the traditional limits of geographic distance" (Sherer, 2014). In 2020, cyberactivism appeared online and often, especially after a white policeman murdered George Floyd. As noted by NBC News, Twitter became one simple way to notify people about needs and to coordinate donations to causes. For example, in one case, "more than 50,000 individuals donated \$1.8 million in 24 hours to support the Brooklyn Community Bail Fund" in response to the focus on racialized class inequity—in other words, the disproportionate amount of incarcerated Black and Brown individuals when compared with the population overall—in the prison system, along with law enforcement's response to a number of the physical protests happening at the same time (Rosenblatt, 2020). When you think about the speed and size of that donation in response to a social media request that was likely shared thousands of times from a single post, that is an incredible testament to the power of antiracist cyberactivism—when used with a purpose, for practical action.

Another example is linked to the rise of youth activism on TikTok around attempting to affect the attendance at Donald Trump's Tulsa, Oklahoma, rally in 2020. In response to a boast from the then-President Trump's re-election campaign that there would be 19,000 attendees at the rally, TikTok users and Korean pop music fans united on TikTok to reserve tickets to the rally with no intention of attending, thereby pushing the actual attendance level down to 6,200 and creating a direct, and successful, assault on white supremacy by effectively blocking what would have otherwise been a rally centered around white nationalist themes and replacing it instead with

youth activists taking an antiracist stand (Rosenblatt, 2020). This was not an isolated event, though, as cyberactivism became a key form of engagement for the youth demographic in 2020. Indeed, according to a Pew Research study conducted around the same time frame, social media platforms were used by 54 percent of social media users aged 18 to 29 in one month as a source to find out about rallies and protests happening in their areas (Auxier, 2020). Within this group, however, Black social media users are more likely to post hashtags or to encourage others to be politically active, with 55 percent of Black social media users ages 18–49 saying they posted a picture to show support for a cause in the past month, compared with fewer than four-in-ten Hispanic (37 percent) or white users (36 percent) in the same age range (Auxier, 2020).

However, juxtaposed with those incredibly powerful examples of cyberactivism and overlapping in time frame was the rise of white slacktivism, or performative white allyship practiced through social media platforms. These terms describe the quick liking, sharing, or following of posts by white people who are doing so predominantly to appear “woke” or engaged in social justice issues, but in reality, fail to convert their presence on social media into any measurable changes—both in their own lives and those of their followers. One visceral example of this is the infamous Instagram black square that appeared, supposedly to support the Black Lives Matter movement using the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag, but often amounted to the sum total of that poster’s actions to support the Black Lives Matter movement. When 28 million people did this at the same time as part of Blackout Tuesday, it obstructed the ability of other organizers who were using the #BlackLivesMatter hashtags to notify people about other social justice initiatives linked to the BLM movement (Rosenblatt, 2020). We consider this to be part of the wave of slacktivism that rose immediately after George Floyd’s murder, as people—most of them white—rushed to show their support because, more often than not, this kind of cyber engagement was performative at best. The purpose and function of using the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag was often misunderstood, as in the above example, where the individual desire by people to show (perhaps performative) support for the Black Lives Matter movement in a passive action on social media actively hindered organizers of that movement from mobilizing supporters at a key time to take actual action.

In a similar vein, as noted by NBC News, people would take a viral video or post, like Tobe Nwigwe’s TikTok video of his song “I Need You To”—which became an anthem in calling for accountability for the officers involved in Breonna Taylor’s death—and then transform that into a meme which used *misdirect* (or the technique of posting a video about a mundane task that would change into a call for justice) (Rosenblatt, 2020). While the video did alert others that the poster was aware of the issues surrounding the lack of accountability for the white policemen who murdered Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old

African American woman, it often amounted to just that: a single post, with no further action taken. Lydia Kelow-Bennett, a Black woman and associate professor in the Department of Afro-American and African Studies at the University of Michigan, called this “easy activism” and noted that it often amounted solely to performative white allyship (Rosenblatt, 2020). Notably, for those of us who were observing these trends in social media posts, as we—biracial Japanese-white women—did with our social justice podcast *Dear White Women*, these types of meme posts would often happen in a bunch, over several days, and then the wave would die down; further, these ebbs and flows would often be more ebb than flow as months passed since the police murder of George Floyd, and as those who had the privilege of being able to look away from these issues did so, returning to their more familiar topics on social media.

So, on the one hand, we have true cyberactivism, where social media is being used by various groups not only to disseminate information in real time, but also to galvanize support for protests, regardless of whether it remains online only or eventually translates offline into physical activism. Along with this, we’ve seen social media users challenging the platforms that they use to reflect this same sense of cyberactivism, such as when Black creators claimed that on TikTok, their content wasn’t being highlighted in the same ways as their white peers, that their videos were being removed without explanation, and that Black experts were not getting the proper credit for trends and challenges that they created or started (Rosenblatt, “From the renegade to Black Lives Matter,” 2020). We ourselves, as Japanese and white women, noticed similar trends with censorship, with certain hashtags triggering algorithms that greatly diminished the dissemination of our own antiracist social media posts; we appreciated the cyberactivism that emerged to shed light on these trends.

On the other hand, we have seen one-off social media posts by white individuals who are looking to garner personal attention, rather than push attention to the causes that they are claiming to support. For example, this could be through a white person who has never shared articles regarding racial justice or equity, taking and posting a single photo of themselves in a Black-owned business as a means of affirming how conscious they are about where they spend their money, and then have all other shopping posts on their feed dedicated to primarily white spaces, brands, and creators. Where does this divide between cyberactivists and slacktivists come from, and how do we effectively utilize antiracist cyberactivism to create and support real change rather than fall into ineffective performative white allyship?

We believe the answer comes down to how strong an individual’s “why,” or sense of purpose, is, especially when that individual is white and is new to these types of conversations and actions. Is the individual engaging in cyberactivism because it’s something they just agree with in theory, or is it

because it's something that taps into a deep, personal belief that something is unjust in the world and needs to change? While there's no scientific formula to differentiate between performative allyship and true cyberactivism in others, we do know in our gut if we and others actually care—as in, if we or others are willing to utilize our resources to make change. Some things to consider when looking at posts on social media include asking ourselves questions like: whose voice, or whose cause, is the post or poster centering? Is the post a re-post, or does it add something new from the poster's perspective? If the post involves a racism issue or antiracist cause, are BIPOC voices and lived experiences spotlighted? The posts, tweets, likes, and comments that often resonate the most, and lead to real action as a result, are those that are authentic, vulnerable, and honest. They contain facts, often provide some form of education for the reader, and offer a call to action. They're also not a singular post, as we know that conversations that lead to lasting, effective change are never singular in nature. That's what we mean by knowing one's "why" or purpose—when the poster does, it's evident from the posts. As we've heard said, people can smell performative allyship a mile away. So how do we move away from slacktivism and toward authentic, change-making antiracist cyberactivism, especially in the world as it stands post 2020?

