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Whiteness: Some Critical Perspectives

Foreword: Whiteness as Metaprivilege

Barbara J. Flagg*

Whiteness is a social location of power, privilege, and prestige. It is a “an invisible package of unearned assets.”¹ As an epistemological stance, it sometimes is an exercise in denial. Whiteness is an identity, a culture, and an often colonizing way of life that is largely invisible to Whites, though rarely to people of color. Whiteness also carries the authority within the larger culture it dominates to set the terms on which every aspect of race is discussed and understood. Whiteness thus is many-faceted and pervasive. I believe it lies at the center of the problem of race in this society.

The papers that make up this symposium reflect the diversity of the topic. One finds here discussions of subjects ranging from the disposition of human remains to dreaming to standardized testing in schools; from patterns of informal affiliation in Senegal to self-presentation practices of individuals and of universities to September 11. Nevertheless, these seemingly dissimilar topics are linked by the strands of Whiteness as metaprivilege that run throughout.

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1. Peggy McIntosh, *White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies* (unpublished paper).

By “metaprivilege” I mean the ability of Whiteness to define the conceptual terrain on which race is constructed, deployed, and interrogated. Whiteness sets the terms on which racial identity is constructed. Whiteness generates a distinct cultural narrative, controls the racial distribution of opportunities and resources, and frames the ways in which that distribution is interpreted. Finally, Whiteness holds sway over the very terms in which its own ascendancy is understood and might be challenged.

This essay takes as given a proposition now well-established by geneticists: there is no such thing as biological race.² Race is wholly socially constructed; the precise contours of racial differentiation and meaning vary from culture to culture and within a given culture over time.³ In the United States, Whiteness is a largely transparent⁴ construction that constitutes the dominant site of power and privilege. The metaprivileges of Whiteness are those aspects of this construction that function as stabilizing agents; they ensure the maintenance of White supremacy.

WHITENESS AND RACIAL IDENTITY

The first metaprivilege of Whiteness is the ability to control the social construction of racial identity. Whiteness has the authority not only to define who is and is not White, but also to delineate the boundaries of non-White racial identities. The long reach of Whiteness’ privilege even extends to the performance of non-White identities within non-White racial groups.

Whiteness constructs itself. John Powell explores the resilient, adaptively persistent character of Whiteness. Beginning with the observation that racial boundaries are so firmly constructed that we rarely go beyond them even in our dreams, he traces the history of the delineation of Whiteness and the “racial other,” emphasizing the ways in which Whiteness continually realigns and sustains itself.

2. See Ian F. Haney López, *The Social Construction of Race: Some Observations on Illusion, Fabrication, and Choice*, 29 HARV. C.R.-C.L. REV. 1, 11–16 (1994).

3. *Id.* at 27–37.

4. For discussions of “transparency,” see Barbara J. Flagg, “*Was Blind, But Now I See*”: *White Race Consciousness and the Requirement of Discriminatory Intent*, 91 MICH. L. REV. 953 (1993); RUTH FRANKENBERG, *DISPLACING WHITENESS* (1997).

powell concludes with the suggestion that “It is clear that the solution to whiteness will not arise within a worldview or a self view based on separation.”⁵

Judy Scales-Trent also explores the boundaries that Whiteness erects around itself. She describes the practice of “cousinage” in Senegal, which, by constructing fictive blood relationships, creates communities and defuses potential conflict among otherwise distinct ethnic groups. This practice treats as related those who “really” are not. Scales-Trent compares it to the situation in America. When White America had to decide how to define children with both Black and White parents, it decided that they would be Black . . . not White, and not both. Thus, as she notes hauntingly, “white America . . . made a very different political decision: the decision to create warfare between the black and white groups by making believe that real families do not exist.”⁶

Whiteness also determines who is Black, Latino, Asian, or Native. Rebecca Tsosie asks “who owns Native identity?” and explores the role the concept of indigeneity plays in contestations over Native ownership of political and cultural rights, land, ancestral human remains, and genetic resources.⁷ Her analyses reveal that “indigeneity” itself frequently is co-opted by those with discursive authority, a group that rarely if ever includes Native people themselves. Thus, Tsosie remarks, “The term ‘indigenous’ has become a trope to argue for a broader entitlement to rights among various groups in society.”⁸ “What is missing in all of this is an ethic of respect for Native values, identities and narratives, and the core concepts within Native epistemologies.”⁹

Beyond racial categories themselves, Whiteness deeply impacts the content of non-White racial identities. John Calmore describes the demands Whiteness makes on him, a Black man. Understanding

5. john a. powell, *Dreaming of a Self Beyond Whiteness and Isolation*, 18 WASH. U. J.L. & POL’Y 13, 44–45 (2005).

