

## Vertigo at the Heart of Whiteness

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That we now turn to whiteness with some trepidation is doubtless a good thing. And as Barbara Appelbaum and Erin Stoik point out so clearly and astutely, the field is new and terms mix and match in quite unstable and occasionally troubling ways, reinscribing some of the problems they seek to undo. That we ought to take more care to understand what terms and concepts bring with them is particularly important, as Appelbaum and Stoik detail so well. I conceive of this response as a continuation of the conversation their essay has started and while I may have a different view of some of the issues, I am glad that this conversation has begun in such a fine, thoughtful manner.

Whiteness studies sometimes, although not always, reminds me of men against rape. That men would be against rape is a very good idea. But no matter how patiently one explains that the purpose of a Take Back the Night march is to allow women a chance to be in public after dark without male accompaniment, some always feel left out, grouchy and go to the press about the unreasonableness of radical feminists. In short, they feel uncomfortable. Why? They believe they are being good male feminist citizens, organizing against sexual violence and yet women will *still* not recognize them as worthy for the march. The point is, they expect that their voluntarism will somehow put them outside structures and institutions that create the meanings of gender that women in Take Back the Night marches are trying to underscore and critique.

Whiteness studies has some of these problems as well, and I greatly appreciate the attention to white identity versus whiteness that Appelbaum and Stoik have given us, as well as their thoughtful attention to the difficulties of addressing white responsibility and complicity in structures of racism. I am less sanguine about one framing concern: that white anti-racist students ought to feel they have agency and that those students get their agency through their white identity, which is somehow not as structurally complicit as their "whiteness." I understand the desire to mark off subjectivity from a sterile determinism, but I think, in many respects, white students have too much agency, although not of their own making, exactly. It is equally as important to understand agency as structural and not volitional and become suspicious of it as well. Agency may not be the freedom to act in the world that we think it is. It may be more dangerous than we had thought. Perhaps what white students should be uncomfortable about is that they are merrily complicit in systems they would prefer to opt out of, that is, the site of their agency is also the site of their anxiety. That we might fix this by giving students a greater sense of agency seems mistaken. I understand a concern with agency as an antidote to the paralyzing sense of liberal guilt, but I rather suspect that liberal guilt is just another indication of the men against rape follies: they sometimes, to use the Anita Hill phrase, "just do not get it" and the only way they will even try to get it is if they get constant positive feedback and recognition of their exceptionality.

Part of the desire for recognition of exceptionality is a desire to pass as “not the average white person.” As a tactic to avoid a pesky liberal guilt, this might be a quick strategy, but I think it underscores a voluntarism that is mistaken. I have found Cheryl Harris’s “Whiteness as Property” to be helpful in addressing some of the volitional sense of race identification and I want to briefly explain her point and then explain its potential problems.<sup>1</sup> Harris examines how the very history of property ownership is tied to race. Not only is race property, property ownership is itself a marker of race. She reminds us that Homer Plessy’s claim was that the railroad had not allowed him access to privileges that ought to have been his based on his lightness. His lawyer, carpetbagger and one time Greensboro resident Albion Tourgee, argued that Plessy’s light skin ought to have allowed him passage in the white car. Tourgee claimed that Plessy’s property, his lightness, was taken away from him unjustly and since that property had value and was his, it ought to be honored. The argument that whiteness is property (and an odd sort of property at that) helps to remind us of the literal cost of racism, as well as the difficulty in actually ridding oneself of this sort of property. Sanctioning some police practices and engaging in private real estate transactions are markers of the property, as well as reminders of its persistence with or without our voluntarist sentiments to the otherwise. Indeed, as the Race Traitors are quick to point out, these actions must be continuous, as one cannot give up the property of race once and for all, but must continually invoke the desire to do so and undertake actions which have the effect of sharing the wealth. Regardless, it is always persons with white skin determining the limits of how that property sharing will happen, because without their active resistance, the property of whiteness will continue to accrue to them. This makes race as property a difficult argument because property is transferable and alienable, and race to a great extent is not — I may share your pain but it is only when I choose to do so.