First, we believe it starts with ourselves. To be in alignment with the cause of moving from slacktivism to anti-racist cyberactivism, we must be willing to look at our own beliefs and behaviors to this point. According to many studies from around the globe, as human beings, we tend to surround ourselves with people just like ourselves across many different realms—racial, religious, income, education, political views, life stage (*Fractured*). This often plays out in our social media feeds as well. Therefore, we believe the easiest first step to encourage more anti-racist cyberactivism is to be clear about our own identities, and check ourselves to make sure we are intentionally getting information and perspectives from a racially, ethnically, gender, sexuality, etc., diverse representation of individuals who are different from ourselves. To give an example, if you identify as white, are you following Black, Native American, Latine, East Asian, South Asian, Pacific Islander individuals and organizations on your social media platforms? By challenging ourselves to follow accounts of people not exactly like ourselves, we not only make sure we are consuming a broad spectrum of information, but increase the likelihood that, due to the variety of sources, we're getting the most accurate information possible. Next, we need to understand why these individuals or groups are the ones we are following. Are these people key players, influencers, educators, and activists within the sphere of change you're hoping to make? What perspectives might you be missing? We know activists who purposely follow people with different political viewpoints so they can truly understand the depth and breadth of viewpoints that represent the US public. Ultimately, the purpose of this is to ensure that you are paying

enough attention to the perspectives of marginalized groups and you are not over-exposed to dominant narratives on the issue in which you are interested. Then, it is important to examine what we are posting and reposting—and what we are not. Are you promoting the posts of people of color as much as white people, for example? Are you highlighting the voices of marginalized communities whom you support? Are you showcasing participants in the movement who've donated time or money or effort in some way?

In considering antiracist cyberactivism, it's important to remember to slow down and do research to ensure that the content you are sharing isn't sensationalized or perhaps even false information. This has become even more imperative with the introduction of generative artificial intelligence platforms like ChatGPT that are, within seconds, able to create credible-sounding articles embedded with incorrect data, which then can be potentially used to spread misinformation. Consider the source of information you are looking at, and click away to investigate the site and its mission, and do a quick search on the author—are they credible? Are they real? Double-check the date of publication of the article you are reading, as old news may not be relevant to current news stories. Check out the reference links embedded in the article to see if they're supporting the assertions the article is making. Every news source has a bias of some sort, so consider checking the media bias chart from the media solutions company All Sides, updated each year, to learn the political bias of our major media outlets and avoid manipulation, misinformation, and fake news. We also recommend becoming familiar with Snopes, a site providing fact-checking and investigative reporting about the most common stories. Make the effort to understand who is able to contribute to the websites you are using, so you can cast an appropriately critical, thoughtful eye as to the content. For example, anybody can post to YouTube; anybody can edit a Wikipedia entry, which means the quality of that information may differ from, say, a scientifically vetted journal or a traditional news source that abides by journalistic ethics. Knowing the sources of your information is important because the perspectives that you are sharing and amplifying are important. Building on this concept, consider that the integrity of the information you are sharing goes beyond the sources from which you pull this information. If we avoid the pull to immediately re-post or forward a piece of information, and instead, slow down, it gives us time to tap into our own gut feelings and reflect on whether each action is going to support our goals—or, conversely, be nothing more than a show of slacktivism. An example where slowing down can help is when you are considering re-sharing a post showing a violent act, like the videos capturing violent actions against people of Asian descent after the uptick of anti-Asian hate during the pandemic, or of assaults by police officers against Black individuals.

While some white people feel that they gain empathy after viewing videos showing targeted acts of violence against people of color (because, due to

their own white privilege, they may never fully understand how it feels to have these types of hate directed against them), it's important to remember that violence is inherently harmful. If a white person chooses to amplify and share that video, the people of color in that same targeted group who see that act of violence on their social media feeds can be triggered and re-traumatized. It's important to slow down and consider what fits best with our intentions, and with the goals we aim to accomplish when we share posts depicting harm, and share only the posts that support our antiracist goals.

Second, once we have examined our own antiracist cyberactivism, we can begin to think about how we address others in our circles. We do want to keep in mind that, as the popular phrase goes, we can do anything—but not everything. While we might care for the well-being of others and of our country, there are simply too many issues in the world to care about all of them equally; one person cannot dive deeply into every single one of them. What we want to help people determine is which issues are the most pressing to them personally, and encourage them to move toward true activism while keeping those key issues in mind. To begin this process, it is helpful if we ease up on our judgment of the slacktivists we see as simply performative, and think of them instead as someone who may be considering the first step toward taking more impactful action (Verma, 2020). If somebody is willing to agree that an antiracism cause is important—for example, by posting a black square in support of Black Lives Matter as referenced earlier—there may be room to help them move from performative allyship to true antiracist cyberactivism. While people who aren't committed to a cause can't click their way to change, people who are committed to a cause can use social media effectively. After all, true activists are those who create an antiracist plan that doesn't start and stop “with sharing articles, asking for donations, or creating a Facebook group” (Morlock, 2020).

