

White Double Consciousness and the Logic of the Broken Plate

Shilpi Sinha

Adelphi University

In their respective articles, Uzma Jamil and Shaireen Rasheed incisively illustrate how the epistemic authority of whiteness, which is built on willful ignorance, is reinforced and reproduced under the guise of liberal policies and practices within universities and the larger public sphere. Jamil draws out the post racial whiteness of universities, which indicates the obfuscation of the systemic nature of racism that is continuously reinforced through academic language such as “objectivity or “impartiality.” Her critique is grounded through the terms of the racial contract as delineated by Charles W. Mills and Sara Ahmed’s elucidation of the interaction and orientation of white bodies in spaces to constitute institutional whiteness, where the university is purposefully and intentionally “designed to be used by those who already fit into it.”¹ Correlatively, Rasheed highlights the push across the United States to ban discussions of critical race theory in classrooms by calling upon the language of “objectivity,” “neutrality,” “free speech” and “civility,” thereby normalizing, reinforcing and reproducing the epistemological hegemony of whiteness grounded in the disembodied political subject.² To enable the interrogation of such an epistemological lens, Rasheed draws upon W. E. B. Du Bois and George Yancy to highlight the need for a pedagogy of white double consciousness that can dismantle structural and institutional oppression and the policies that undergird it.³

In this response paper, I reflect on how white epistemic authority, which delineates the terms of “correct” knowledge and to whom it

is to be attributed and accessible, is continuously re-animated through material conditions and processes. Further, I highlight how the pedagogical task of nurturing white double consciousness must go beyond the terms of critical consciousness raising once we understand how white double consciousness functions differently from Black or non-dominant double consciousness. More specifically, utilizing insights gained through W.E.B. Du Bois's reflection on the 1917 East St. Louis riots, and critical phenomenology's conception of the habituated historico-racial body schema, I will suggest that the interrogation of the epistemological lens of whiteness is itself dependent upon material conditions.⁴

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN WHITE DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS AND BLACK DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS

As Dana Francisco Miranda has highlighted, double consciousness and its perceptual parameters function differently for whites than for non-dominant groups.⁵ Double consciousness for whites is not the effect of an immobilizing oppression as it is for Blacks.⁶ Whites originally see themselves through the dominant, hegemonic framework, which relies on the denial of the Black gaze, and thus can be seen to be rooted in willful ignorance.⁷ White double consciousness that is potentiated or critical, that is to say, when it sees itself "through both the dominant and non-dominant lens and recognizes the latter as corrective truth," is predicated, as Miranda notes, on there being a split consciousness to begin with.⁸ Since the white internal lens is already rooted within dominant frameworks, for white consciousness to be split, its dependence upon external indicators that can gesture toward the falsity of its perceptions or valuations rather than reliance upon its own internal valuations, as would be the case for Black double consciousness in its potentiated form, is what needs to be foregrounded. The question is, how might we understand such external indicators and how might such external indicators

function in a way such that white consciousness may be split and split in a potentiated form? The distinction between the functioning of white double consciousness and Black or non-dominant double consciousness has implications for understanding what a white double consciousness pedagogy may have to involve. Importantly, the cultivation of white double consciousness cannot be seen as finding its grounding through the terms of white liberal imagination or primarily cognitive conceptions such as critical consciousness raising. Rather, the possibility of troubling the lenses and frameworks one inhabits can be seen to be fundamentally rooted in material conditions. Here I turn to insights provided by W.E.B. Du Bois alongside the insights of critical phenomenology to help better understand and point toward the very conditions for the possibility of white double consciousness, white double consciousness pedagogy, and the “ambush” experience that may serve as its potentiating force.⁹

W.E.B. DU BOIS AND THE LOGIC OF THE BROKEN PLATE

In “Of Work and Wealth,” Du Bois drew out the experience of the resentment and conflict sown within white workers against Black workers through the intersection of racism and capitalism.¹⁰ The white American worker had begun to reap the benefits of unionization, not just in terms of higher wages, but in terms of the rising of their dreams toward a middle class existence and all its trappings.¹¹ However, unionization and its benefits were more often than not foreclosed for Black workers since most unions would not admit them. As the need for workers increased on the part of the Northern employers, they turned to the Black workers in the South who, driven by the “need to escape hunger, insult, the hand of oppression, and the shadow of death,” were willing to work for the low wages offered by Northern employers, thereby undercutting the white unionized workers.¹² Union leaders deflected the subsequent fury of the white workers onto the Black workers by pointing to their

blackness and the degeneracy it purportedly signified, and thus as the cause of the white workers' ills.

