Critical Whiteness Studies
Barbara Applebaum, School of Education, Syracuse University

https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.5
Published online: 09 June 2016

Summary
In 1903, standing at the dawn of the 20th century, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote that the color line is the defining characteristic of American society. Well into the 21st century, Du Bois’s prescience sadly still rings true. Even when a society is built on a commitment to equality, and even with the election of its first black president, the United States has been unsuccessful in bringing about an end to the rampant and violent effects of racism, as numerous acts of racial violence in the media have shown. For generations, scholars of color, among them Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Franz Fanon, have maintained that whiteness lies at the center of the problem of racism. It is only relatively recently that the critical study of whiteness has become an academic field, committed to disrupting racism by problematizing whiteness as a corrective to the traditional exclusive focus on the racialized “other.”

Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) is a growing field of scholarship whose aim is to reveal the invisible structures that produce and reproduce white supremacy and privilege. CWS presumes a certain conception of racism that is connected to white supremacy. In advancing the importance of vigilance among white people, CWS examines the meaning of white privilege and white privilege pedagogy, as well as how white privilege is connected to complicity in racism. Unless white people learn to acknowledge, rather than deny, how whites are complicit in racism, and until white people develop an awareness that critically questions the frames of truth and conceptions of the “good” through which they understand their social world, Du Bois’s insight will continue to ring true.

Keywords: whiteness, white supremacy, racism, white privilege, ignorance, denials of complicity, distancing strategies, vigilance

In 1903, standing at the dawn of the 20th century, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote that the color line is the defining characteristic of American society. Well into the 21st century, Du Bois’s prescience sadly still rings true. Even when our society is built on a commitment to equality, and even with the election of the first black President of the United States, our nation has been unsuccessful in bringing about an end to the rampant and violent effects of racism, as the numerous acts of racial violence, shown in the media, have demonstrated. For generations, scholars of color, such as Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Franz Fanon, have maintained that whiteness lies at the center of the problem of racism. Toni Morrison uses the metaphor of a fishbowl to elucidate how an invisible system of white norms is the condition for racism. If
one focuses exclusively on the water and the fish, Morrison explains, one does have to acknowledge how the fishbowl itself frames where and what happens within it. As Morrison describes it,

it is as if I had been looking at a fishbowl—the glide and flash of the golden scales . . . and then I saw the bowl, the structure that transparently (and invisibly) permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world.\(^6\)

It is only relatively recent that the critical study of whiteness has become an academic field of study, committed to disrupting racism by problematizing whiteness as a corrective to the traditional exclusive focus on the racialized “other.”

In a recent *New York Times* opinion piece, Nell Irvin Painter\(^7\) points to the reticence that white people exhibit when it comes to talking about whiteness. She suggests that our search for understanding in matters of race has been inclined to focus on the victims of racism, when the answers lie in naming the elephant in the room—the construction and maintenance of whiteness. This is the starting point for Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) both in the sense that the field makes the invisible norm of whiteness visible, and in the sense of making whiteness visible when it hides behind good intentions.

**Whiteness, Racism, and White Supremacy**

**White Invisibility**

CWS is a growing body of scholarship whose aim is to reveal the invisible structures that produce and reproduce white supremacy and privilege. Some of the foundational research in CWS can be found in historical analyses that focused on the construction of whiteness and how some European-based groups “became white” (Italians, Irish, and Jews\(^8\)) in American society.\(^9\) This scholarship demonstrated the contingent nature of whiteness by studying the fluidity and malleability of who was considered white or not throughout different eras, regions, and along other social group intersections within the United States and globally.

An important objective of CWS is to make whiteness visible, in order to disrupt white dominated systems of power. White norms permeate white dominated society, yet these norms appear to be common and value-neutral to the social groups that benefit from them. These norms create the standards by which “difference” is constructed. Scholars in the field seek to make explicit the ways in which whiteness is a determinant of social power and to demonstrate how whiteness works through its invisibility. Whiteness often goes unnoticed for those who benefit from it, but, for those who don’t, whiteness is often blatantly and painfully ubiquitous. Quoting from Hazel Carby, Richard Dyer argues that it is important to study whiteness, to “make visible what is rendered invisible when viewed as the normative state of existence”\(^10\) in order to dislodge whiteness from its position of dominance. It is impossible, then, to gain an understanding of systemic racism without understanding how whiteness works, and Dyer claims that whiteness, because it is presumed neutral and normal, can only be studied by making it “strange.”\(^11\)
Whiteness is understood to be not just about a skin color, but intimately related to the construction of race. Whiteness is dependent for its meaning on the process of negation of what is outside its borders. For instance, whiteness means nothing without the existence of blackness. The center and periphery are mutually constituent. As Ruth Frankenberg puts it, “Whiteness comes to self-name . . . simply through a triumphant ‘I am not that.’”\(^{12}\) In this sense, CWS explores the practices and policies involved in the social construction of race.

