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Better the devil you see, than the one you don't: bearing witness to emboldened en-whitening epistemology in the Trump era

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ABSTRACT

Critical scholars of race maintain that racism that is not clearly seen every day is the most dangerous kind. Notwithstanding 'invisible' racism qua racism without racists—per some race scholars—explorations on mechanisms of Whiteness in the Trump era must be had. One mechanism is perpetuating epistemological racial ignorance. However, that epistemological moment has passed. Instead, US society is returning to an emboldened en/whitening epistemology characterized by perverse re-appropriation of civil rights terminologies—once used to support People of Color—to instead strengthen White nationalism. Towards racial justice—dismantling White supremacy—we unveil how Whiteness incites an en/whitening epistemological moment so captured in today's mindsets. Methodologically employing critical hermeneutics, specifically, metaphors, to forever remind Whiteness as dehumanization, this paper identifies the devil of Whiteness so to facilitate the futurity of humanity.

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Introduction

Scheurich and Young (1997) prophetically wrote, 'One of the worst racisms ... for any generation or group is the one that we do not see, that is invisible to our lens – the one we participate in without consciously knowing or intending it' (p. 12). Colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), dysconscious racism (King, 1991), and hegemonic Whiteness (Rothenberg, 2015) all operate under the guise of epistemological ignorance (Mills, 2007). Meaning, since they are all so hegemonically woven into the fabric of our US society they operate almost invisibly, like the air we breathe. Notwithstanding this 'invisible' racism qua racism without racists – per Bonilla-Silva (2006) – there must be earnest, urgent, and diligent explorations on the mechanism of racism, Whiteness, and White supremacy in the era of Trump, lest we slide backwards toward ethnocide, *de jure* racism, and overt racial discrimination once again.

Per Mills (2007), one such mechanism of Whiteness is the active perpetuation of the epistemological ignorance of race. This ignorance is 'both false belief and the absence of true belief' (p. 16). Yet because White supremacy has normalized Whiteness such that 'Whites refus[e] to recognize the long history of structural discrimination that has left Whites with the differential resources they have today' (p. 28) what remains is a 'mystification of the past [that] underwrites the mystification of the of the present' (p. 31). Regardless of whether or not these mystifications are consciously or subconsciously reproduced, the end result is a 'larger collective amnesia' that is used to perpetuate Whiteness ideology at the expense of people of color's livelihood (p. 31). This epistemological moment is what characterized most of the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s.

But we argue that the colorblind epistemological moment has now passed. In the wake of #Blacklivesmatter, White supremacist mass shootings like in Charleston, student protests against racism in higher education like Mizzou, and a 2016 presidential campaign that employs racist rhetoric to amass a collective fear of Others, the US, despite the recommendation for coloring epistemology via Scheurich and Young (1997), is now entering a moment of emboldened en/whitening epistemology that is characterized by the perverse re-appropriation of civil rights and socially just terminologies and concepts – once used to support the rights of People of Color – to instead strengthen White nationalism. Although we recognize that Whiteness ideology was ever present during any period, we argue that during *this* epistemological moment, Whiteness is returning to an emboldened state, which, if left uncontested, can reproduce many discriminatory acts. In order to prevent repeating our past transgressions we must first identify this phenomena. As such, we question, what characterizes this emboldened en/whitening epistemology? And, by identifying this epistemology, how can racial justice workers be ready to debunk it? We present the troubling of this epistemological moment as our deep patriotic pledge to 'liberty and justice for ALL.'

Framing theory

Since we are dealing with how Whiteness operates in belief systems and the 'knowledges' that undergird those belief systems, we specifically draw from critical Whiteness studies (CWS) because it deals with 'what then, does it mean to be White' while also examining how the White racial marker impacts People of Color (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; p. xvii). Additionally, it is also a field that is 'grounded in social change' (Doane & Bonilla-Silva, 2003, p. 6). We draw upon this approach knowing that we forever seek to dismantle how 'Whiteness, then, in all of its manifestations, is embodied racial power' (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; p. 271). Known for its multidisciplinary style from philosophical ruminations (Yancy, 2008) to legal considerations (Lopez, 1997), we too draw from transdisciplinary theories – philosophy, sociology, education, political science, and psychology – in order to provide the multidimensional theory of race that Leonardo (2013) so demands. With regard to CWS we draw from several elements of Whiteness. In Matias (2016) book *Feeling White* she details the interconnectedness of White supremacy, Whiteness, elements of Whiteness, and racism on Whites and People of Color (see Figure 1).