Du Bois wrote:

Everything in the history of the United States, from slavery to Sunday supplements, from disenfranchisement to residence segregation, from "Jim Crow" cars to a "Jim-Crow" army draft—all this history of discrimination and insult festered to make men think and willing to think that the venting of their unbridled anger against 12,000,000 humble, upstriving workers was a way of settling the industrial tangle of the ages. It was the logic of the broken plate, which, seared of old across its pattern, cracks never again, save along the old destruction.¹³

And:

So hell flamed in East St. Louis! The white men drove even black union men out of their unions and when the black men, beaten by night and assaulted, flew to arms and shot back at the marauders, five thousand rioters arose and surged like a crested stormwave, from noonday until midnight; they killed and beat and murdered; they dashed out the brains of children and stripped off the clothes of women; they drove victims into the flames and hanged the helpless to the lighting poles... Firemen, policemen, and militiamen stood with hanging hands or even joined eagerly with the mob.¹⁴

Du Bois's powerful depictions above highlighted the fomentation of conflict in ways that that could not be collapsed into merely economic or class terms and thus understood solely through the strictures of false belief or false consciousness on the part of the white workers. It was not merely a question of white workers' inability to see how the very ex-

clusion of Black workers from the structures of economic guardianship, such as unions, could be used by those in power to protect their own economic interests at the expense of workers' interests by compelling Black workers to work for wages that undercut the white workers and their unions.¹⁵ Rather, Du Bois was pointing to the very *festering* of the history of discrimination and insult levelled against those marked as Black, as it played out or was lived through the white workers' bodies, minds, and actions. We can understand a festering as a progressive deterioration within one's whole being, occurring through the reanimating of old fissures and breakages, as Du Bois's "logic of the broken plate" seems to signify. A festering of the history of discrimination and insult gives rise to certain contingent but not arbitrary relations and interactions among and between bodies, spaces, things, and ideas, providing the contours of what some bodies, who are at "home," can do and what other bodies not-at-home can or cannot do.¹⁶

Critical phenomenology can provide a clarifying context for Du Bois's intuition through the notion of the existence of the historico-racial body schema.¹⁷ The historico-racial body schema builds upon Merleau Ponty's notion of the body schema, understood as the "pre-representational sensory motor capacity functioning below the level of reflective awareness, and 'which provides a posture toward a certain task, actual or possible.'"¹⁸ The historico-racial body schema indicates the body schema as already racialized through the intermingling of social/political/historical events with material, affective, and discursive elements.¹⁹ Accordingly, in the very moment of bodily gesture and visual perception, bodies serve as the site of the inscription and re-inscription of racialization where bodies of color are repeatedly over-determined. Such over-determination of the body of color may be evidenced by the repeated tensing of one's muscles, the stiffening of the back, the hardening or narrowing of the eyes or expression, the flinching or recoil, 'the moving away,' the hurried,

indignant movement toward another or the even solicitous going toward the other, where the other is seen as threatening, to be feared, questioned, mistrusted, disdained, or pitied.²⁰ Significantly, one's perception and interaction with others is habituated through the policies and practices that constitute one's milieu: for example, de facto school segregation and the residential segregation upon which it depends, distorted or deficient media representation of people of color, predatory lending practices that devastate communities of color, voter suppression, inequitable funding for schools within communities of color, and neglect in the hiring and retention of educators of color.²¹ In short, the reviling of blackness must also be understood in terms of the recurring reanimation of the memory of that which is to be abased, a memory inscribed and reinscribed in bodies as a muscle memory that takes hold and *is held* through a living-in-the-world that functions through the iterations of the history of discrimination and insult entangled within social structures and practices.

CONCLUSION

Through Du Bois's use of the metaphor of the logic of the broken plate to describe the horrific events of the 1917 East St. Louis riots, alongside the insights of critical phenomenology, we are led to the understanding that the external indicators that may serve as the conditions for the possibility of white double consciousness, where the epistemological lens of whiteness may be troubled, are tied to the environmental and material shifts that may enable the interruption of the reanimation of the habituated historico-racial body schema. Such shifts indicate the redrawing or redirecting of the spatial and affective dimensions of life. By arranging institutional spaces in ways that unsettle Western liberal ideals (for example, by no longer making operative the notion of civility in the classroom that ends up legitimating and prioritizing the emotional expressions, safety, and comfort of those who occupy identity positions