While the definition of whiteness is difficult to pin down, there is widespread agreement that whiteness is a socially constructed category that is normalized within a system of privilege.\(^{13}\) Frankenberg defines whiteness as

\[
\text{. . . a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second it is a “standpoint,” a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society. Third, “whiteness” refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed.}^{14}
\]

Cheryl Harris\(^{15}\) suggests that whiteness is best understood as a form of property rights that is systemically protected by social institutions such as law. Thus whiteness involves a culturally, socially, politically, and institutionally produced and reproduced system of institutional processes and individual practices that benefit white people while simultaneously marginalizing others. The reference to property rights highlights that white people have an investment in whiteness, which can obscure how white people, even with the best of intentions, are complicit in sustaining a racially unjust system.

By focusing on making whiteness visible, however, CWS risks the danger of recentering whiteness.\(^{16}\) Sara Ahmed argues that “any project that aims to dismantle or challenge the categories that are made invisible through privilege is bound to participate in the object of its critique.”\(^{17}\) This is not to imply that the project of critical whiteness studies should be suspended but rather that we must be vigilant about the ways in which projects of critique can be complicit with what they attempt to disrupt. This critical vigilance, I contend, is prominent in much of the CWS scholarship, as will become evident. Yet understanding the dangers of making whiteness visible does not lead to hopelessness. Instead, the significance of CWS is that the field has produced more nuanced and complex analyses of whiteness as a result of such vigilance. This type of critical self-reflection, I would argue, is one of the most important lessons to be learned from CWS, and I will frame this article with such vigilance in mind.

**White Supremacy and the System of Privilege**

A key concept often referred to in CWS is “white supremacy.” bell hooks writes that the word “racism” ceased to be a useful term for her, and she began to use the term white supremacy as a descriptor for the reality of the everyday experiences of people of color.\(^{18}\) White supremacy, in this sense, does not specifically refer to groups like the Klu Klux Klan, who proudly parade their overt belief in the supremacy of whiteness, and the racial hatred and prejudice that accompanies this belief (but which in no is way meant to minimize the danger
of these groups). Instead the term has been appropriated to refer to the continual pattern of widespread, everyday practices and policies that are made invisible through normalization and thus are often taken for granted as just what is.

Charles Mills\textsuperscript{19} points out that white supremacy is to race what patriarchy is to gender. White supremacy, as a form of oppression, is to be understood, following Iris Marion Young,\textsuperscript{20} as a structural concept that is reproduced by the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society. The outcome of white supremacy has deleterious impact on the lives of the racially marginalized, while simultaneously affording benefits or privileges for white subjects as a collective. David Gillborn defines white supremacy as “a comprehensive condition whereby the interests and perceptions of white subjects are continually placed centre stage and assumed as ‘normal’.”\textsuperscript{21} White supremacy, therefore, presumes a conception of racism as a system of privilege that white people, often unwittingly, perpetuate in what seems to white people as common, unremarkable, and sometimes even seemingly “good” practices and in the implementation of what seems to be racially neutral policies.

The concept of white supremacy facilitates our understanding of the ways in which these practices and policies may not seem deliberately racist and may even stem from “good” intentions, yet are what contribute to the maintenance of an unjust system. As bell hooks emphasizes,

> When liberal whites fail to understand how they can and/or do embody white supremacist values and beliefs, even though they may not embrace racism as prejudice or domination, . . . they cannot recognize the ways their actions support and affirm the very structure of racist domination and oppression that they wish to see eradicated.\textsuperscript{22}

It is important to distinguish white supremacy from racism understood as primarily about prejudice and mean-spirited acts of discrimination. Racism is often considered exclusively about having a set of prejudiced beliefs or stereotypes or negative attitudes towards racial groups. One problem with understanding racism as only about prejudice involves the fact that one can be complicit in the perpetuation of racism even if one does not believe one is prejudiced. Most significantly, one can be complicit even if one has good intentions.\textsuperscript{23}

A classic illustration of how the reproduction of white supremacy can be cloaked behind the veneer of good intentions can be found in appeals to colorblindness or the idea that ignoring or overlooking racial difference will promote racial justice. A recent MTV survey\textsuperscript{24} of young people between the ages of 14 and 24 indicates that, although the respondents say that in comparison to previous generations they are more tolerant and have a deeper commitment to equality, a large majority of these “millennials” profess colorblindness and agree with the statement that if we just ignore skin color, racism will disappear. The ease and prevalence of white appeals to colorblindness was evidenced in the response of democratic presidential candidate Martin O’Malley to the rallying cry, “Black Lives Matter.” When demonstrators demanded that the former governor of Maryland address the issue of race, criminal justice, and police brutality, O’Malley’s retort was “Black lives matter. White lives matter. All lives matter.”\textsuperscript{25}
Such apparently well-intended gestures to universal humanity, using colorblind discourse, ignore the norm of whiteness and make it difficult to acknowledge institutional racism and one’s part in it. The problem of the rejoinder “All lives matter” is not that it is untrue. Rather, the problem is with the quickness and the ease with which one turns to such universal formulations. Colorblindness is assumed to stem from “good” intentions, yet such discursive moves allow one to “miss the fact that black people have not yet been included in the idea of ‘all lives.’”