What would a plan like that look like? What constitutes meaningful engagement? We must understand how change happens, and it happens differently for each issue—though money and voting have a large influence in most cases. For criminal justice and police reform, for example, state and local officials play major roles; mayors and county executives appoint police chiefs, and district attorneys and state attorneys decide which crimes to prosecute. All of these are elected positions in which the officials can critically impact race relations. For voting rights and fighting against voter suppression, while the federal government can play a major role in passing policies like the Voting Rights Act of 1965¹ and attempts to pass additional protections for voting rights since that point, state governors play a major role in implementing racialized voter suppression (as happened in Georgia with Governor Kemp in 2021) which, again, is an elected position. Additionally, policies that affect our quality of life can be changed through a combination of elected officials and corporate pressures and interests. While maternity

and paternity leave, for example, is regulated by US labor law—which currently requires companies with more than 50 employees to give parents only twelve weeks of unpaid leave per year for every mother of a newborn or newly adopted child—states do have the power to supplement these policies, as do individual corporations who may choose to offer more generous terms. Policies supporting maternity leave will have a great impact on Black mothers—two-thirds of whom are equal, primary, or sole earners in their households, and they “have higher labor force participation rates than other moms” (Roux, 2021). Plus, on average, Black women earn 64 cents for every dollar a white man makes, while white women earn 79 cents (Bleiweis, 2021). Given the fact that Black women do paid work outside the home at a greater rate and for less pay than white women, paid maternity leave would have a disproportionately positive financial impact on Black women and their families. Paid maternity leave, then, meets intersectional antiracism goals at a systemic level. Activism in various forms, including cyberactivism, can play a role in influencing and pressuring states and corporations to provide paid maternity leave. Each stage of influence offers opportunities for people to use their voice and ask for what they need to see changed.

Ultimately, to move people away from slacktivism toward true antiracist activism, we must be very clear about the end goal of what we are trying to accomplish, what the necessary steps are to get there, and how we can encourage people to participate in all the steps along the way (Verma, 2020). We must take the time to more deeply understand the antiracism issue we are fighting for (or against), clearly identify and communicate what the end goal is, and determine what changes need to be made in order to meet that goal. Then, we can begin to use the tools of cyberspace to convince people to care about this same goal and help take the steps necessary to make the changes. After all, “history is made by those who can define a path forward and persuade others—even those who are initially skeptical—that it is a journey worth embarking on” (Satell, 2017).

What are the ways cyberactivism—true antiracist cyberactivism, not slacktivism—can play a role in bringing about change? We have identified that part of the challenge is to get people to personally care about the goals we care about, and there are many different layers to antiracist cyberactivism that can help us reach these goals. We certainly cannot discount the importance of cyberactivists who raise awareness to certain issues that are systemic and not simply one-off problems. This was where we began with our podcast. As biracial women with multiracial children, we noticed that in the white female circles that we were privy to, there was not the same level of conversations about race and racism taking place—largely because the white women, through their racial privilege, did not experience challenges related to race in their daily lives. We felt one of the biggest steps we could take to help move the needle to protect our children’s generation was to bring conversations,

rooted in fact, to this audience and dive into the racial history and racist laws and realities of our country so they could understand more than their own personal realities. After all, what we see is our reality, and as we saw with our white friends, if we aren't personally affected by a problem, we may not even be aware that this problem exists. However, "a minority cannot be protected from oppression if the majority does not understand that that oppression or abuse is occurring" (Sherer, 2014). From this, we can glean that education is a foundational part of antiracist cyberactivism.

We would posit that antiracism education takes several different forms, as it speaks both to people's intellect as well as to their emotions, and we suggest a listen-learn-act framework. On listening, we can reach emotions by tapping into people's stories, which triggers empathy. Empathy is "feeling someone else's pain or seeing through their eyes. It's also a precursor to compassion, which is empathy in action—a commitment to doing something that relieves someone else's suffering" (Aguilar, 2018). When white women watched the video of George Floyd's murder and they heard him calling out to his mother, it elicited in them the empathy and reminder that he was someone's son, and that feeling of motherhood solidarity called many of them into antiracism action. We return to the idea that people aren't typically committed to a cause unless it affects them personally, and so it's critical to showcase how an antiracism cause might impact them or someone they care about: "The three main reasons people donate to nonprofit organizations are very personal in nature – they have a deep passion for the cause, they believe the organization depends on their donation, or they know someone affected by the nonprofit's mission" (Dietz, 2016, p. 3). Whether it's due to a personal connection, or learning, for example, that forces of oppression include pressures of perfectionism or standards of professionalism or one-size-fits-all education systems that work to control humans instead of celebrating our diversity, as white people start to expand their understanding of the many layers of interwoven oppression involved in upholding racism, antiracism work might become more personal to them.

On the learning front, we can reach intellect by sharing facts and history and laws and statistics, many of which most Americans learn unevenly, if at all, in school. For example, slavery is included in the Massachusetts history and social studies framework 104 times. Louisiana's standards for K-12 social studies refer to slavery four times, while Idaho's guidelines mention slavery twice (Heim, 2019). When we mention this difference in our talks, we tend to see eyes widening in the audience, surprised to hear about the different levels of learning we experience in our country's education systems depending on what state we are raised in, and this knowledge tends to spur on people's curiosity—it's as if now that they are aware that they might not know our country's full picture, they want to start learning more. We would encourage antiracist cyberactivists to help others understand that they have

not only the responsibility but indeed the power to help others they care about, in order to motivate them to take further action (Staub, 2021).

This further action can take many forms. As discussed earlier, money and voting go a long way toward facilitating change. Donating money to a cause does make it more sustainable for the work to continue, but as research shows, there is an effective way that causes organizations make the donations more sustainable. For organizations, it's important to focus on building relationships with potential donors first by asking them to engage in smaller steps—instead of just bringing new supporters on board and asking them for money. “Non-donors who take action online are 3.5 times more likely to donate than non-donors who have supplied their e-mail address (say, for a newsletter) but haven't taken action,” said Paynter. “Donors who also take action are better donors. Existing donors who had taken action online were 2.3 times more likely to donate than donors in the e-mail file who hadn't” (Livingston, 2020).

One of the powerful parts of cyberactivism is that it enables movements to be effective even without being controlled by a central organizing body. What this means is that individuals' small actions can become more powerful when they use the strategies we mentioned above. That being said, anybody who is committed can become an active agent for a cause. Whether you are part of an organization or an individual supporter of an antiracist movement, effective smaller actions can include asking people to share a tweet or post you've made and thanking them for their support in spreading the word. There may be a petition that you've asked them to sign that will go to their state representatives (with the understanding that online petitions only go so far without in-person action by the leaders of the organization) and you thank them for their participation. You might be asking people to volunteer their time and skills however they can, whether it's supporting disadvantaged communities or calling potential voters or sending postcards through the mail. It may even be possible to motivate cyberactivists to come out from behind their computers and show up in face-to-face interactions at in-person information sessions or even participating in rallies. Ultimately, “a successful movement is one that uses a mix of strategies including rallies, phone calls, letters to editors, litigation, etc., and people need to know this” (Verma, 2020).