6. Judy Scales-Trent, *Make-Believe Families and Whiteness*, 18 WASH. U. J.L. & POL’Y 47, 53 (2005).

7. Rebecca Tsosie, *The New Challenge to Native Identity: An Essay on “Indigeneity” and “Whiteness,”* 18 WASH. U. J.L. & POL’Y 55 (2005).

8. *Id.* at 94.

9. *Id.* at 95.

Black identity as performance, Calmore notes that “white performance was [and is] the *quid pro quo* for white privilege.”¹⁰ Though “few people of color can insulate themselves from [the] influence [of dominant Whiteness],”¹¹ Calmore advocates a transgressive performance: “people of color must not reinforce white privilege through our attachment to it.”¹²

Gerald Torres explores the ways in which Chicana feminists challenge Chicano machismo as a reinscription of racism.¹³ In this analysis, resistance to male supremacy within the Chicana community is theorized, as a strategic matter, as the same as resistance to White supremacy. From this perspective, Whiteness infiltrates the construction of the Chicano male within the Chicano community; it therefore must be interrogated.

WHITENESS AND RESOURCES

A second metaprivilege of Whiteness enables it to set the terms on which valuable resources are allocated. Helen Moore explores the problem of “testing while Black”: Whiteness controls “who tests, what is tested, and how tests are administered and interpreted.”¹⁴ Standardized tests are well known to be flawed: they produce mutable scores, reflect cultural biases, and are invalid markers of learning; moreover, test taking itself is a culturally specific process.¹⁵ The “invalid science of assessment” currently in wide use inscribes Whiteness as the standard of educational success; it is embedded in and reinforced by and through the No Child Left Behind legislation.¹⁶

10. John O. Calmore, *Whiteness as Audition and Blackness as Performance: Status Protest from the Margin*, 18 WASH. U. J.L. & POL’Y 99, 102 (2005).

11. *Id.* at 106.

12. *Id.* at 127.

13. Gerald Torres & Katie Pace, *Understanding Patriarchy as an Expression of Whiteness: Insights From the Chicana Movement*, 18 WASH. U. J.L. & POL’Y 129 (2005).

14. Helen A. Moore, *Testing Whiteness: No Child or No School Left Behind?*, 18 WASH. U. J.L. & POL’Y 173, 184 (2005).

15. *Id.*

16. *Id.*

WHITENESS AND CULTURAL NARRATIVE

Whiteness generates uniquely White narratives that become definitive cultural stories. David Roediger examines self-representation practices of “historically white” colleges and universities that appropriate images of persons of color to advance White objectives.¹⁷ At the University of Wisconsin, for example, an image of a Black student was superimposed on an otherwise all-White scene, in an attempt to portray racial diversity. Here the authoritative narrative of self-representation obscures “the exclusionary past and present of such institutions.”¹⁸ Thus “diversity” itself serves the hidden interests of Whiteness.

Tom Ross explores the Whiteness of the cultural narrative concerning September 11, 2001, as it has developed in the presence of a declining White population and against the backdrop of racially-laden nationalist narratives associated with John Harlan and Theodore Roosevelt. He observes that “the essential face of the victims was White,” and notes that in consequence “the suffering of those outside the narrative of 9/11 has receded even further from the public consciousness.”¹⁹ The story of September 11—the attack on “us”—is one that reflects “quintessentially White” anxieties and uncertainties.

WHITENESS AND PRIVILEGE

Stephanie Wildman interrogates the persistence and resilience of White privilege.²⁰ In addition to material forces that both constitute and shore up White privilege, Wildman identifies four sociocultural factors that help account for the continued existence of White privilege. They include the ability of Whites to control the cultural discourse of racial equality—colorblindness rhetoric and “individual-

17. David Roediger, *What's Wrong with These Pictures?: Race, Narratives of Admission, and the Liberal Self-Representations of Historically White Colleges and Universities*, 18 WASH. U. J.L. & POL'Y 203 (2005).

18. *Id.* at 203.

19. Thomas Ross, *Whiteness After 9/11*, 18 WASH. U. J.L. & POL'Y 223, 236–37 (2005).

20. Stephanie M. Wildman, *The Persistence of White Privilege*, 18 WASH. U. J.L. & POL'Y 245 (2005).

group sleight of hand”—as well as Whites’ socialization to, and insistence upon, social preeminence.²¹ Whites operate within a “comfort zone” that renders Whiteness “normal.”²² And when displaced, Whites often employ strategies that reinstate Whiteness at the center.²³ Here the metaprivilege of Whiteness resides in the “absence of awareness of White privilege” that Wildman notes.²⁴ Whiteness does not acknowledge either its own privilege or the material and sociocultural mechanisms by which that privilege is protected. White privilege itself becomes invisible.