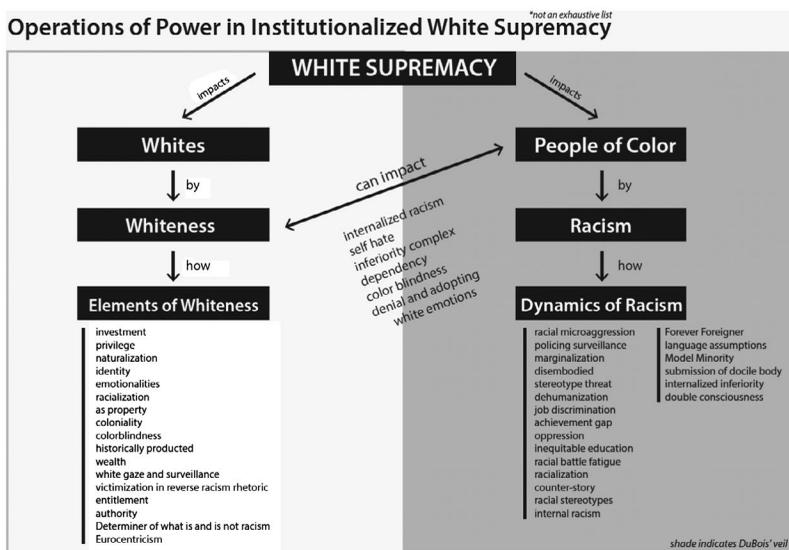


Figure 1. Operations of White supremacy. Source: Matias (2016, p. 185).

Knowing that elements of Whiteness uphold a White supremacist nation state, we specifically utilize transdisciplinary theories of Whiteness to explain nativism, xenophobia, normalization/naturalization, privilege, vitriol, and reverse victimization narratives. We do so because these specific elements are erroneously presenting themselves as 'valid' knowledges, which is dangerous when they undergird an entire racist belief system: emboldened en/whitening epistemology.

A method to battle Whiteness in educational research

During the 2015 American Educational Research Association Conference, one of the nation's prominent race educational scholars, Dr. Ricky Lee Allen, delivered a revealing paper that fiercely cautions how educational research methods that overlook critical interpretations, especially with respect to race-related research, ultimately recycles the ubiquity of White supremacist ideals. He asserts that if a society is imbued with White supremacist dominant interpretations, then academia – an institution of such given society – becomes 'a space where White racial politics of interpretations regulate the process, constructing fabricated, distorted knowledges that obscure the White supremacist social system, maintain the myth of White ignorance, and reproduce the ideology of Whiteness' (p. 1). Notwithstanding the underlying reliance to White supremacist interpretations that go uncontested in educational research, Allen (2015) claims 'what is needed then is a hermeneutics rooted in critical understanding of White supremacy as a history social system' (p. 4). In doing so, it forefronts how 'language is used as a form of White supremacy social practice' (p. 9). A critical hermeneutics of Whiteness, as Leonardo (2016) corroborates, helps to interrogate the oft unquestioned tropics of Whiteness; a '*blancocentric* universe as functioning around the gravitational pull of Whiteness' (p. 3). Drawing mainly from literary metaphors to better re-interpret how Whiteness operates, a critical hermeneutics of Whiteness 'theoretical aim is to heighten our sensibility for metaphor in the attempt to capture the topic of Whiteness through the literary route' (p. 5). Therefore, in order to reveal just how White supremacist ideals have successfully embedded itself within 'normal' or 'naturalized' discourse, ideology, epistemology, and language in educational research, race-related research must engage in a critical hermeneutics of Whiteness.

Epistemology

Emboldening en/whitening epistemology – the birth of a non-nation

Epistemology, as the study of knowledge, is quite befitting for this moment. For one, as revered philosopher, Willard Van Orman Quine suggests, epistemology does not 'provide an independent standpoint for validating empirical science; instead, empirical science provides the framework for understanding empirical knowledge' (Gibson, 2004, p. 19). Yet, with regard to emboldening en/whitening epistemology, the dogmatic assumption that there exists a valid standpoint to inform all empirical sciences, and thusly, knowledge is how it gets hegemonically reinforced. Simply, it's a backwards principal. Take for example, the absurd notion that all Muslims are terrorists. By engendering this epistemological stance though one standpoint, this fear of the Other becomes confused for empirical science and fact, and becomes the basis for discriminatory practices such as banning Muslims into the US. The fact is, more US home-grown terrorists have killed more US Americans than Jihadist¹ yet this empirical knowledge and science gets marginalized when there is a racist power structure that marginalizes one knowledge set over the other (Foucault, 1980). Plainly, we can all have an epistemology that informs our decisions, behaviors, and discourses. However, some epistemological stances are wrought with false knowledge sets and bogus science but instead of rendering them meaningless, they are emboldened because those falsities are protected by a power structure that erroneously and, most dangerously, equates alternative facts to reality. And, in doing so, it reigns supreme. Let us be clear. This is analogous to a blind king who professes to lead the sighted. If the King has no vision but all the power, his shortsightedness reigns supreme. With respect to Whiteness, the knowledge set and science that historically proves the atrocities faced by People of Color in the United States will be obscured by whites who refuse to acknowledge or

