

There Are No Sheep in Post-Structuralism

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Progressive white scholars often proceed as if “incorporating race” and culture into our work automatically destabilized the whiteness of our intellectual and pedagogical practices.¹ Diligently, we add brown and black references to our publications, assign readings by scholars of color, and weave material about race into our lectures. Many of our attempts to decenter whiteness, however, effectively reinstall white authority. Additive adjustments underscore the foundational white assumptions that organized our research questions or syllabus in the first place — as when we begin by defining what counts as feminist or queer pedagogy, and then blend in race themes to ensure our inclusiveness. Even when race and culture are central to our work, chances are that those of us who are white — and some who are not — appeal to white-referenced ways of naming and framing race and culture. As Wendy Kozol asks, “what do we mean by ‘race’?”² What do we mean by “culture”?

In preparing my race narratives course, I tried to start from “race,” yet I never questioned my ability to name race. Thinking about race and culture in the ways I knew how to, I sought out narratives that decentered whiteness, complicated the recognizability of race and culture, and restoried race in troubling ways. I included materials from moral and political philosophy; indigenous, gay, Latina/o, and African American perspectives; anthropology; fiction; critical race theory; feminist theory; and whiteness theory.³ It never occurred to me to include anything about sheep. When sheep finally made their way into the fold, they arrived by way of my colleague Norma González’s syllabus. My class was discussing the race-based assumptions in a white, post-structuralist account of two white teachers working in Cree and Inuit communities in Canada, when a student asked, “Where are the sheep?” Reading about Navajos for her other class, Deb Marrott told us, she had noticed that sheep kept coming up.⁴ There was a pause as we pondered the absence of sheep in the account before us. “There are no sheep in post-structuralism,” I said.

This essay will sometimes appear to be about sheep, but I know nothing about sheep. What it is about is how theories regarding race, culture, gender, and sexuality tend to start from what we already recognize as race, culture, gender, and sexuality — whether “ours” or “theirs.” As Aldon Nielsen observes, teachers’ attempts to introduce white students to racial others enable them to “discover” the otherness they already expect to find.⁵ Having identified in advance what counts as race, culture, sexuality, and gender, we then look for the materials that will help us understand that way of being in the world. But the ways we know how to know narrow the stories that can be told. What counts as a coming-out story, for example, is highly ritualized, assuming a dramatic before-and-after, a binary between courageous “out” speaker and former closeted self, and a necessary focus on suffering.⁶

In a course on queer theory, Kim Hackford-Peer elected to read Jackie Blount’s *Fit to Teach*. Reporting on the book, Kim mentioned how interested she had been

to read about Abraham Lincoln's "tender, abiding friendship" with another man, a friendship with "a 'streak of lavender.'" But, she asked, "Now that I know this about Abraham Lincoln, what do I really know, and where does that get me?" Kim's question about the status of knowledge claims regarding sexuality unsettles our ability to teach about sexuality. What is it we know when we "know" that Eleanor Roosevelt was lesbian or bisexual, or that Nixon was straight? Judith Butler puts it this way: "What or who is it that is 'out,' made manifest and fully disclosed, when and if I reveal myself as lesbian? What is it that is now known, anything?"⁸

Whether we invoke social categories or educational practices, we are likely to assume that the "what" of what we are talking about is within our grasp when we invoke. Metaphorically, however, we may not be seeing the sheep — if, in our own lives, something does not play a recognized organizing role, we are unlikely to see that it needs to be theorized. For Navajos on the reservation, sheep historically have been central to livelihood, relationships, and education. Left Handed, Son of Old Man Hat, remembers his father telling him, "'The herd is money. It gives you clothing and different kinds of food.... Everything comes from the sheep.'"⁹