WHITENESS AS METAPRIVILEGE

Whiteness is not only an identity, but the power to name and shape identities. Whiteness not only has control of valuable resources, but has the ability to limit access to those resources to those who reflect its own image. Whiteness not only constitutes a distinct perspective on events, but has the authority to generate definitive cultural narratives. And Whiteness not only is a set of unearned privileges, but the capacity to disguise those privileges behind structures of silence, obsfucation, and denial.

Whiteness creates, and exists within, a conceptual framework in which human agency is presented as absolute, the individual is the constitutive unit of agency, and White antiracist work is understood to be optional. Seemingly creating a space for meaningful transformation of White race consciousness, these axioms of Whiteness constitute core metaprivileges of Whiteness, and they provide a final layer of defense in the maintenance of White supremacy.

21. *Id.*

22. *Id.*

23. *Id.*

24. *Id.*

WHITENESS PRESENTS HUMAN AGENCY AS ABSOLUTE

In one sense, this is so. Human action is not *fully* determined by conditions external to the actor.²⁵ However, agency effectuates itself within sets of conditions that constrain, often severely, even if they do not entirely control. Thus agency is a complex amalgam of possibilities and constraints, material and ideological conditions and consequences. Agency is a fluid phenomenon, conforming like hot glass to forms impressed upon it by societal structures. In its congealed form, agency is at once determined by and determinative of dominance and subordination.

WHITENESS POSITS THE INDIVIDUAL AS THE UNIT OF HUMAN AGENCY

So understood, the individual is not responsible for what he or she has not brought into being, and thus systemic dominance and subordination are beyond the scope of (individual) moral obligation. However, the notion of responsibility envisioned by White privilege is quite a shallow one. As Joyce Trebilcot has explained, one can adopt a larger notion of responsibility, exemplified by the phrase “to take responsibility for”:

Notice first that to take responsibility for a state of affairs is not to claim responsibility for having caused it. So, for example, if I take responsibility for cleaning up the kitchen I am not thereby admitting to any role in creating the mess; the state of the kitchen may be the consequence of actions quite independent of me. . . . In taking responsibility a woman chooses to make a commitment about a specific state of affairs.²⁶

25. As Sartre put it, “No factual state whatever it may be (the political and economic structure of society, the psychological ‘state,’ etc.) is capable by itself of motivating any act whatsoever. For an act is a projection of the for-itself toward what is not, and what is can in no way determine by itself what is not.” JOHN-PAUL SARTRE, *BEING AND NOTHINGNESS: AN ESSAY ON PHENOMENOLOGICAL ONTOLOGY* 435 (Hazel E. Barnes trans. 1956).

26. JOYCE TREBILCOT, *TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR SEXUALITY* 2 (1983).

Similarly, Whites can take responsibility for the systemic maintenance of White supremacy.

WHITENESS SEES WHITE ANTIRACIST WORK AS OPTIONAL

If the individual human agent is absolutely free to act or not, and to choose the forms of action that are to be undertaken, no particular act is inevitable. In this sense, White people can elect whether or not to engage in action that contributes to the dismantling of White supremacy.

However, because choice is socially structured, meanings attributed to action by any particular actor are not dispositive, nor are interpretations ascribed by White privilege. The social significance of choices made by Whites is socially given, so that neither the material or ideological consequences of chosen acts are fully determined by Whiteness. Whites do not absolutely control the *character* of antiracist work.

THE AXIOMS OF WHITENESS CONTRIBUTE TO THE MAINTENANCE OF WHITE SUPREMACY

The conception of individualized responsibility adopted by Whiteness enables Whites to evade engagement with systemic structures of racial injustice. First, Whites can claim not to be responsible for systemic oppression. For example, the rhetoric of “White innocence” that is featured prominently in the debate over affirmative action presupposes that there is no individual responsibility for the societal conditions and normative choices that exclude all but a disproportionately small number of people of color from institutions such as contracting and higher education.

Moreover, even once White privilege is recognized and addressed, systemic subordination seems out of reach; it is too pervasive and vast to permit meaningful confrontation at the individual level. Even thoughtful discussions of ways in which White privilege might be dismantled tend to emphasize individual action, which renders such proposals ineffective other than at the symbolic level.

Because in White privilege White antiracist work is understood as optional, one can be a “good,” even “nonracist” White person while enjoying all the benefits of complicity in White supremacy. For

example, while the majority of Whites “overwhelmingly endorse civil rights principles,” fewer than half actually support fair housing laws.²⁷ Similar results can be found for questions of desegregating schools and affirmative action at the college and university level.²⁸

Dismantling White privilege at the meta level requires Whites to reject its constituent axioms. In their place, antiracist Whites must adopt and employ conceptions of agency that recognize the free but contingent nature of human choice. Whites must find ways to take collective responsibility for racial subordination. And, perhaps most centrally, Whites must come to understand that either one engages in meaningful antiracist action, or one supports White supremacy; there is no middle ground. Once the metaprivileges of Whiteness are exposed and challenged, it becomes apparent that dismantling White privilege requires the adoption and effective enforcement of antiracist legal regimes.

