

## Reservation Blues: Ethics and the Privilege of Being Responsibly White

Matthew Jackson  
*Brigham Young University*

I ain't got nothing, I heard no good news  
I fill my pocket with these reservation blues  
Those old, those old rez blues, those old reservation blues  
And if you ain't got choices  
What else do you choose?  
And if you ain't got choices?  
Ain't got much to lose

— Sherman Alexie, *Reservation Blues*<sup>1</sup>

It is indeed a privilege to be able to muse safely and comfortably about white moral responsibility in the context of academia. Whites have lots of choices, with much to lose, and this privileged positionality of being white within a larger ontological arrangement of beings-in-the-world that moves to the steady beat of being-for-itself within its own orchestration of power — this may be what has me so white and blue in responding to Lawrence Blum's essay on white privilege analysis (WPA).

I think we need to heed Blum's genuine call for more comprehensive and finely tuned analyses of the structures of white privilege. And I think that there is a good and growing body of research along these lines. The problem, as Blum points out, is that whiteness theorists do not often put these analyses to good use. But rather than simply respond here in a way that only harmonizes with Blum's assertions, I think it more productive to sound a more cacophonous chord.

WPA is an old tune of sorts — W.E.B. Du Bois asks the question, "But what on earth is whiteness that one should so desire it?" He answers himself: "Whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!"<sup>2</sup> Albert Memmi, writing in the 1960s, asserts that, "Beyond being a psychological and social fact, racism [read as white supremacy] is also above all an institutional fact."<sup>3</sup> I insert the term white supremacy into Memmi's quote, informed by Maulana Karenga's claim that when we speak of whiteness, the focus should be on white political, economic, and cultural *domination* — the ability "to impose one's will."<sup>4</sup>

And while I think that Blum and I share some concerns and hesitations about what might be gained and lost in WPA, there is an ontological assumption embedded in Blum's essay that has left me with a lingering undertone of the blues. My reservations concern his demarcations of duty and assignments of rights and privileges based on what I see as an Anglo-centric perspective (as seen from my own Anglo-centric perspective — an insidious epistemological cycle). That is, while I think there is some value in calling into question what counts as a right and privilege in certain contexts, I think there is greater value in turning that question on its head and asking, "Who it is that is making these determinations about *whom*?" Plainly put, I think the problem I have with Blum's discussion of white privilege is that it keeps

whites in control of knowing and naming what constitutes *being raced*, and who is and is not justified, and in what ways.

In Blum's argument, there is an underlying assumption that if we can just define racial problems fully and in the right way, then we can solve them. I have referred to this problem elsewhere as the "comprehending being of consciousness," who, in Heideggerian fashion, can grasp the totality of the racialized world and shape it into something better — in this case a more ethical objectified system of racial justice based on rights and privileges.<sup>5</sup>

I think this problem is exhibited most strongly in Blum's use of "native language" with the concept stripped of any racial significance. I find this example, even for the sake of argument in a case of formal logic, a bit absurd. Language is an inextricable aspect of being, and as such, is intertwined with one's identity, along with any category of uniqueness that we might identify.

From my position of privilege, I want to play some more with the notion of "Native language" bringing a phenomenological focus to the discussion. A book reviewer for *The Nation* wrote about Sherman Alexie's book, *Reservation Blues*: "On the big Indian Reservation we call the United States, Sherman Alexie is one of the best writers we have."<sup>6</sup> This suggests to me that we must always-already talk about ourselves — no matter whom we are — as racially and linguistically oriented beings-in-relation-to-others. I would argue that, just as "one's designated race is a constitutive element of fundamental, everyday embodied existence and social interaction,"<sup>7</sup> so it is with one's linguistic identity. In talking about a "phenomenology of racial embodiment," how do we begin to talk about whites' rights and privileges when these are most often already based on whites' perceptions?

Invoking another rhetorical trope from Alexie's work, there is a scene in the movie *Smoke Signals*, when Victor and Thomas, after lamenting that "the cowboys always win," begin to chant:

John Wayne's teeth  
 John Wayne's teeth  
 Are they false? Are they real?  
 Are they plastic? Are they steel?<sup>8</sup>

What do John Wayne's teeth have to do with WPA? In her poem, "Dear John Wayne," Louise Erdich refers to John Wayne's smile as "a horizon of teeth," a horizon upon which everything whites see belongs to them.<sup>9</sup> Whether perceived literally or figuratively, this trope flips the phenomenological horizon of white privilege, and one could ask, are John Wayne's teeth an earned or unearned privilege? Have they caused injustice? Have I been enriched because of them? Are the associated rights and injustices of that smile related to my racial responsibility?