Although we've emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic, we suspect that cyberactivism is here to stay. We hope that we can, along with you, encourage people to move beyond slacktivism into connecting with the antiracism causes that they're most passionate about, and use all the tools that are at our fingertips to spur on real change.

Notes

Note: *Dear White Women* is an award-winning podcast that models and normalizes conversations about race and racism and is dedicated to helping white women use

their privilege to uproot systemic racism, without centering themselves in the process. The show is hosted by Sara and Misasha, two biracial (Japanese and white) daughters of immigrants who've been best friends since they met at Harvard nearly 25 years ago. Misasha is a lawyer, amateur historian, and is married to a Black man; Sara is a life coach and facilitator and is married to a white Canadian man. Their podcast calls on us to look deeply at our personal experiences with race and identity and examine the structures in both our nation's history and present day, to create a more equitable world for the next generation.

- 1 The Voting Rights Act of 1965 prohibits racial discrimination in voting. After President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the act in law, it became illegal for white people and white institutions to intimidation, murder, and public policy to prevent Brown and Black people from voting. See NAACP, "Voting rights act of 1965," NAACP Legislative Milestones (Web).

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19

MAKING MISTAKES

A conversation

Peggy Diggs and Lucy R. Lippard

As older White feminists, we see ourselves stuck between the power of White men and the all too frequent disempowerment of women of color. We believe that art offers unique ways of investigating and communicating such a difficult subject. As perpetrators of racism and oppression, White people's energies are too often focused on and even dependent on the "other." Given the tremendous inequalities faced by people of color, it once seemed inappropriate to talk about ourselves. But we are the largest part of the problem, and this cannot be ignored. We know that no matter how active and empathetic and educated we think we are, no matter how racist or antiracist we may have been raised, and given the systemic White patriarchal supremacy that dominates this country, to be White means to be marked by racism as surely (though not as painfully) as people of color. It is crucial that we begin to spend more time discussing among ourselves about how we got here, how we might escape the stereotype of the self-satisfied, ignorant, and matronizing White woman, and how we can learn to accept responsibility for our massive wrongs. We agree that artmaking has the potential to be a powerful way of knowing and challenging the status quo. (PD and LRL)

PD: For years, as an activist artmaker, I have done projects concerning a range of feminist issues. Working with community groups I was interested in, I approached them somewhat the way a designer might work with clients: we explore their experiences, we question, we think about target goals and audiences, and then I usually make some draft images which we discuss together. I design for sites and formats where those communities want their messages to be seen. These have included milk

cartons, bar coasters, table tents in fast food restaurants, billboards, white dress shirts, subway posters, photo murals in public space. Generally, the communities make the decisions. I've worked with abused women in shelters, social workers, male perpetrators of sexual assault recently released from prison, teenage girls about issues important to them, formerly homeless women, women in prison for killing their abusers, and university women in Caracas, Venezuela.

In 2003, when I came across the reference to an enslaved Black person in my father's family papers, I shifted to finding ways to grapple with my slave-owning ancestors, a desire to examine responsibility triggered by the actions and reactions of those Who share my Whiteness.

LRL: That's such an impressive career! And you are rare in answering the call of writer Angela Pelster-Wiebe, a White woman, who wrote in 2018 that White artists need to

address their own complicity in white supremacy...White artists and writers have done such a poor job of addressing [the subject] in their work that it's practically its own sub-genre.... White artists often fail at this work because they haven't centered themselves within the violence of their own whiteness,

conceding that she herself is "still learning how to do this work in ways that do not harm" (2018). And, recently, a righteous essay by Asian American art writer Ryan Lee Wong, laying out the rules for White artists working on race, appeared online warning White readers that this "might be the hardest work of your life." He sets out a program of consciousness raising and "requirements," such as: "Introduce constructive discomfort both within yourself and among your white-identified peers, social circles, and families"—something that you, Peggy, have already done. He moves on to drawing "a psychological portrait of white shame," creating a performance that would "mark the whiteness of your social circles, leading to the desegregation of said circle," and tracing your family's history of "slavery, genocide, and warfare" (2021).

PD: The models I grew up with were, individually, racist, and the institutional systems I grew up with were, collectively, racist. All I can say is that I am working to understand all of this better. I don't want to infer by any means that I am not a racist. I don't ask for forgiveness or retreat into my guilty Whiteness. I'm just spelling out work that I've been doing.

LRL: I always say I wasn't raised to be a racist, which doesn't mean that my race-conscious family and I weren't as susceptible to the pervasive societal racism as all other Whites.

And yet...and yet... Inspired over a few years by your work, I've been forced to confront and scrutinize the issue of Whiteness. Like most White antiracists, I was merely resting on my progressive credits. When we began to think about this essay, it was a deep dive. The systemic racism that plagues our society has bled into all of our lives and attitudes. All White people are internal racists, whether or not we acknowledge it. Mostly we deny it, pleading innocence. And then considering the issues as presented in contemporary art was even more difficult. We agree that artmaking can be a way of knowing, or realizing, or questioning the status quo. Now, rather than depending on people of color to teach us, we have to do our own diagnoses and prescriptions to cope with White supremacy and internal and systemic racism.

PD: I think the most believable and apparent reason that it's so hard for White people to talk about Whiteness is that we have to look at ourselves as intentional or oblivious perpetrators. More often than not, we get defensive, or say that what happened "years ago" is not our fault. But I find it so much more imperative to admit that we benefit from systemic racist practices, in addition to behaving callously, inadvertently harming and insulting people of color.

So what can I do about that? George Yancy, a Black philosopher, proposes that

White people are being asked to remain within the space of uncertainty, of lingering with the gravity of white privilege...[where] they face and carry the burden of a critically engaged understanding of whiteness as oppressive. In this way their whiteness disorients, their world begins to feel precarious, they begin to feel the sense of not being at home, not being safe.