A related problem with limiting the concept of racism to individual thought and behavior is the focus on the individual rather than the deeper structural source of individual racist practices. If one does not acknowledge racism as a system of privilege composed of an interlocking web of institutional, cultural, and individual practices, racism can be reduced to just the bad behavior on the part of particular individuals who need to be removed or rehabilitated, while the system within which these individuals are embedded can remain unchallenged. Refusing to see police brutality against black youth as part of a system, for example, results in the focus being exclusively on the individual officer (or officers) and whether or not racist intent motivated the particular action. This diverts attention from the systemic problem, which can remain substantially intact.

If white supremacy is a system of privilege, does that entail that all white people are racist because they benefit from a racist system? Beverly Daniel Tatum explains when she hears her white students ask her this question, she wonders if she is being asked if all white people are bad. Feminist philosophers have been acutely aware of this problem. Marilyn Frye queries, “Does being white make it impossible for me to be a good person?” Similarly, Linda Martin Alcoff asks

> What is it to acknowledge one’s whiteness? . . . [is] it to acknowledge that one is inherently tied to structures of domination and oppression, that one is irrevocably on the wrong side?

The point, however, is not whether one is a good or a bad person. This concern just re-centers white interests and needs over the needs and concerns of people of color. Rather the relevant questions should be what are the privileged ways in which one is implicated in the maintenance of white supremacy, often unwittingly? How does benefitting from the system make one complicit in the perpetuation of white supremacy? One way to address these questions involves a critical analysis of the concept of white privilege. The recent critiques of white privilege pedagogy offer an excellent entry point to examine these questions. This scholarship explicitly studies how white people reproduce and maintain racist practices even when, and especially when, they believe that what they are doing is morally good.

Much research has studied how white norms are systematically enforced in schools. Topics include issues of whiteness and curriculum, whiteness and equity issues in higher education, educational policy, and the forms that institutional racism takes within the context of education. For example, white students and teachers often fail to consider the ways in which congruence with the culture of power contributes to academic achievement. As a teacher/educator, I have found that the critical whiteness theory is particularly important for white educators. The scholarship on whiteness in schooling is huge and continues to grow. Therefore, I will focus my review on one dimension of this scholarship that attempts to
analyze and teach white teachers to understand the ways in which well-intentioned white people perpetuate and recreate white supremacy, often without knowing that they do so. Even when white teachers are committed to diversity and multiculturalism, if they do not deconstruct their own investments in whiteness, they will not be able to understand how their good intentions might be detrimental to their students of color.

White Privilege: A Critical Analysis

The concept of privilege has been helpful in moving discussions of racism away from prejudice by exposing the unearned benefits and advantages that accrue to dominant group members solely by virtue of occupying a dominant social position and often regardless of one’s attitude, volition, or belief. Currently, the leading approach in institutions of higher education across North America to teaching white students about their role in systemic racial injustice is white privilege pedagogy, which refers to approaches to anti-racist education that aim to find ways to encourage white students to acknowledge their individual white privilege.

Although other scholars have published books and essays on white privilege, Peggy McIntosh’s seminal essay, “White Privilege and Male Privilege,” is the most common resource used in white privilege pedagogy. In fact, Lensmire et al. explain that the prevalence of this essay in teacher education evidences that it has become a synecdoche, or stand-in, for all of anti-racist work. Peggy McIntosh’s influential essay lists the myriad social, political, and cultural advantages of being white in the United States that white people can take for granted. Among those privileges she lists are these: being assured that one can live anywhere one can afford to live; not being assumed to speak as a representative of one’s group; and the ability to find bandages that are “flesh” tone, and actually match one’s skin color. Each of her illustrations points to the existence of white privilege. Her metaphor of white privilege as an “invisible knapsack of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious” is often cited in courses that teach about systemic injustice.

The concept of white privilege also endeavors to trouble the right to perceive one’s own experience as common and “normal.” McIntosh writes that she recognized a pattern connecting the different manifestations of white privilege that she experienced in her life; this resulted in a silent assumption that this world “is my own turf, and I was among those who could control the turf . . . I could think of myself as belonging in major ways, and of making social systems work for me.” The assumption that white experience is normal has the effect of marking those whose experiences are different as deviant.

McIntosh maintains that, without acknowledging the “colossal unseen dimensions” and the “silences and denials” surrounding white privilege, white people cannot contribute to the eradication of racism and, in fact, contribute to its maintenance. Whiteness benefits all those ascribed to whiteness (although it does not benefit all whites in the same way), and it is white people’s investment in whiteness that can obscure how white people, even with the best of intentions, are implicated in sustaining a racially unjust system. White privilege is not experienced similarly by all people ascribed whiteness. What privilege looks like for a “broke
white person” is different from what privilege looks like for someone like Donald Trump. Nevertheless, even if experienced differently, all white people in some way benefit from whiteness.

Although white privilege pedagogy has the advantage of exposing white students to the unrecognized benefits of whiteness, white privilege pedagogy has a number of serious shortcomings that require examination. In general, the approach leads to a very simplistic analysis of privilege. I will focus on McIntosh’s article in order to highlight the limits of white privilege pedagogy.