In "The Souls of White Folk," W.E.B. Du Bois suggests that we are coming ever closer, "day by day, to making the statement, 'I am white,' the one fundamental tenet of our practical morality."<sup>10</sup> The problem with reformulating whiteness from the security of one's own (white) consciousness is that it limits one's work to an ethics of self-investment. That is, when my analytical efforts are grounded in my "perseverance in being," the *conatus essendi* (struggle of living) that Emmanuel Levinas

criticizes, all of my efforts take my own existence into account first, and everything else, even apparently genuine considerations for others, are secondary.<sup>11</sup> This is a problem for antiracist work done in the name of people of color, because it all comes from one's (white) consciousness, which is unlikely to dismantle its own sense of being.

In line with Levinas's analysis of the ethical relation, I cannot rethink or unthink my whiteness; resorting to reason simply reproduces the same ego-driven ethics. The "otherwise than being" of Levinas's philosophy means that I must let go of the need to comprehend — to grasp and to control — in order to *be*. I must begin, somehow, to *be otherwise* in whiteness. Some whiteness scholars have suggested that we "do whiteness differently," and remain constantly vigilant and self-reflexive about whiteness, even as we inhabit whiteness as a place of paradox, a place of vertigo, of active discomfort.<sup>12</sup> Shannon Sullivan recently suggested that we develop a sense of "Wise White Provincialism," as a way of working through a "critical conservatism of whiteness" (a notion she is not entirely comfortable with), rather than white abolitionism.<sup>13</sup> While these are important movements against whiteness, they seem to maintain within such places and positionalities a sense of primacy for reason in white being. That is, while I may be critical of my whiteness, there seems to be an underlying assumption that I can know and name it, and therefore control it by setting the terms of the discourse.

And this sense of comprehending whiteness seems to drive so much of our work; it is as though we are so bent on "fixing" whiteness that we look to that end goal and rely on our powers of reason to be the means by which we can achieve it. We really believe that if we can just comprehend whiteness, we can change it. The trouble is that such an approach will always be driven by the controlling violence of the self. We are blinded by the troublesome belief that as long as we are involved in the process of working against whiteness we can assume that we are being ethical. It is as if my acknowledgment of my whiteness and my self-identification as an antiracist educator grants me safe ethical passage through the difficult waters of racism.<sup>14</sup>

I submit, as a contribution to such an exploration, that part of what perpetuates whiteness and keeps white rationality at the center of whiteness studies and white endeavors such as WPA — even with reservations — is our very reliance on the primacy of reason and being in our work, particularly as they relate to our ethical assumptions. We should be wary when ethics equates to responsibility as reduced to a "calculus of being," as Levinas warns against.<sup>15</sup> We need to admit that while there are possibilities, there are also limits and dangers to the ways that racial responsibility can be delineated and legislated through the conscious comprehension of reason.

---

1. Sherman Alexie, *Reservation Blues* (New York: Warner, 1996).

2. W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Souls of White Folks," in *W.E.B. Du Bois Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 124.

3. Albert Memmi, *Racism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2000), 133.
4. Maulana Karenga, "Whiteness Studies: Deceptive or Welcome Discourse," *Black Issues in Higher Education* 16, no. 6 (1999), 26–8.
5. Matthew Jackson, "Bordering on Violence: A Levinasian Critique of Ontology and Ethics in Giroux's Critical Pedagogy," in *Philosophy of Education 2006*, ed. Kenneth R. Howe (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2006), 306–314.
6. Leslie Marmon Silko, "Bingo Big," *The Nation*, June 12, 1995, 860.
7. Linda Alcoff, "Toward a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment," in *Race*, ed. Robert Bernasconi (New York: Routledge), 1.
8. Sherman Alexie, *Smoke Signals* (Burbank, Calif.: Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 1998).
9. Louise Erdich, "Dear John Wayne," (1984), in *Original Fire: Selected and New Poems* (New York: Harper, 2004).
10. W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Souls of White Folk," in *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Henry Holt, 1955), 456.
11. In my own way here, I am enacting the very perseverance in being that I am critiquing.
12. John T. Warren, "Performing Whiteness Differently," *Educational Theory* 51, no. 4 (2001): 465–6. See also, Cris Mayo, "Vertigo at the Heart of Whiteness," *Philosophy of Education 2000*, ed. Lynda Stone (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2001), 317–20.
13. Shannon Sullivan, "White Wise Provincialism" (paper presented at the Examining Whiteness Conference, Allegheny, Pa., April 2008).
14. Audrey Thompson, "Tiffany: Friend of People of Color: White Investments in Antiracism," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 16, no. 1 (2003): 7–29.
15. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, trans. Alfonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1998).