(2019, p. 149)

LRL: Yes, there's no question that Whites talking about Whiteness is a psychologically risky proposition. Many Whites just shrug it off as irrelevant or feel unsafe even addressing it. Many people of color question our motives: Are we trying to separate ourselves from the history of white supremacy? Are we being holier than thou? Is this an excuse not to talk about racism, to bring the discussion back to the dominant culture? It's a delicate balance. This is probably one of the reasons there is so little art about whiteness. White scholar Ruth Frankenberg, in her prescient 1993 book on feminism and Whiteness, argues that "race shapes white women's lives...And in a social context where white people have too often viewed themselves as nonracial or racially neutral, it is crucial to look at the 'racialness' of white experience." She sees the terrain shaped by race privilege, "a place from which

white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society,” and as a “set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed” (p. 1). How, then, is feminist art affected and practiced within these boundaries? This is a hard question to answer because the subject has so rarely been tackled by White feminists. We have preferred to be “antiracist,” pro-people of color, always looking out rather than in. We use “the other” to define ourselves.

PD: Well said. We often define ourselves in terms of what we’re not rather than what we are. And in art, portraying or grappling with “not-ness” is pretty rough! Maybe this too is a reason (among many others) why White artists have a hard time making art about Whiteness.

LR: So we’ve established our do-gooder intentions; we’re trying hard to be antiracists, but we’re still talking about people of color, and not about Whiteness. In the current climate, only people of color seem to be able to talk publicly about race. We who have not suffered directly from racism stand back, because, understandably, no excuses are acceptable. Is that why it’s so hard to talk about Whiteness?

PD: I found myself wondering what is the job, the role, of White artists doing work about Whiteness? Are there goals? What is there to say? Through a residency at the Santa Fe Art Institute in 2017, I began a project about Whiteness by interviewing fifty White people and ten people of color. Not everyone I approached agreed to be interviewed; those who were uncomfortable with the subject or felt they might be “blamed” did not want to speak. I also had little access to children, although I was able to interview about a dozen multiracial teens. Each interview was about an hour, and consisted of many questions, some aimed at one group and others at everyone, a few of which are:

- *What attributes might a person of color have other than skin color?*
- *How do you understand the experiences of people of color that may be different from yours?*
- *Where do you think the concept of Whiteness came from?*
- *What do you wish for White people?*
- *Whatever your race, what does being White mean to you? How do you understand the concept of Whiteness? What is White identity?*
- *What incident first informed you about your family’s position on race? (What are the views on race held by your family?)*
- *Under what circumstances do you feel the most White?*
- *Do White people pay a price for their privilege?
Would you say you have a White way of looking at things?*
- *What do you think White people might have to gain from the end of racism?*

Over two months of interviewing, the responses were sometimes self-aware, sometimes poignant, sometimes defensive. Many of the White interviewees expressed a desire for more closeness among community members—something they attributed to communities of color. Many expressed an awareness of their daily racial privilege, while others were in denial. Many felt isolated in their Whiteness and felt they didn't know how to introduce more racial diversity into their social circles. Some feared loss of place, of power, of standing. Other responses included: "Our denial of racism protects us from having to give away what we think we deserve"; "The cost of our privilege is that we live in a kind of anesthesia."

Here are a few of the questions and comments:

- Q: Our denial of racism protects us from what? A (from a White queer woman in their thirties): [Our denial of racism] protects us from accountability, response, alliance. We don't have to give away what we think we deserve. It protects us from one of the fundamental human fears—scarcity, not enough resources. If things were equitable, it would be a lot different for us.
- Q: (to the same woman) What about the White "race" disturbs you? A: [Our] cultural amnesia; [a sense of] entitlement even across class—across working class life; constructing a certain delusional reality and the pervasiveness of it.
- Q: How would you describe a White identity? A: (from a White man in his seventies): privilege and access.
- Q: (to the same man) What about the White race disturbs you? A: The assumptions that accompany the privilege—large gestures of assumed language that can be spoken without consequence, from most hateful to dumb ignorance; when Whites are unquestioning of their behavior and don't take responsibility for the consequences.
- Q: How do you identify "Whiteness"? A: (from another White man in his seventies): We Whites don't have a sense of community; worst of whiteness is the Midwest—a homogeneity to it, a cultural flatness. Whites don't like drama, unless it's organized like football. Whites keep things tamped down, maybe because they're dominant.
- Q: (to same man): What aspects of the White race disturb you? A: The sense of White exceptionalism is used as a club for all sorts of bad things. Capitalism has a strong grifter component—payday loan industry, banks. An American and White construction is capitalism.

LRL: Interesting how these replies ignore the existence of class. There's a strange lack of empathy on some of the White Left for White people who suffer economically in this society. There is a classic and common tendency to lump all Whites together (harder these days) and all people

of color together, ignoring all the differences...and similarities. Since the role of class is so clearly relevant, we have to ask why class alliances (traditionally within unions or communities) have for the most part failed to produce long-lasting interracial alliances.

PD: Your fabulous book, *Mixed Blessings* (1990), was the first encounter I had with work by artists of color in any substantive way. And many of them were female, as you've been a feminist forever. I've been revisiting it and marveling at how fresh it still feels. I'm curious about the section titles in that book which seem to relate to our discussion of feminism and Whiteness: MAPPING, NAMING, TELLING, LANDING, MIXING, TURNING AROUND, and DREAMING. How do you see any or many of them helping our discussion here?

LRL: Those section headings were a way of literally mixing it up so that each theme embraced work by Black, Native, Asian, and Latinx artists, and I didn't have to get into rigid definitions of any specific cultural background. I've always regretted dismissing a last-minute idea when I was finishing *Mixed Blessings* (and bracing myself for criticism about a White person taking this on) to make the last chapter about Whiteness. I just wasn't there yet. In the 1980s, when I was writing this, Whiteness was not yet an issue. It still might not be prominent, for me, without your work.

David Roediger, a White historian, has said that White identity is "derived from the experience of dominating rather than from biology or culture" (2002, p. 23)—which seems like a key insight. At the same time, by delving into White responsibility for racism, we leave ourselves wide open to disagreement from both sides. While Black intellectuals might warily welcome belated support, it's not as though most White people want to participate in this process. Too difficult, too risky, or just not important. How do we choose our tone? Do we have to be apologetic? Empathetic? Just pathetic? Willing to admit that we White antiracists remain on the wrong side, that efforts like this one are necessary even when they are only efforts?

PD: I come back to George Yancy's comment as a reply to this, but also to the iconic African American writer James Baldwin, who noted that "Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety" (1956, p. 7). So how can art be a useful part of this discussion? And, again, what are the goals or even the areas of concern in such work?