SHEEP IN THE LIVES OF NAVAJOS

Several indigenous North American nations have historic ties to sheep, including Hopis and Pueblos. Like Hopis, however, many have shifted "their forms of livestock from sheep to cattle, which do not require constant care."¹⁰ Cattle, although costly, demand "less continuous care and bring a much higher sales price, vital items in the emerging wage economy."¹¹ In contrast with other tribes, many Navajos have maintained an important economic and cultural connection to sheep. Historically, "the subsistence residential unit is the fundamental unit of Navajo social organization. It is organized around a sheep herd, a customary land use area, a head mother, and sometimes agricultural fields — all of which are called mother."¹² Although sheep are no longer as central to life on the Navajo reservation as they were, they continue to play a role in defining relationships, identity, and place. For example, "traditional home sites that are determined by sheep and cattle grazing rights are maintained by a Land Permit Office."¹³

For Navajos on the reservation, sheep may mean commitment, duty, obligation, and relationship.¹⁴ Having sheep may confer status and respect. At Rough Rock, Gary Witherspoon found that "the status of people within the residence group and the number of sheep they had in the herd corresponded quite closely, though there was plenty of evidence that this is changing rapidly and that it was probably more true in the past."¹⁵ Certainly before the 1930s, "livestock constituted the primary currency for paying ritual specialists, and herding the chief context for child socialization."¹⁶ Because sheep are central to the Navajo economy, they are a vital "means of incorporating children into the life and communal economy of the residence group."¹⁷ It is through sheep that cooperative human relations are organized. Although sheep are individually owned, they "are herded and cared for in common," and almost everyone has "sheep in the common herd." Children from about the age of five "share in the tasks of the herding."¹⁸ Each child receives "livestock as the nucleus of a future herd," and once able to "share in the responsibility of herding,

the boy or girl receives additional lambs and kids as an earned right.”¹⁹ Through caring for the herd and sharing in profit from it, “the child learns the meaning, necessity, and nature of group or communal life.” The experience of herding sheep thus is crucial to forming the child’s “social personality.”²⁰

Beginning in 1933, the U.S. government seized or slaughtered “over half the sheep and goats on the reservation.”²¹ Although the federal livestock reduction program was intended to prevent overgrazing on Navajo land, Teresa McCarty argues that it also was intended to prevent erosion from causing a silt runoff that would affect the Hoover Dam. The program “meant an abrupt change in land use for people who had moved more or less freely” on the land.²² Whereas to the government it was obvious that the herds had to be reduced by whatever means were most expedient, to most Navajos the program was an outrage. To Eli Gorman, as to many Navajos, John Collier’s claim that overgrazing had caused the erosion was a lie: “it was evident that lack of rainfall had caused the bad condition.” Gorman recalls that Collier’s friends among the Diné “kept all of their sheep,” while “piles and piles of dead sheep and goats belonging to ‘little’ people who opposed the reduction could be seen in the washes and ditches.” Sheep and goats were slaughtered or taken to corrals where they “just starved to death.”²³ Navajos saw “the government’s allowing thousands of sheep to die in holding pens or en route to the railroads” as particularly inhumane.²⁴

The loss of huge numbers of sheep had a profound economic impact on the Navajo Nation. It also undermined vital forms of social organization. Marsha Weisiger argues that, in “their haste to respond to an environmental crisis, Collier and his conservationists unwittingly made matters worse, ecologically and culturally.” Ignoring Navajo knowledge of the land and their animals, Collier and his fellow reformers “refused to listen to Navajos’ advice in implementing the livestock reduction program. Significantly, they disregarded women.” Indeed, like earlier Bureau of Indian Affairs policymakers, Collier and E. R. Fryer “sought to transform Navajo societies by stripping women of their power” as economic producers and community decision-makers.²⁵ The reformers also ignored the specific value that sheep had for Navajos. Whereas the reformers measured sheep in “sheep units,” to Navajos sheep were “our children, our life, and our food.”²⁶ Sheep were indispensable to family life. The Navajos’ “main complaint about livestock reduction was, ‘Who will raise the children when you take away the sheep?’”²⁷