Focus on the Individual

The idea of privilege based on the knapsack metaphor, and the list of privileges that McIntosh offers, pulls towards individualism that obscures the relational dimension of privilege. One may acknowledge that having access to homes is a positive benefit that is denied to others but may still not have to realize that, when people of color are denied equal access to housing, this means there are more options for whites. As Beverly Tatum explains,

If a person of color is the victim of housing discrimination, the apartment that would otherwise have been rented to that person of color is still available for a White person.  

This is one illustration of the ways in which white privilege pedagogy, with its metaphor of a knapsack, portrays white people as independent social agents rather than interdependent upon the constitution of racialization of others through unjust social and historical processes.

Cynthia Kaufman provides another illustration of how the relational element of white privilege is hidden by the knapsack metaphor. That white people are not being followed around in stores, for example, is not only about the being able to walk through a store freely. Privilege also consists in the presumption of white moral integrity, which is, in the larger systemic picture, contingent upon the co-construction of black as morally suspect. Kaufman succinctly explains,

The image of the black thief helps stabilize the image of the average good citizen (who of course is coded as white). When I walk into a store and the clerks look at me with respect and assume that I am not going to steal anything, the trust that I receive is at least partially built upon the foundation of my distance from the image of the savage. When an African American walks into the store, that unconscious material comes into play in the opposite way.

White privilege protects and supports white moral standing and this protective shield depends on there being an “abject other” that constitutes white as “good.”

A final example of the importance of emphasizing the relational element of privilege is found in Kathy Hytten and John Warren’s excellent study of white students learning about their whiteness. Phillip, a white student in Hytten and Warren’s study, recounts his efforts to have the confederate flag removed from the mascot of his former high school. Phillip’s black high
school friend joined him in these efforts. Yet, while both he and his partner were equally active in this undertaking, people responded to and interpreted their endeavors very differently. Although Phillip was regarded as an individual who was engaged in laudable ethical work, his friend was considered as “another underprivileged black kid spending more time rebelling against authority than taking care of his grades, getting a job, and so on.”

Phillip notes that, prior to learning about white privilege, he was aware that his friend was being treated in racist ways. In this situation, however, following his acknowledgment of white privilege, he learns that there were not only active, visible forms of oppression manifested in this incident, but invisible ones as well. He offers, “prior to this reflection, I had failed to note that the racism in this experience came not just in the guise of individual acts of negative regard to my friend, but also in widespread and unthinking positive reaction to me.” Whites, thus, benefit from white privilege in a very deep way that is not unrelated to the marginalization of people of color. As Zeus Leonardo remarks, all whites are responsible for white dominance, since their “very being depends on it.”

**Simplistic Solutions That Let Those Who Benefit From Privilege Off the Hook**

We have seen that, when white privilege is understood through the knapsack metaphor, attention is drawn to the individual, and the relational element of privilege can be ignored. The knapsack metaphor also tends to lead to simplistic and problematic solutions. First of all, the knapsack metaphor leads one to believe that the knapsack can be taken off or disowned at will, and that there is a non-racial subject that will emerge, if only one can divest oneself of white privilege. The knapsack metaphor implies that privilege is separate from the constitution of white being and encourages the belief that, once divested from privilege, the white student is transformed to non-racist. The metaphor of the knapsack does not bring to attention the ways in which power works through white bodies, as the story about Phillip intimates. Nor does it encourage white students to consider how their white discourses protect the system of injustice from contestation, as will be discussed in later sections.

Another naïve solution involves the claim often made by white students that the remedy for racial injustice is to ensure that all people have the privileges that white people enjoy. Laudable as this response might seem, it functions to relieve white students of having to consider their complicity in the perpetuation of white supremacy. Such solutions protect white students from having to consider the unconscious habits and character traits (which will be addressed shortly in greater detail) that are manifestations of privileged experience and that have harmful consequences for people of color. It is the laudability of the desire for and pronouncement that all should have privilege that, in fact, allows whites to escape considering the ways in which they continue to perpetuate white supremacy through repetitive habits and practices that reproduce whiteness and constitute “others” as marginal. It should come as no surprise that white students often assume that the remedy for having privilege is “giving it up” as if, like a knapsack, one can take up and take off systemic privilege at will. Researchers have demonstrated not only that privilege is bestowed, despite attempts by white people to denounce it, but also that privilege is deeply embedded in white ways of being.
Finally and related to the point about individualism, white privilege pedagogy promotes a focus on white confessionals. If white privilege is invisible to white people, and if the goal is to raise consciousness of the privileges one benefits from, then the focus on personal awareness often leads to confessions. As Timothy Lensmire et al. contend, white privilege pedagogy begins but also ends with the demand for confession. In other words, the confession becomes the entire anti-racist project itself. While in some sense it is a good thing that white people own up to previously unacknowledged privileges, unfortunately, such confessions contribute little to dismantling the system of oppression that is the condition of privilege. More significantly, Lensmire et al. contend that, by confessing, white students are able to avoid owning up to their role in the perpetuation of systemic racism.

Confessions are extremely problematic in anti-racist work. Cynthia Levine-Rasky argues

> if the formula “education is transformation” drives a pedagogy inspired by liberalism, the mere hearing of white privilege may perform an educative function, emancipating whites from participation in systems of domination. When learning about white privilege fulfills this redemptive function, the exercise becomes a confessional.  