of power and privilege in relation to others), or by advocating for policy enactments that shift the landscape of who gets access to what, who interacts with whom, whose images we see and voices we hear in our social, cultural, and political spheres, and how economic opportunities are allocated, can the space be opened for the reconfiguring of one's "bodily habits of movement, gesture, perception and orientation."²² It is through such redirecting and re-drawing that the space for new ways of being, moving, feeling, perceiving, and thinking to arise may be potentially opened and meanings other than those engendered by dominant narratives and interactions may emerge. In short, what I am asking us to consider is how white double consciousness pedagogy is dependent upon not only what goes on inside the classroom, but also on the political advocacy that takes place outside of it.

Author's Note

Portions of this paper are from my paper titled, "Identity Politics, Solidarity and the Aesthetics of Racialization," which will be published in the Spring 2022 issue of *Puncta: Journal of Critical Phenomenology*.

1 Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Sara Ahmed, *What's the Use?* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019); Uzma Jamil, "Whose University? Racial Politics and the Claims of Postracial Whiteness," *Philosophy and Education* 77, no. 4 (2021).

2 Shaireen Rasheed, "Identity Politics, Freedom of Speech, and the Politics of Silencing: Thinking in and through White Academic Spaces," *Philosophy and Education* 77, no. 4 (2021).

3 W.E.B. Du Bois, "Of Work and Wealth," in *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (The Project Gutenberg eBook, 1920/2005), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15210/15210-h/15210-h.htm>;

George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America*

(Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017).

4 Du Bois, “Of Work and Wealth.”

5 Dana. F. Miranda, “Signals Crossed: White Double Consciousness and the Role of the Critic,” *Philosophy of Education* 77, no. 3 (2021): 59–65.

6 Miranda, “Signals Crossed,” 62.

7 Miranda, “Signals Crossed,” 62.

8 Linda Martín Alcoff as quoted in Miranda, “Signals Crossed,” 61; As Miranda highlights, double consciousness can be both potentiated and unpotentiated. That is, if the former, it can be critical or if the latter, it can lead to “duplicity, resentment or resignation” (Miranda, “Signals Crossed,” 62).

9 Du Bois, “Of Work and Wealth”; Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes*.

10 Du Bois, “Of Work and Wealth.”

11 Du Bois, “Of Work and Wealth.”

12 Du Bois, “Of Work and Wealth.”

13 Du Bois, “Of Work and Wealth.”

14 Du Bois, “Of Work and Wealth.”

15 John N. Robinson III, “W.E.B. Du Bois and the Racial Economics of Inclusive Capitalism,” *Items: Insights from the Social Sciences*, January 22, 2019, items.ssrc.org/race-capitalism/w-e-b-du-bois-and-the-racial-economics-of-inclusive-capitalism.

16 Michalinos Zembylas, “The Contribution of Non-representational Theories in Education: Some Affective, Ethical and Political Implications,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 36, no. 1 (2017): 393–407.

17 Tyson E. Lewis, “‘But I’m Not a Racist!’ Phenomenology, Racism and the Body Schema in White Pre-Service Teacher Education,” *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 21, no. 1 (2016): 118–131; Helen Ngo, “Racist Habits: A Phenomenological Analysis of Racism and the Habitual Body,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 42, no. 9 (2016): 847–872; Alia Al Saji, “A Phenomenology of Hesitation: Interrupting Racializing Habits of Seeing,” in *Living Alterities: Phenomenology, Embodiment, and Race*, ed. E.S. Lee (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014), 133–172.

18 Tyson E. Lewis, “‘But I’m Not a Racist!’ as cited in Shilpi Sinha, and Shaireen Rasheed, “Journeying Toward Transformative Teaching in the Age of Alternative Facts and Re-Ascendant Ethnic and Racial Prejudice,” *Teachers College Record* 122, no. 4 (2020), 15.

19 Zembylas, “The Contribution of Non-representational Theories.”

20 Ngo, “Racist Habits,” as cited in Sinha and Rasheed “Journeying Toward Transformative Teaching,” 17; Sinha and Rasheed “Journeying Toward Transformative Teaching,” 17.

21 Habituation indicates a bodily orienting where one actively takes up residence in the spatiality of something, reanimating the past into the present (Ngo, “Racist Habits,” as cited in Sinha and Rasheed “Journeying Toward Transformative Teaching,” 18).

22 Ngo, “Racist Habits,” 848.