A 1968 study found that Navajos who were asked “what a Navajo should think about most...nearly always [said,] ‘the sheep.’”²⁸ As Hasbah Charley put it, “I think of them as my parents....They are the ones that keep me going day after day.”²⁹ Dorothy Begay explained, “Once we awoke in the morning, the first thing that came to our minds was herding sheep, taking out the sheep, what are the sheep going to eat. Once we had our breakfast...there was always someone who was going to tend the sheep. You didn’t wait for someone else to do it.”³⁰ Although Navajo culture deplores coercion, “anyone who fails to care for their herd properly will not be respected by the community, and will often be singled out for sharp criticism.” In addition to the economic and moral dimensions of responsible caretaking, there are

bonds of affection. “When Navajos are away from home for extended periods of time they often comment in letters about how much they miss the sheep and ask about how the sheep are doing.”³¹ When federal officers would come to take their sheep, says Agnes Begay, ““We used to cry, my sister and I — when they took the sheep, we used to cry.””³²

The significance of sheep for Navajos cannot be grasped by plugging sheep into a preexisting theory of difference. When progressive scholars incorporate cultural and racial diversity into our accounts of experience-based education, educational caring, and education for social justice, we miss the importance of *starting* from the sheep. The sheep are not mere placeholders for “specific cultural values to be inserted here.” They represent a distinctive way of organizing relationships and understanding human development. Substituting “cattle” or “fish” for other cultures will not yield parallel educational values.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “RACE”?

Focusing on questions of race and culture helps progressive educators identify how seemingly universal or neutral claims may be organized by a difference that is then suppressed. Post-structuralist analyses demonstrate that preferred values are produced in part by designating a foil: for every leader, there must be followers; for any appeal to normalcy, there must be deviations from the norm. To imagine safety, we must imagine danger. Often, the foil for preferred values involves racial difference. Resisting any fixed definition of race, post-structuralism instead focuses on the play of meanings between norm and racial other. Such approaches are “meant to refuse the distinction between ideas and practices or text and world that the culture concept too readily encourages.”³⁴ They show how what we have learned to recognize as race or culture is produced by what race and culture supposedly are *not* — namely, the normal, neutral, default condition.

Yet because post-structuralism does not focus on cultural specifics but describes the field against which any meaning is rendered intelligible, it offers, in Butler’s words, an “account of the suppression of difference [that] can only proceed through a suppression of difference of which it cannot take account.” It sets itself “above the fray of cultural specificities and historical formations,” so as to be “able to describe, without recourse to culture or history, what ‘every’ and ‘any’ postulation of identity might entail.”³⁵ As Wanda Pillow argues, post-structuralist theories seldom start from race as the center (perhaps with Michel Foucault “used ‘on the side’”). Instead, they apply preexisting principles to something called “race.”³⁶ Yet race actually refers to quite different sets of values; for some groups, race invokes civil rights, while for others it may invoke language or sovereignty. Substituting the term culture is not a solution, for while culture appears less essentializing, it “retains some of the tendencies to freeze difference possessed by concepts like race.”³³

Although post-structural whiteness theories seem to start from race, they usually start from generalizations about race rather than from the relationships, temporal patterns, and sense of place and language specific to a people or a community. In its concreteness, Deb’s question, “Where are the sheep?” helps us think about what is missing from our account of cross-race indigenous education —

missing because we do not know how to value it. In the context of Cree or Inuit culture, the question is misleading, as sheep's centrality to Navajo culture does not imply a similar value in other cultures, but as a provocation, the question reminds us to ask what outsider teachers need to understand about Cree and Inuit cultures. In the article to which Deb was responding, questions of race did not begin from a standpoint steeped in the particulars of Cree or Inuit culture. Rather, they were framed in terms of white identity formation rooted in "the workings of desire" around and against "an unconstructed alterity" (*WSM*, 272). Although I focus on how that particular article framed race in relation to education, the analysis applies equally to my own work and that of other theorists who offer discursive analyses of how whiteness organizes our pedagogies and curricula. Most of us have not sought out articles about sheep or snowmobiles as a way to understand race, culture, nationhood, and identity.