Confessions of privilege, according to Levine-Rasky, serve as a “redemptive outlet” through which white students are able to perceive themselves as “good whites” in comparison to those “bad whites” who do not acknowledge privilege. As “good whites,” they can disregard the ways in which their seemingly good practices may be contributing to the maintenance of systemic injustice. The assumption is “that confessing to the inner working of whiteness in their lives would redeem them from their complicity with racism.” Levine-Rasky contends that there is a danger, that by acknowledging their privilege white students may assume that they have “arrived,” and that they do not have to worry anymore about how they are implicated in systemic racial injustice.

Even when McIntosh’s essay gestures towards systemic racial injustice, the text pulls overwhelmingly to a concept of privilege that emphasizes the individual and encourages solutions to overcoming racial injustice that highlight personal consciousness-raising. Not only is there no move to take action against racial injustice; by focusing on personal awareness, confession, and renouncing privilege, white privilege pedagogy gives white students a way to be comfortable with their whiteness by restoring whites’ sense of moral goodness. White students are not only permitted but also encouraged to remain preoccupied with their own needs. White privilege pedagogy does not assist whites in giving attention to the needs and interests of racialized others, nor to understanding what the marginalized are trying to explain about the ways in which their experiences are affected by white supremacy.

Thus, even when white people acknowledge their complicity, their white confessionals or public self-disclosures can serve to re-inscribe privilege and offer redemption from complicity. Paraphrasing Foucault, who equates confession with “whatever it is most difficult to tell,” Robyn Wescott argues that making one’s whiteness visible is like confession, and that revealing what is “most difficult to tell” is rather like asking for penance. When white privilege pedagogy allows white students to evade considering their complicity in racism,
whiteness is perpetuated and reproduced. One way to rectify this problem is to highlight the link between privileges that benefit white people and how such benefits sustain systems of oppression, a topic to which I will now turn.

The System of Oppression Behind Privilege

In his essay, “The Color of Supremacy: Beyond the Discourse of White Privilege,” Zeus Leonardo acknowledges the importance of studying white privilege, but he insists that we must do so in ways that do not mask the system of oppression that creates and maintains privilege. White privilege must be studied not from a personal perspective, but from the perspective of white supremacy, because it is “the condition of white supremacy that makes white privilege possible.”

Leonardo points out how white privilege pedagogy, with its emphasis on invisibility, often implies that privilege occurs without the participation of the subject of domination. It portrays an image in which domination occurs behind the backs of whites, instead of on the backs of people of color. Leonardo takes issue with the underlying passivity implied in the conceptualization of white privilege, and, pointing to McIntosh’s essay, he shows how “white racist teachings, life lessons, and values are depicted as actions done or passed on to white subjects.”

Leonardo draws attention to the passivity assumed in white privilege pedagogy in his response to a seemingly innocent comment made by James Joseph Scheurich, a white educational researcher who has published many articles on whiteness and his own struggles to become aware of it. Scheurich equated white privilege to walking down the street and having money put in one’s pocket without one’s knowledge. Leonardo explains that this description of white privilege minimizes the active role that whites play in maintaining the system of racial oppression. “If money is being placed in white pockets,” Leonardo wants to know, “who places it there?”

Leonardo concedes that the description of white privilege that Scheurich works with has been of some value, because it encapsulates unearned privilege and white people’s obliviousness about it. He insists, however, that it is also dangerous because it

\[\text{downplay(s) the active role of whites who take resources from people of color all over the world, appropriate their labor, and construct policies that deny minorities full participation in society.}\]

White people benefit not only from having money put in their pockets, Leonardo argues, they also take resources from people of color. Failing to pay attention these processes perpetuates white innocence. To be critical of white supremacy, as Leonardo contends, involves being less concerned about “the issue of unearned advantages, of the state of being dominant, and more around the direct processes that secure domination and the privileges associated with it.”

It is not that privilege should not be addressed, but we must do so with the type of complexity that highlights how people who benefit from privilege are accountable for the reproduction of racial injustice. One of the ways that whites actively perpetuate systemic injustice is when they are privileged in ways that give them permission to be ignorant, oblivious, arrogant, and destructive. Such negative white privilege is often manifested in discursive practices that deny complicity and that profess white innocence. To ignore such privilege is to disregard the
injustice that good white people are perpetrating now, in the present, and continually. White privilege pedagogy, which focuses more on positive white privilege, ironically works to protect white innocence rather than challenge white supremacy. In the next section, I will focus on the ways in which dominance is sustained through negative white privilege or the practices of “average, tolerant people, of lovers of diversity, and of believers in justice.”

Negative White Privilege and Complicity

Privilege, as Sonia Kruks explains, is “a benefit that redounds to the members of one group through the oppression of those of another.” We must begin to focus on the discursive strategies that secure systemic dominance, because dominance is not maintained without agents.