LRL: So we agree that art can be a tool for raising consciousness about any number of issues, though few White artists have chosen that path. Raising consciousness is the starting point for any activism and any change. That's where art comes in.

Thank you, Peggy, for your research and vetting all the Whiteness/art references sent to us by friends. While some White artists have touched on or referenced whiteness, surprisingly few addressed it in any depth. The

one work we found to be substantially relevant was Andrea Fraser's 2021 *This meeting is being recorded*, a ninety-nine-minute performance-based video installation shown at Marian Goodman Gallery in January 2023. Based on and edited from six zoom meetings with seven women, the artist plays all of the parts, including herself, taking up "the task of examining our internal racism and our roles in white supremacy and specifically... to apply the [psychoanalytical practice of] Group Relations methods to that task." Fraser herself, the former chair of the UCLA Art Department, noted, "as White women, we are beneficiaries of structural racism. We do have that power." And yet, "my...sense of deprivation as a woman... blinds me to my privilege." In another passage, she recognizes her "avoidant racism. And what I'm avoiding is being confronted with my own sense of my own guiltiness and shamefulness and hatefulness. It's how I judge myself, that I then project in interracial encounters" (2021). In a public conversation with Fraser, Black writer Claudia Rankine said she was interested in "the diminishing defenses against the repressed, that the racism is in there," and work like Fraser's "allows people to at least see and recognize that" (Fraser and Rankine, 2023).



FIGURE 19.1 Andrea Fraser, *This meeting is being recorded*, UHD video installation, 2019. Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, 2023. Photo credit: Alex Yudzon, Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, 2023. Copyright: Andrea Fraser. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.

Why do you suppose it is so difficult to get down to brass tacks in art? Is it the fear of being accused of being “too political” and therefore excluded from “serious, quality art”? (Hopefully those days are gone.) Or is it related to the fundamental problems we’re discussing here? I think of Faith Ringgold, who said decades ago that as a Black woman artist she could do what she wanted because she was left out anyway. (The title of a 1982 book—*All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*—says it all [Hull, Bell-Scott, and Smith, 1982]). Although Faith is a friend, I was obviously one of those White feminists who fumbled and stumbled around her issues. She and her daughters worked with us protesting the Whitney Museum’s neglect of both women of color, men of color, and White women artists in 1970, but we needed her more than she needed us. Kimberlé Crenshaw (2020), a Black woman legal scholar, notes that the FBI calls the Black Lives Matter movement “identity extremism” (December 15, 2020). Surely that applies far more to Whites and the status quo than to Black people, although the fact that Whites don’t often have to think about our racial identity mutes the necessity.

Here in New Mexico, everyone who is not Indigenous, Black, or *Hispanola* (often used instead of the more conservative Hispanic, the more political *Chicana*, and the globally general *Latino*) is often called an “Anglo.” Maurice Berger (1999), the late lamented author of *White Lies: Race and the Myths of Whiteness*, wrote about his mother, who was a dark-complected Sephardic Jew:

My mother was the embodiment of the mutability of race, the evidence that terms like ‘black’ and ‘white’ are imprecise at best, living proof that miscegenation has blurred the racial boundaries of almost every one of us, confirmation that race itself is socially and culturally constructed.

(1995, p. 5)

That mutability is real, but then so was/is the one-drop notion that anyone with the tiniest fraction of “Black blood” is Black, no matter how much “white blood” is in the mix. In the Southwest, *mestizaje* (mixture, usually of *Hispana* and Native) is another major signifier. Elsewhere, “mixed race” is more broadly applicable.

PD: An early series of works by the iconic artist Adrian Piper was a huge influence on me. She would hand out calling cards in social situations when someone made a racial slur, assuming that she—a light-skinned African American—was White. The card would be slipped to the speaker, informing them she was Black and objected to their comment. She considered the cards as performances, a conversation with a (usually White) person in a real-life situation. In some ways part of

my current project also intends to confront viewers in real life about their opinions on race and Whiteness. It consists of guerrilla actions in which printed yard signs are placed along roads and in public spaces. In bold graphics, they carry phrases such as *How did you discover your beliefs about race?* and *I am White: I am sorry for what my people do to yours* and *What does being White mean to you?* and *Do people fear you because of your race?* The objective is to catch the eye with unexpected content for a public sign and to encourage internal questioning.

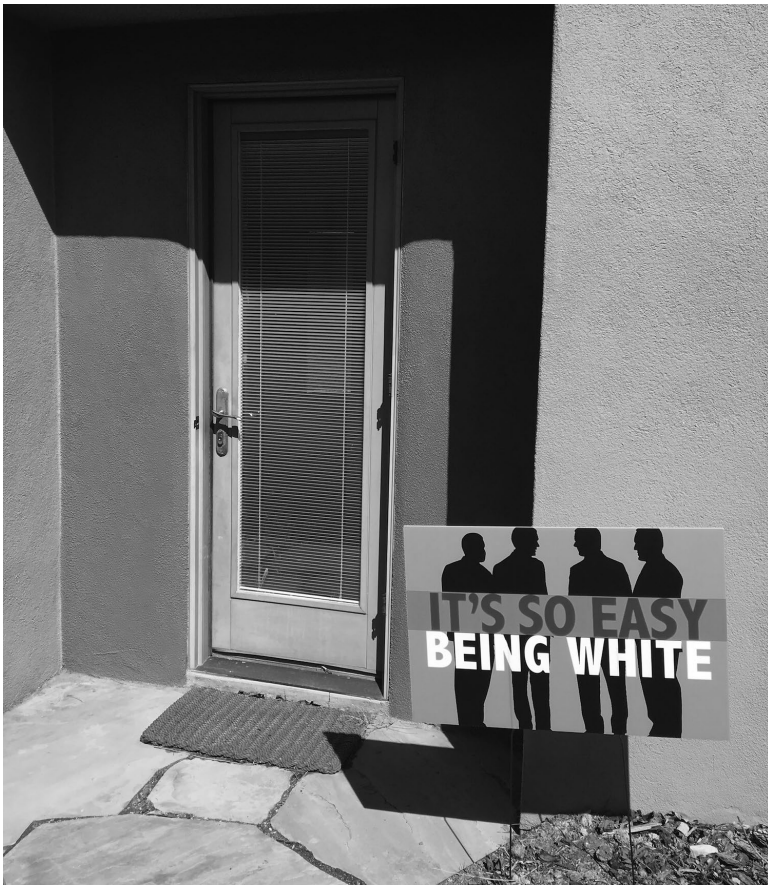


FIGURE 19.2 Peggy Diggs, *It's So Easy Being White Yard Sign*, 2019. 18" h × 27" w; ink, Coroplast, aluminum; installation view. Copyright Peggy Diggs; photo credit Peggy Diggs.