Drawing on Butler and Roger Simon, Helen Harper argues that the identity of liberal and radical white women teachers is organized by desires for and fears of an otherness that must be suppressed if white feminine privilege is to be protected. Given white women's considerable presence in schools, she asks how "white feminine teacher identity" might "be rearticulated to promote what Roger Simon calls a 'pedagogy of possibility'" (*WSM*, 272). The two subject positions she believes are most seductive for progressive white women teachers are what she calls "Lady Bountiful," an identity in which selflessness and caring unite with cultural authority to position the teacher as the civilizing "white mother-teacher in the service of the Empire" (*WSM*, 274), and "Janey Canuck," or "white lady traveler," which positions the teacher as bold adventurer and "intrepid...female reporter to the Empire" (*WSM*, 275). Both identities allow white women teachers to use racial otherness as a way to define themselves as helper, tourist, or insider in an exotic culture. Insisting on and exploiting the otherness of indigenous peoples, they perpetuate a colonizing relationship. They also contribute to a transient teaching population, since the teachers tend to see themselves as eventually (usually sooner than later) returning to their own culture.

To rearticulate white female teacher identity, Harper suggests that radical teacher education programs offer "critical antiracist education," address the historical and "discursive construction of racial identities" together with "postmodern notions of identity, displacement, and home," and help students examine and rework the identities "of Lady Bountiful and the white lady traveler in the text of the lives of teachers and students" (*WSM*, 286). All of these solutions assume that critical realignments of discursive values will serve as the engine of a new possibility. The people, places, animals, tools, politics, natural resources, and languages that make up the Cree and Inuit cultures where the women teach are mere backdrops against which the women prove themselves insufficiently critical and self-aware.

One teacher, Nell, suggests that she has adjusted well to Inuit culture: "When they killed the whale outside my house, Kay said, 'Here, you want some?'" Whereas in her first year she might have felt compelled to eat the raw whale meat to prove that she could pass the "test for the white girl," Nell saw herself as having made progress

because she was able to say, “No thanks.” The “desire to be accepted, to be seen as different from less involved, less aware white teachers obviously placed tremendous pressure on her,” Harper remarks (*WSM*, 281). Kay and the whale are the only eruptions of the particular into Harper’s discussion of the white woman and the Inuits. There are no seals, no sled dogs, no snowmobiles. I couldn’t say what in Inuit culture might have the importance of sheep for Navajos, but the framing of the article tells me that this would not be considered a significant question. Understanding race in reference to one’s own fears and desires, apparently, readies white educators to teach responsibly in “fly-in First Nations Communities” (*WSM*, 270).

CONCLUSION

An absence of sheep is not distinctive to post-structuralism. Presumably there are no sheep in critical race theory, pragmatism, queer theory, existentialism, theories of caring, or radical feminism. I would be surprised if there were sheep in Marxism, phenomenology, or cultural studies. Even in anthropology, where one does find sheep, they may not appear in the index or the table of contents. For the most part, sheep, fish, and birds are not central to frameworks of analysis in the way that language or kinship is. Lisa Heldke has pointed out that prevailing “hierarchies of knowing” preclude the possibility of recognizing that either small-town or rural living “requires any *desirable* forms of knowledge.”³⁷

The ways in which I have invoked sheep are far from conveying the “ethnographies of the particular” that Lila Abu-Lughod views as necessary in “writing against culture.”³⁸ I cannot talk about sheep in the multiple, layered ways that might convey a feel for time, ritual, and changing relationships. Indeed, I risked fixing both sheep and Navajos in time. Donna Deyhle tells me that sheep now may be herded from the back of a pickup truck. By 1977 Deescheeny Nez Tracy lamented that the sheep songs (Blessing Way songs) were being forgotten.³⁹ It might appear encouraging that, in the annual Miss Navajo contest, one of the skills required of contestants is the ability to butcher a sheep.⁴⁰ Even in honoring the significance of sheep for traditional Navajo culture, however, the attempt to institutionalize a physical relation to sheep indicates a value that may be slipping away. As Sunni Dooley, the 1982–83 Miss Navajo acknowledges, “I think what’s scaring a lot of these contestants is the sheep butchering part of it, also the [need to speak] Navajo.”⁴¹