White students who read McIntosh’s article often come away understanding privilege as a sort of material gain and even psychological advantage. The term “privilege,” which has a positive connotation, invites this impression. But what white students often fail to comprehend, although McIntosh clearly mentions this in her essay, is how white privilege also involves protecting a type of ignorance, arrogance, and denial. To explicate how white people are conferred dominance, McIntosh introduces two different manifestations of white privilege, which she refers to as positive and negative privileges. Positive forms of privilege are benefits that all should share. For example, neighbors should be decent toward one another. Negative forms of privilege, however, are benefits that no one should have because they reinforce dominant/subordinate power differences. McIntosh offers the privilege to be arrogant, ignorant, and dismissive of others, as illustrations of negative privilege. About one type of negative white privilege she explains, “We were given the cultural permission not to hear voices of people of other races, or to tepid cultural tolerance for hearing or acting on such voices . . .”

Understanding negative privilege underscores that privilege is not only a matter of passively receiving benefits but also consists in ways of being in the world. Sara Ahmed discusses the phenomenology of whiteness, which she illustrates by pointing to the tendency of white people to always be the center often without realizing it. Adrienne Rich makes a similar observation when she describes what she calls “white solipsism” or the penchant of whites “to speak, imagine, and think as if whiteness described the world.” Shannon Sullivan exemplifies white privilege as unconscious habits of whiteness when she highlights “white ontological expansiveness” or the tendency for white people “to act and think as if all spaces—whether geographical, psychical, linguistic, economic, spiritual, bodily, or otherwise—are or should be available to them to move in and out of as they wish.” These are all systemically privileged ways of being in the world that sustain dominance and are alluded to by McIntosh when she introduces the notion of negative privileges that none should have. Negative white privilege functions to authorize white people to be ignorant, oblivious, and arrogant, often without realizing that that is what they are doing. In what follows, I summarize the scholarship on systemic white ignorance and white denials of complicity. Both are forms of negative, white privilege that work hand-in-hand to protect the system of white supremacy from contestation.
Systemic White Ignorance as Meta-Ignorance

Privilege... gives whites a way to not know that does not even fully recognize the extent to which they do not know that race matters or that their agency is closely connected with their status.\(^{63}\)

Cris Mayo’s provocative but discerning quote highlights the connection between privilege and ignorance. White ignorance is systemic—there exists an epistemology of ignorance\(^ {64}\) that functions to keep privilege invisible to those who benefit from it. Charles Mills draws on the concept of an epistemology of ignorance to investigate the question: “How are white people able to consistently do the wrong thing while thinking that they are doing the right thing?”\(^ {65}\) White ignorance, Mills contends, is part of an epistemology of ignorance, “a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will, in general, be unable to understand the world they themselves have made.”\(^ {66}\) Similarly, Linda Alcoff cautions that we should not perceive white ignorance as merely an individual’s bad epistemic practice, but rather as “a substantive epistemic practice itself.”\(^ {67}\)

In his oft-cited book, The Racial Contract, Mills argues that a Racial Contract underwrites the modern Social Contract. The Racial Contract is a covert agreement or set of meta-agreements between white people to create and maintain a subperson class of non-whites that solidifies the boundaries of white and personhood. The purpose of the Racial Contract is to “secure the privileges and advantages of the full white citizens and maintain the subordination of nonwhites.”\(^ {68}\) To achieve this purpose, there is a need to perpetuate ignorance and to misinterpret the world as it really is. The Racial Contract is an agreement to not know and an assurance that this will count as a true version of reality by those who benefit from the account. That such ignorance is socially sanctioned is of extreme importance. Not only is such a lack of knowledge an inverted epistemology that misinterprets the social world, but it is also officially sanctioned.\(^ {69}\) White ignorance, thus, will feel like knowledge to those who benefit from the system because it is supported by the social system as knowledge.

Eve Sedgwick\(^ {70}\) expands our understanding of systemic ignorance by pointing out that ignorance is not a passive lacking, as the term “ignorance” implies. Ignorance is actively maintained. Building on Sedgwick’s insight and applying it to color ignorance (or an unwillingness to notice race), Cris Mayo contends that such ignoring is not a “lack of knowledge” but “a particular kind of knowledge”\(^ {71}\) that does things, that promotes white innocence while conserving non-white marginality. We get a better sense of what Mayo means when Mills notes that such ignorance affects not only what one believes. It also influences the questions one believes are important to ask and the problems one believes are valuable to pursue. Mills points to the privilege of not having to ask certain questions when he notes that the Racial Contract involves

\[\ldots\] simply a failure to ask certain questions, taking for granted as a status quo and baseline the existing color-coded configurations of wealth, poverty, property, and opportunities, the pretense that formal, juridical equality is sufficient to remedy inequities created on a foundation of several hundred years of racial privilege, and that foundation is a transgression of the terms of the social contract.\(^ {72}\)
Therefore, white ignorance not only influences how one understands the social world but also is a type of knowledge that actively protects systemic racial injustice from challenge.