What we are faced with are the difficulties of a politics of performativity: it requires someone else present to watch and understand, and it is ultimately voluntaristic even though its purported power is in the inadventancy of subversion in the first place. So we are potentially back to the problem of men against rape: having recognized that male violence is the problem, men still want to be the center of political attention. The other caution one might make about performative politics is that dominant power is also performative. As Christine Sleeter points out, white bonding enacts white identity through repetition of racist statements, a continual enactment of identity and privilege undertaken even in the absence of black people to remind white people through words that white people are white.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, performativity itself does not get us out of the problem because whiteness as privilege is a performative process. What instead we examine, instead of fully turning to voluntarism, is the degree to which those processes have fits, starts, and failures. David Roediger, Alexander Saxton, and many others have documented the shifts in category, some of which were undertaken against the grain of racial understandings of their time — but that also happened within a strategic play of pre-existing privilege.<sup>3</sup> For example, the Irish in one of their failed attempts to become white attempted to blacken the Germans, a situation that underscores the

power and failure of volitional, strategic attempts to rearticulate one's and another's racial membership.<sup>4</sup> Historically, of course, it is not only the Irish who went through multiple attempts at achieving social power by achieving whiteness. Other people also have engaged in multiple, sometimes successful attempts to be re-recognized as a different race. As F. James Davis documents, definitions of race shifted from court-based determinations to community understandings of the person in question and back again at different points in time.<sup>5</sup> In other words, one's identity is not volitional, it is a matter of how one lives one's life, where one lives and what one's neighbors think one to be. In Toni Morrison's *Sula*, although Tar Baby is originally recognized by the community as mixed race, once Eva names and recognizes him as white, he is pushed back to the community as black. The Deweys, too, although differently raced, become unrecognizable as individuals when they are named by Eva as a collective.<sup>6</sup> Of course, the situation is much more complicated for Arabs, Armenians, Mexicans, and Asian Indians, all of whom face the difficulty of being unrecognizable by courts and communities as raced, and yet legal, political and other structures require that the determination be made.<sup>7</sup> Trihn Mihn-Ha points to similar negotiations under apartheid in South Africa, where redefinitions of racial classification were constantly negotiated through the courts, though never did a white person become black or a black person become white.<sup>8</sup> Joel Williamson also points to movements across categories in the twentieth century as light-skinned black people largely stopped passing as white or identifying as light and instead, following civil rights, claimed black identity.<sup>9</sup> While categories shift however, it may be difficult for them to do so in a climate that increasingly concretizes the meaning of race. This climate poses a problem for performative politics since it requires audience understanding: subversions and disidentifications can fall on deaf ears or be misrecognized.

I want to end by echoing the concerns Applebaum and Stoik have with positive white anti racist identity: the new abolitionism calls its own privilege further into existence and thus simultaneously enacts race traitorousness and creates more incidents in which the power of whiteness is recognized. Granted it does this with the intention of marking out the possibility of undoing that privilege, but again, only at the beck and call of the white person so doing. That these incidents highlight the constitutive constraint of anti racist behavior is perhaps the most important lesson, but it is one that raises, one would think, the level of discomfort of any white person. One must always realize that one's actions or inactions are structured by one's race. One may have the *noblesse oblige* to temporarily turn the tables, but one does not have the ability to end the need for table turning. I would argue that this constant sense of complicity and the cultivation of a sense of extreme discomfort at the structures and categories of race make perpetual vigilance a necessary way to live one's life as a white anti-racist. These discomforts are at the heart of an anti-racist pedagogy that, while it is deeply concerned with making sure we understand racial identity as relational and interconnected, does not recentralize, or particularly concern itself with the comfort of the dominant group. The heart of whiteness ought to maintain vertigo as its impetus for positive action against the structures of its own dominance.

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1. Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Readings that Formed the Movement*, ed. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas (New York: The New Press, 1995), 276-91.
  2. Christine Sleeter, "White Racism," *Multicultural Education* 1, no. 4 (1994): 8.
  3. David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1999) and Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (London: Verso, 1990).
  4. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, 143.
  5. F. James Davis, *Who is Black? One Nation's Definition* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991).
  6. Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Plume, 1973), 39.
  7. See Ian F. Haney López, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).
  8. Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Not You/Like You: Post-Colonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference," in *Making Face, Making Soul: Haciendo Caras*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1990), 374.
  9. Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995).