Rather than tracing changing Navajo relationships that vary across time and place, I have written in generalities intended to offer philosophical lessons. Asking “where are the sheep?” nevertheless may have transformative possibilities for progressive philosophers because it asks where race and culture live — what their dailiness is. Antiracist Anglos commonly assume that we know what culture and race mean, but all too often we ignore how they are rooted in particular kinds of relationships, a particular sense of place, and a distinctive temporality. Primarily, what we mean by race or culture is alterity — difference from ourselves. We then harness that idea of race or culture to the particularities with which we wish to animate it. Race thus comes to mean the problem of prejudice (which we are against and know better than), while culture means the promise of diversity (which we celebrate in our syllabi with philosophy’s version of “Cinderellas from around the

world”). Sometimes the question of race is taken to point to the need for change in ourselves — a need for more humility, say, or more self-reflexivity. But rarely is it taken to mean that we might need to think and feel our way into other rhythms, other relationships, other ways of going out and going forward.

At a Midwest-Society of Women in Philosophy meeting a few years ago, María Lugones told a largely white audience that she understood that we were trying to study race, trying to think differently. “But,” she asked, “have you given up your sense of spatiality, your sense of temporality?” I knew for sure that I hadn’t, because I had no idea what she meant. I still am not really sure. But I suspect that living with sheep, waiting for sheep, and waking up to sheep requires a different temporality than my own, and that understanding those rhythms and those constancies would give me a distinctly different understanding of race than one grounded in a theory that could not start from sheep.

1. The phrase is from Wendy Kozol, “Can Feminist Pedagogy Find a Safe Space? White Defensiveness and the Politics of Silence,” *Concerns* 26, nos. 1–2 (1999), 14. Whereas Kozol appears to use “incorporating” in a straightforward sense, I wish to underscore its problematic character. Such phrasing suggests that we can keep our curriculum more or less as it is, but add a race element.

2. *Ibid.*, 14.

3. Although scholars of color played a key role in the syllabus, the course decentered whiteness only by fits and starts. The electronic syllabus can be found at <http://www.pauahtun.org/6620.S04.html>.

4. Because my quotations from students were written down later, they may not be verbatim. The class was discussing Helen Harper’s “When the Big Snow Melts: White Women Teaching in Canada’s North,” in *Working Through Whiteness: International Perspectives*, ed. Cynthia Levine-Rasky (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 269–88. This work will be cited as *WSM* in the text for all subsequent references. Although Navajo practices cannot be assumed to apply to Cree and Inuit cultures, Deb’s question about sheep prompts us to ask what we are not seeing. In the discussion that follows, my focus is on Navajos’ relation to sheep, but a number of other tribes in the Southwest also have had historic relations with sheep.

5. Aldon L. Nielsen, *Writing Between the Lines: Race and Intertextuality* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 20.

6. Especially powerful discussions of these points can be found in Marilyn Frye, “Review of *The Coming Out Stories*,” *Sinister Wisdom* 14 (1980): 97–8; and Eric Rofes, “Martyr-Target-Victim: Interrogating Narratives of Persecution and Suffering Among Queer Youth,” in *Youth and Sexualities: Pleasure, Subversion, and Insubordination In and Out of Schools*, ed. Mary Louise Rasmussen, Eric Rofes, and Susan Talburt (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 41–62.

7. The section on Lincoln’s romantic friendship is in Jackie M. Blount, *Fit to Teach: Same-Sex Desire, Gender, and School Work in the Twentieth Century* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 35.

8. Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 15.

9. Left Handed (1938), quoted in Walter Dyk, *Son of Old Man Hat: A Navaho Autobiography* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), 103.

10. Edward A. Kennard, “Hopi Economy and Subsistence,” in *Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 9, ed. William C. Sturtevant (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1979), 559.

11. Michael B. Stanislawski, “Hopi-Tewa,” in *Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 9, ed. Sturtevant, 595.