White ignorance itself not only is a type of white privilege (who has the privilege to be ignorant?) but also works to safeguard privilege. Mills underscores that it is white group interest that is a “central causal factor in generating and sustaining white ignorance.”\(^7^3\) Such ignorance functions to mystify the consequences of such unjust systems, so that those who benefit from the system do not have to consider their complicity in perpetuating it. Members of the dominant group, for instance, have a vested interest in not knowing. Linda Alcoff\(^7^4\) emphasizes not only that white people have less interest in understanding social injustice than those who are victimized by such systems, but also that white people have a positive interest in remaining ignorant. One of the types of vested interests that such ignorance serves is the sustaining of one’s moral self-image.

Expanding on Mills’ concept of white ignorance, Jose Medina\(^7^5\) introduces the term “meta-ignorance” to name a tenacious form of active ignorance that operates at a meta-level and involves an ignorance of one’s ignorance. To understand the ignorance of the privileged, Medina claims, we need to study not only the role of not knowing and not needing to know but, more significantly, needing not to know. The latter, according to Medina, is of particular significance because it not only fuels an active yet often unconscious epistemic obliviousness that persists “no matter what the evidence may be,”\(^7^6\) but it also functions to protect privilege through systemically supported mechanisms of defense.

The concept of meta-ignorance helps us to better understand how well intended white students, who consider themselves anti-racist or non-racist, can be so resistant to learning about their complicity in social injustice. When ignorance masquerades as socially sanctioned “knowledge” that determines what is plausible or intelligible, such ignorance becomes difficult to dislodge. White meta-ignorance promotes a refusal to consider how one might be complicit in the reproduction of white supremacy. White ignorance is sustained through discursive strategies of denial that prevent white people from hearing what people of color are trying to tell them. In the next section, we will explore how discursive strategies of denial underscore that “. . . the problem of Whiteness is not a problem of evil, but a problem of good!”\(^7^7\)

**White Denials of Complicity: The Dangers of Good Intentions**

A burgeoning body of research has developed around white denials of complicity. Such denials involve discursive ways in which white people reject any role in systemic racism through proclaiming their white innocence. Those who do not experience racism will more likely profess its non-existence or diminish its effects and, consequently, also relieve themselves of having to consider how they might be complicit in perpetuating a system that to them does not exist.

Peg O’Connor\(^7^8\) offers an illustration of such white denial that may be familiar to those who teach courses that attempt to challenge systemic social injustice. O’Connor describes the response of her white student who resists engaging with the possibility that race and the ability to secure a mortgage are related. When shown statistics that support how people of color are refused a mortgage to a significant degree more than white people, the white
student consistently provides explanations for the refusal to “prove” that the bank’s refusal has nothing to do with the race of the person. O’Connor acknowledges the possibility that in isolated cases one of these explanations might be valid, but the point is how discursive practices are so easily and so quickly brought forth. The possibility that race and getting a mortgage might be related is given little credibility. No matter what one produces to try to engage this student with the possibility that financial history and race are systemically related, the student continues to refuse even to consider that race might be a factor. The student may even come back with the allegation that black people are always “playing the race card.”

Tim Wise examines the “playing the race card” accusation, and he calls into question why anyone would want to play this card, especially since the card is often ineffective. Even if some people of color do play the “race card,” Wise compellingly contends that white people play the white denial card even more frequently. White people have always doubted people of color when they claim that racism exists. This is why playing the race card is usually futile. White people, Wise notes, often continue to deny the racial aspects of incidents even when they are compelled to recognize the strong evidence that is produced before them. Wise concludes that “whatever ‘card’ claims of racism may prove to be for the black and brown, the denial card is far away the trump, and whites play it regularly.”

Educational researchers, especially researchers who study how white students engage in social justice education, have given serious attention to such denials. At the present time, there are a plethora of studies that have explored how white students employ discursive maneuvers to resist knowledge of their complicity. Such resistance is expressed in multifarious ways, from emotional oppositional outbursts in class to passivity and silence. Kim Case and Annette Hemmings refer to “distancing strategies” to describe how white women preservice teachers avoid being positioned as racist or implicated in systemic oppression. They use these strategies to avoid acknowledging responsibility. White students often resist this knowledge because the only message they can hear is “you are to blame.”

Hytten and Warren’s ethnography of the rhetorical moves their white students performed in courses that attempt to teach about systemic oppression and privilege (already mentioned in the section “Focus on the Individual”) offers many examples of such tactics. Among the types of discursive strategies that Hytten and Warren discuss are: remaining silent, evading questions, resorting to the rhetoric of ignoring color, focusing on progress, victim blaming, and focusing on culture rather than race. Hytten and Warren emphasize that these discursive moves are culturally sanctioned discourses of evasion that “were not original—that is, they are already available, already common forms of asserting dominance.” That these practices are socially sanctioned is intimated when Peggy McIntosh refers to privilege as “permission to escape,” and when Alice McIntyre refers to “privileged choice.” In other words, the mere fact that they can question the existence of systemic oppression is a function of their privilege to choose to ignore discussions of systemic oppression or not. Such discursive strategies of denial are an “implicit way of resisting critical engagements with whiteness.” These rhetorical strategies work to obstruct engagement so that deliberations about one’s complicity in systemic oppression can be avoided.
Along similar lines, McIntyre coined the phrase “white talk” to name discourse that functions to “insulate White people from examining their/our individual and collective role(s) in the perpetuation of racism.” White students often perform white talk in classroom discussions. To explain why they are silent in cross-racial dialogues, for instance, white students often report “I am silent because I don’t want to offend.” This discursive strategy functions to authorize students’ disengagement and to protect their comfort via the pronouncement of their alleged consideration of others.