There are, of course, many more artists of color who have represented and grappled with the subject of White hegemony than White artists, and quite effectively. I think of Hank Willis Thomas' photo

series *Unbranded: A Century of White Women*; Ken Gonzales-Day's lynching photos that erase the victims, leaving the focus on the White celebrants; John Lucas and Claudia Rankine's *Stamped* images of blondes; Nayland Blake's *Equipment for a Shameful Epic*; Ricardo Caté's Indigenous comic, *Without Reservations*, where a White Custer-like officer is clueless; Byron Kim's subtle skin color grids; Daniel Joseph Martinez's "I can't imagine wanting to be white" metal clip-ons handed out at the Whitney Museum; Lezley Saar's naked dolls with white bodies and black heads, and vice versa; Kyungmi Shin's *Blue Eyes* series; John Feodorov's shamans, and many others.¹

LRL: Your wonderful napkin piece, *Faces* (2009), executed at Williams College with a multiracial group of staff, faculty, and students, asks, among many other provocative questions: "How would you describe yourself as 'White' (if you do) other than by skin color?" and "Could you tell your life story without mentioning race?" I suspect most White people could easily tell a nonracial story, or at least those not living in the South or those without close friends of color who are not afraid to call us on our mistakes. But these stories are changing. It's been predicted that around 2050, the United States may be half "non-white." I wonder how White people will react to no longer being a majority. Will the shoe be on the other foot?

PD: I think we're seeing many White people right now reacting (badly) to that predicted future. Much of the public violence experienced since 2020 is likely influenced by that fear.

But I'd like to bring two things to the table here: I've always approached artmaking as a way of making propositions, a "what if" or "let's think about" or "let's pretend that." Art provides a forum for thinking outside of the conventional academic and critical boxes. I like to locate my art in places where it triggers conversations, sometimes outside of an art context. It can then become a tool to grapple with social issues. So proposing ideas in art may enable viewers to reconsider the issues. Second, there's no doubt that White artists offering different ideas about Whiteness and race are going to run into trouble. This may be why we don't see much art by White artists about whiteness. To grapple with this issue, a White artist must risk making mistakes, offending people, and encountering her own inevitable racism. She must develop a thick skin, listen to and think about the feedback, and keep on going.

LRL: One of those social issues is the ways that feminism plays different roles in different cultures (many of them White). The extent of difference has to be acknowledged but shouldn't disable discussion. As early as 1991, White artist Barbara Kruger (1991) wrote: "I basically feel that right now people of color can do a better job of representing

themselves than white people can of representing them. It's about time" (*Critical Inquiry*, 1991). Black Artist Lorraine O'Grady recalled that in the 1970s, Black women in the feminist movement were "charged with difference," While White women didn't have to deal with it (*Hyperallergic*, 2021). Since then, *intersectionality* has become a buzzword, further (positively) complicating the discussion. The term, incidentally, was coined by a Black woman, Kimberlé Crenshaw, a fact rarely mentioned by White feminists. In a famous essay, Gayatri C. Spivak asked "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1994). The parallel is: can the dominant culture listen? So before the White woman speaks, we have to listen (and in this case, look at a lot of art by people of color). When we do look inward, instead of self-criticizing, we tend to focus on how we have stayed on the correct side (as I did earlier in this chapter). Instead, we need to take responsibility in a positive sense rather than depending on negatives like guilt, indoctrination, and ignorance. We don't have to admit to villainy to go deeper. If we are aware of the subtleties of our excuses, can we proceed beyond them? We need room to fail, but the context is justifiably unforgiving. Can we do something right? Black anti-racism activist Rachel Cargle has offered Whites a formula for antiracist work: "Here's how you can show up," she said. "Knowledge plus empathy plus action. If you take any one away, you're performing." If someone says something racist, it's up to the White audience to get over their discomfort and tackle the topic themselves. Reticence and recusing ourselves is not possible in her world. "Racists should be the most uncomfortable people in your space," she says. "Racists should be terrified to be around you" (2019).

Note

- 1 For more examples of art on Whiteness, plus important texts, see Tylor Stallings, ed., *Whiteness: A Wayward Construction*, Laguna Beach: Laguna Art Museum/Fellows of Contemporary Art, 2003, 9.

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AND I AM SORRY

Anaïs Peterson

in the space between i want it to be talked about and i should not have to
force them to see me
are the charity texts, the requests for absolution sprinkled with words like
solidarity and *i am experiencing this alongside you*
dripping with good intentions shot from a hand that could have held
the gun

i imagine this must be a difficult time
you tell me this, twice,
and you busy yourself imagining how *painful and difficult* these times are
telling me about it and wringing your hands and never once looking
yourself in the eyes
by the time your own good intentions exhaust you it is time to begin again

~~and i am sorry, i do not want to sound ungrateful~~
~~and i am sorry, i know you are trying~~
and i am sorry that maybe this is your best

i feel the grief planting itself in my chest putting down deep tangled roots
and in this moment when all i want is to hold my people i do not know
how to hold the grief you force into my hands prying open my fingers as
if it is an honor to be asked to bear your guilt

and when you tell me you are sending love i don't want the red emoji hearts
you careful picked after deliberating for seconds between the red and
yellow –

i want your rage.

and you end every text

please let me know if you need anything

as if it is as simple as asking, as if we are not already.

WHITE ME

A check list

Ivy T. Schweitzer

Have been unaware of my privileges as white, check

Really unaware of my privileges as a white woman, check

Believed that racism is just personal prejudice, check

Protested that I am not a racist, check

Protested that I know and like many people of color, check

Protested that I have Black friends, check

That I had a Black boyfriend, check

That I had *two* Black boyfriends, check

That I am a good person, check

Argued that I marched during the 60s, check

That I don't *intend* being racist, and racism is intentional, so I cannot possibly be a racist, check

Cried and got defensive when friends or colleagues pointed out my racist language, ideas or attitudes, or my participation in racist systems, check

Feared when I passed a dark man on a dark street, check

Did not call out racism when I saw it in friends, family, work, or community, check

Retreated into myself, my group, my tribe to complain about "the complainers," check

Felt exhausted by the awareness of racism and wanted it to go away, check

Consumed Black culture and felt cool about it, check

Got confused and frustrated by the shifting terminology around race and color, check

Felt checked, cornered, rejected like a bounced check

Just wanted it to go away and go back to normal without check

Struggle struggle struggle not to check out

When people of color every day cannot.