12. Gary Witherspoon, *Navajo Kinship and Marriage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 71–2.

13. Donna Deyhle, "Navajo Youth and Anglo Racism: Cultural Integrity and Resistance," *Harvard Educational Review* 65, no. 3 (1995), 424.
14. Because I have only found limited current information about sheep among Navajos, I am not certain how widespread these longstanding patterns continue to be. Deborah House, who does not say much about sheep, says that her "research has given her the impression that a significant segment of the Navajo population... is unfamiliar with and does not adhere to even the most basic traditional values, beliefs, and traditions." See *Language Shift among the Navajos: Identity Politics and Cultural Continuity* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002), 17. By contrast, Teresa L. McCarty's *A Place to Be Navajo: Rough Rock and the Struggle for Self-Determination in Indigenous Schooling* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002) underscores the central role of sheep in Navajo culture.
15. Gary Witherspoon, "Sheep in Navajo Culture and Social Organization," *American Anthropologist* 75, no. 5 (1973), 1443.
16. McCarty, *Place to Be Navajo*, 58.
17. Gary Witherspoon, "Navajo Social Organization," in *Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 10, ed. Sturtevant (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1983), 529.
18. Gary Witherspoon, *Navajo Kinship and Marriage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 72.
19. Mary Shepardson and Blodwen Hammond, "Navajo Inheritance Patterns: Random or Regular?" *Ethnology* 5, no. 1 (1966), 90.
20. Witherspoon, "Navajo Social Organization," 529.
21. McCarty, *Place to Be Navajo*, 57.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Ruth Roessel and Broderick H. Johnson, comps., *Navajo Livestock Reduction: A National Disgrace* (Chinle, Ariz.: Navajo Community College Press, 1974), 26. For an account sympathetic to the government, see Lynn R. Bailey, *If You Take My Sheep: The Evolution and Conflicts of Navajo Pastoralism, 1630–1868* (Pasadena, Calif.: Westernlore, 1980).
24. James F. Downs, *Animal Husbandry in Navaho Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), 93.
25. Marsha L. Weisiger, "Gendered Injustice: Navajo Livestock Reduction in the New Deal Era," *Western Historical Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2007), 441.
26. *Ibid.*, 453.
27. Witherspoon, "Navajo Social Organization," 529.
28. Witherspoon, "Sheep in Navajo Culture," 1441. He is quoting from Werner and Begishe's unpublished 1968 study.
29. McCarty, *Place to Be Navajo*, 68. The interview is from 1996.
30. Quoted in Fred Bia and T.L. McCarty, with Regina Lynch, *Of Mother Earth and Father Sky: A Photographic Study of Navajo Culture* (Flagstaff, Ariz.: Navajo Curriculum Center and Northland Press, 1983), 12.
31. Witherspoon, "Sheep in Navajo Culture," 1442. Witherspoon identifies "coercion" as "deplored" on 1445.
32. Quoted in McCarty, *Place to Be Navajo*, 57.
33. Lila Abu-Lughod, "Writing Against Culture," in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, ed. Richard G. Fox (Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research Press, 1991), 144.
34. *Ibid.*, 147.
35. Judith Butler, "Collected and Fractured: Response to *Identities*," in *Identities*, ed. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 441.
36. Wanda Pillow, "'Why Foucault?' Thinking about Race, Colonial Desire, and Postmodern Responsibility" (paper presented at the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, April 1999).

37. Lisa Heldke, "Farming Made Her Stupid," *Hypatia* 21, no. 3 (2006), 151 and 152 (emphasis in original).
38. Abu-Lughod, "Writing Against Culture," 149.
39. Broderick H. Johnson, ed., "Deescheeny Nez Tracy," in *Stories of Traditional Life and Culture, by Twenty-two Navajo Men and Women* (Tsaile, Navajo Nation, Ariz.: Navajo Community College Press, 1977), 160.
40. *Miss Navajo*, film, directed by Billy Luther (Hollywood, Calif.: National Geographic, 2007).
41. Felicia Fonseca, "A Pageant Where You Butcher Sheep," *Reznet*, November, 2007, <http://www.reznetnews.org/article/feature-article/%2526%2523039%3B-pageant-where-you-butcher-sheep%2526%2523039%3B>.

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