Proclamations of “I don’t see color” in its various manifestations are also a form of white talk. Although color-ignorance is ostensibly grounded in good intentions, its effect is not only that white people can avoid “seeing” racism, but it also establishes one’s moral, non-racist credentials and so permits one to escape considering the ways in which one might be implicated in sustaining white supremacy. As previously mentioned, the statement “All lives matter” is true and stems from good intentions. But to respond to the Black Lives Matter Movement with a statement that all lives matter has the effect not only of minimizing black experience but also of establishing the one who utters this statement as innocent of complicity with violence against black youth.

Denials of complicity that hide behind good intentions are not restricted to the classroom. Sarita Srivastava highlights how white feminists who, as feminists, perceive themselves to be committed to egalitarian principles and, thus, find it incomprehensible that they, who are themselves so “progressive,” can be accused of racism. Srivastava recounts how women of color raised concerns about racism at a Toronto shelter for battered women. June Callwood, a prominent white Canadian philanthropist and chair of the board, reproached the women of color for complaining about racism when they had received so much aid from the shelter. Since benevolence is considered “good,” the innocence of the one who bestows benevolence is secured, and any implication one might have in perpetuating social injustice can be ignored. The reminder of the good white women who help women of color brought any discussion about the racism existing at the hostel to an end. Audrey Thompson similarly argues that a preoccupation with being “good” can block challenges to systemic oppression. According to Thompson, whites “must interrogate the very ways of being good . . ., for the moral framing that gives whites credit for being anti-racist is parasitic on the racism that it is meant to challenge.”

Inconclusion

Throughout this article, I hope it has become evident that CWS has developed under the belief that we must be continually vigilant about the ways that progressive projects, even the progressive project of CWS, can be complicit with what they attempt to disrupt. Even good intentions must be interrogated for their implications in the maintenance of white supremacy. This means that CWS will continue to evolve, and that is why this section is titled “inconclusion.”

Vigilance has been advanced by many scholars who study systemic racial injustice. Mayo promotes “perpetual vigilance” as a “necessary way to live one’s life.” George Yancy advocates vigilance for the white anti-racist because whiteness “is deferred by the sheer complexity of the fact that one is never self-transparent, that one is ensconced within
structural and material power racial hierarchies.”

Whiteness continuously “ensnares” and “ambushes” white people so that whiteness finds ways to hide “even as one attempts honest efforts to resist it.”

Being an anti-racist white, therefore, is a project that always requires another step and does not end in a white person’s having “arrived” in the form of an idyllic anti-racist.

This should not lead to hopelessness, Yancy insists, but rather “one ought to exercise vigilance.”

Vigilance, according to Yancy, involves the “continuous effort on the part of whites to forge new ways of seeing, knowing, and being.”

Ahmed offers sage advice when she cautions white people to “stay implicated in what they critique.”

The vigilance that is necessary for social justice education, and especially for teaching white students about their complicity in racism, therefore, must be a vigilance about whites’ own goodness, not only a vigilance about their negative beliefs about “others.” It must be a vigilance that involves the attitude that Dreama Moon and Lisa Flores point to when they contend that

while we cannot avoid taking an action step, neither can we become so committed to our particular vision for change that we fail to see the possibility that every strategy for change can also become oppressive.

Rather than resting assured that one is fighting racism, white people must continually be open to interrogating the consequences of one’s ethical and political practice on both the self and the world. When CWS helps to encourage this type of vigilance, then the field has the potential to contribute to the disruption of racial injustice.

Notes

12. R. Frankenberg, (1996), When we are capable of stopping, we can begin to see. In B. Thompson & S. Tyagi, (Eds.), (1996), Names we call home: Autobiography on racial identity (New York: Routledge), 7.


35. McIntosh, White privilege and male privilege, 291.

36. Ibid., 295.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.


40. Tatum, *Why are all the black kids sitting together?,* 9.


44. Ibid.


48. Levine-Rasky, Framing whiteness, 276.

49. Ibid., 277.


52. Leonardo, The color of supremacy, 137.
53. Ibid., 144.
54. Ibid., 138.
55. Ibid., 138, emphasis added.
56. Ibid., 137.
57. Ibid., 144.


69. Ibid., 18.


73. C. Mills, White Ignorance, in *Race and epistemologies of ignorance*, 34.

74. Alcoff, Epistemologies of ignorance, 47.


82. Hytten & Warren, Engaging whiteness, 66.

83. McIntosh, White privilege and male privilege, 295–296.


86. McIntyre, Making meaning of whiteness, 45.

87. Case & Hemmings, Distancing, 614.


94. Yancy, Whiteness as ambush, 240.

95. Ibid., xxii.

96. Ibid.

97. Ibid., 231.

99. Moon & Flores, Antiracism and the abolition of whiteness, 111.

Related Articles

Qualitative Methods and the Study of Identity and Education