HUMAN CHOICE, EVEN UNDER CONDITIONS OF WHITE PRIVILEGE, IS SIMULTANEOUSLY CONTINGENT AND FREE

In this society, the opportunities White people have to make unconstrained decisions are exponentially greater than those available to people of color. Even so, White decisionmaking is subject to external forces, including the social structures that name and define race, and the material conditions under which race plays itself out. Wishing away racial injustice, as in the “I don’t think of you as Black” strategy, is not a meaningful antiracist option. Nor is a colorblind legal regime an effective method of moving in the direction of racial justice. Antiracist Whites must move beyond the culturally-inscribed mindset of White omnipotence, and accept the proposition that antiracist work has to begin with a thorough understanding of, and engagement with, things as they really are.

27. MICHAEL K. BROWN ET AL., WHITE-WASHING RACE: THE MYTH OF A COLOR-BLIND SOCIETY 42 (2003).

28. *Id.* at 43.

WHITES MUST TAKE COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY FOR RACIAL
SUBORDINATION

Taking responsibility for a state of affairs is acting to alter it, without necessarily having had any role in bringing it about. To take responsibility today for racial subordination is to act in the present in an effective manner to change it. It is irrelevant whether a particular White person, or any specific group of White people, has or has not had any part in the construction of White supremacy as it now exists.

Taking collective responsibility is necessary because racism is systemic. Isolated individual action sometimes can ameliorate the localized effects of racial subordination. At the same time, some individual action is wholly ineffective, such as the “new abolitionist” approach, which seeks to “abolish Whiteness.”²⁹ Systemic subordination must be addressed at the level at which it occurs—at the level of society as a whole.

EITHER ONE ENGAGES IN MEANINGFUL ANTIRACIST ACTION, OR
ONE IS COMPLICIT IN THE MAINTENANCE OF WHITE SUPREMACY

The notion of a nonracist (but not antiracist) White—one who “is not racist” but in fact does nothing to dismantle, and enjoys all the benefits of, White supremacy—is dear to the hearts of liberal Whites, and central to the self-perpetuating ideology of White privilege. However, passive White complicity in structures of subordination today is a leading mechanism for the maintenance of White supremacy. Thus material change in the direction of racial justice requires an end to such complicity. Moreover, though White privilege controls the “dominant” (read White) social meaning of White conduct, it does not control its meaning in the eyes of people of color.³⁰ Even at the ideological level, “nonracist” White passivity fails to meaningfully challenge White supremacy.

29. “The key to solving the social problems of our age is to abolish the white race, which means no more and no less than abolishing the privileges of the white skin.” *What We Believe*, RACE TRAITOR: JOURNAL OF THE NEW ABOLITIONISM, available at <http://racetraitor.org> (last visited Apr. 18, 2005).

30. See generally BLACK ON WHITE: BLACK WRITERS ON WHAT IT MEANS TO BE WHITE (David R. Roediger ed., 1998).

DISMANTLING WHITE PRIVILEGE REQUIRES THE ADOPTION AND
EFFECTIVE ENFORCEMENT OF ANTISUBORDINATIONIST LEGAL
REGIMES

Once the choice has been made not to be racist, passivity is no longer an option; one has to undertake meaningful antiracist activity. The notion that dismantling White privilege is optional is itself one of the privileges of Whiteness that must be discarded.

The aspect of White privilege that sees only meanings ascribed by Whites also must be set aside, in favor of the realization that the meaning of action is given by social reality, which requires antiracist action to be directed at systemic social oppression. Individual and/or local action is not adequate to challenge either the material or the ideological reality of White supremacy.

Because it provides systematic constraint, law can be an appropriate vehicle for antiracist engagement, to the extent that it embodies antisubordinationist values and objectives, and to the extent that it receives meaningful implementation. However, laws that are not antisubordinationist in purpose and effect do not constitute antiracist activity, even when they are supported by “antiracist” rhetoric. These laws, such as the “colorblindness” interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment, in fact are artifacts of White privilege.³¹ Their existence provides aid and comfort to White supremacy. Thoroughly dismantling White privilege, including its metaprivileges, means that for Whites who work in the law—lawyers, legal academics, judges—the sole antiracist option is the support, adoption, and enforcement of antisubordinationist legal regimes.

31. Wildman, *supra* note 20, at 254.