MIRANDA WAIVER FOR WHITE PEOPLE

Becky Thompson

Before we ask you any questions, you must understand your rights:

- You have the right to finally speak up.
- Anything you say can and will be used to undo white supremacy.
- You have the right to seek support so you can reject cruelty and domination.
- If you cannot afford an attorney to undo your will that enriches white power for the next generation, we will appoint one for you.
- You can decide at any time from this moment on to leave jobs and move out of neighborhoods that back white isolation, paranoia, and narrow thinking.
- Do you understand each of these rights I have explained to you? Having these rights in mind, do you wish to talk now?

I have read and understand fully each of my rights. I do not want the advice of a racist attorney at this time. No promises or threats have been made to me. I can be trusted (I think?).

Signature:

Date:

Witness signature:

Date:

DOI: 10.4324/9781003449508-32

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QUESTIONS, ACTIVITIES, AND RESOURCES

Questions for writing and discussion

- 1 At the end of Chapter 13, Meena Mangat poses reflection questions about allyship, beginning with: *What is my definition of allyship?* In writing, group or full-class discussion, or both, work through these questions one at a time. What do the answers suggest to you about where you are, individually or as a group, in your praxis, and what you can do next? (See the introduction to this section for a sketch of the interlinked activities of antiracist praxis.)
- 2 How does white allyship go wrong? Collect some examples from the readings, from current events, or from your own experience. What harm was done, and how did that happen? Brainstorm strategies the people involved could have taken that would have reduced or eliminated the harm, or how they could address the harm caused effectively after it's done. Keep in mind this famous quote from Audre Lorde: “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” How does that quote apply to your examples of allyship?
- 3 As a class, use the board or an online platform to brainstorm common understandings of what the feminist movement is all about—core principles, tactics and strategies, goals, and visions for the future. Critically consider the list you’ve created: Which of these understandings are misconceptions? How are whiteness, liberalism, and settler colonialism linked to these common understandings? Alminas and Pillen convey their Indigenous students’ recommendations for the feminist movement: (1) refuse the erasure of BIPOC and nonbinary people; (2) embrace differences; (3) educate the public about intersectionality and cultural sensitivity; and

- (4) take accountability for the ways white-centered feminism perpetuates settler colonialism. Apply these recommendations to your brainstormed version of feminism; which of these priorities needs work, and what specific actions can you take?
- 4 Pay attention to and write about moments when awkwardness or silence comes up in conversations about the topics discussed in these chapters. What specific topics have been raised when this happens? If you are silent or fumbling for words, what is that experience like for you, and why do you think it happens? Often the topics that people stumble on have to do with lived experiences and embodied identities that are unfamiliar to the speaker, or may not fit the speaker's expectations. Is this the case in your examples? What would it take to get past the silence and awkwardness?
 - 5 As a class, brainstorm characteristics, images, values, and behaviors that are commonly associated with "masculinity," and then narrow down the focus of the list to "white men." How are white supremacy and heteropatriarchy represented in the list? How do these attributes harm white men?
 - 6 In class, have different readers read each of the three poems at the end of the section out loud—ideally, more than once—pausing after each reading to allow time for everyone in the class to take quick notes on what they notice and how they feel about each poem. Use these notes as the basis for a discussion of this question: What do these poems together show us about whiteness, about antiracist feminist praxis?

Learning activities

- 1 Individually or in groups, conduct research on the Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women movement in the United States, or the Murdered and Missing Aboriginal Women's movement in Canada. A coalition of multiple Indigenous organizations are involved in these movements. Explore the websites of one or more of these organizations, paying attention to the regions and tribal nations they represent, the information they present, their analysis, their mission and goals, and specific actions they undertake or ask others to do. Report to the class about what you find.
- 2 Research immigration in your region. Who are the new immigrants? What can you learn about where they came from, why they left, how they got to your area, and what has life been like for them since they arrived? What public services or government resources are available to them, and which are not? Try to identify any local nonprofit organizations or grassroots groups that are assisting new immigrants in meeting their basic needs for survival and in getting settled. What would effective allyship entail?

- 3 Explore the Digital Transgender Archive’s Race and Ethnicity page, starting with this page: <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/learn/raceandethnicity>. Use the archive to conduct research on trans history. How can the archive assist you in gaining insight into the fluidity of trans/nonbinary identities, and into the lives and communities of trans BIPOC beyond victimhood?
- 4 At the end of Chapter 17, Rasmussen lists activities that white male college students can do to counter the shame that contributes to direct and indirect white male violence against themselves and others. Investigate and share any examples of opportunities that are available on your campus to get involved in these kinds of activities. The activities include: (1) Forming a community with other white men focused on understanding and addressing patriarchy, whiteness, and violence. (2) Engaging in embodied practices, such as meditation and mindfulness. (3) Ongoing learning about white supremacy, patriarchy, and racial capitalism, by studying the works of BIPOC thinkers and activists. (4) Participation in groups and campaigns that challenge whiteness, patriarchy, and violence, such as bystander intervention programs and antiracist groups. (5) Supporting feminist antiracist organizing efforts to fight white supremacy, patriarchy, and white male violence. (6) Working toward an ethical practice of solidarity and a caring orientation to relationships.
- 5 Use cyberactivism to educate the public! In a small group, create and circulate a podcast, website, vlog, or social media page dedicated to educating others about race, whiteness, white supremacy, intersectionality, and anti-racism. Focus on specific topics, events, or resources that you believe need to be more broadly understood. Spread the word, connect with related efforts, and sustain your presence for at least a month.
- 6 Chapter 19 describes several different kinds of public and interactive artworks that Peggy Diggs has created. You can see more examples at her website: peggydiggs.net Using Diggs’ work as inspiration, create an interactive art project to stimulate reflection and conversations about whiteness, race, and antiracism on your campus or in your community.

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