admit to those wrongdoings. If those folks remain in power, they will continue to pervert knowledge so that their epistemological stance remains intact, which provides them the rationale and justification for their discriminatory behaviors. Alas, the same rhetorical maneuver was used to scapegoat Jews as conspirators; a crucial step used to justify their extermination during World War II.

This is why we acknowledge that the (battle)field that is epistemology has always been as political as it has scientific – even as it has long been useful to *critical* theories, especially since Hegel's move to build off of Kant's 'transcendental categories' by situating knowledge in its historical moment (Morrow & Brown, 1994), and even more so when Foucault (1980) placed knowledge in power dynamics. From such paradigms, Scheurich and Young (1997) offered a tiered theory of *epistemological racism* whose determining outer layer – which they called *civilizational racism* – is constructed by 'the dominant group [which] creates or constructs "the world" or "the Real" and does so in its own image, in terms of its ways and its social-historical experiences' (p. 7). This structural view of epistemological racism has helped generate theories of epistemological *Whiteness*, as seen in Mills (2007) who defines White ignorance as 'an ignorance militant, aggressive, not to be intimidated, an ignorance that is active, dynamic, that refuses to go quietly – not at all confined to the illiterate and uneducated but propagated at the highest levels of the land, indeed presenting itself unblushingly as *knowledge*' (p. 13; emphasis in original). Perhaps more so than indicating a lack of knowledge, Mills is defining a perversion of knowledge in *White ignorance*. Understanding Whiteness itself is key to this interpretation, for as critical Whiteness scholars have argued, the historical '*raison d'être*' of Whiteness is to be 'coterminous with domination' (Leonardo, 2016; p. 4). Ultimately, we find Mills' (2007) exposition of White ignorance the most important for the current epistemological moment, for as he ominously stated, once more, it is 'propagated at the highest levels of the land' (p. 13) – echoing Scheurich and Young's model of *civilizational racism*. We simply must not fail to see this 'militant' and 'aggressive' emboldening of a White epistemology happening under Trump's administration.

Sadly, since the 2016 presidential campaign emboldening en/whitening epistemology has been the growing US dogmatic epistemological stance and although it is indeed wrought with false knowledge sets and fictitious sciences (like the denial of scientifically proven climate change), it is nonetheless being used to justify discrimination, hate, and fear mongering. And this persists because in a White supremacist society that naturalizes Whiteness as Truth, any efforts or projects that seek to accept or acknowledge the humanity of those who are not White Christians becomes counterproductive to pre-existing perverted sense of morality (bounded in hate) that racists have already adopted (Balley, 2017).

Characteristics of emboldened en/whitening epistemology

The White Δ: proliferation of alt-right, re-appropriating civil rights language, & guising hate speech in false free speech

Within the DC Comics' Legion of Super-Heroes is a fictitious racist organization symbolized by the White Triangle. Armed with xenophobic racism, this group believes that Daxomites are superior beings, and in order to maintain this creed, they keep communities deliberately ignorant. Though espoused in a comic book series, the sad reality is that the same ideological beliefs within the White Triangle has and continues to exist in US America. Perhaps nothing better characterizes this new resurgence of emboldened en/whitening epistemology better than the normalizing of what the media has been calling the 'alt-right.' Even a cursory analysis of this movement's most emboldened White supremacist leaders (e.g. Richard Spencer, Jared Taylor, Greg Johnson) reveals a troubling re/centering of Whiteness,² and thus a Crusade-like charge for a revitalized *civilizational racism*. We believe it is then no coincidence that Trump, who capitalized on an en/whitened epistemological slogan for his candidacy ('Make America Great Again'), found a chief strategist, Steve Bannon, who gave an open platform to White nationalists through the media company he co-founded, to chair his campaign and thence become his chief strategist in the White House (Taylor, 2016). Bannon, for his part, denies being a 'White nationalist,' preferring the lone-term 'nationalist.'³ But in concert with Trump's campaign slogan, we ask – along with other critical Whiteness scholars (Leonardo, 2016; Roediger, 1999) – if there ever was a time in the history of the United States when its 'greatness' was not predominantly (if not solely) for Whites? And, in acknowledging that 'for

most of US history the state has functioned as a racial state protecting White supremacy' (Mills, 2003, p. 43) one would have to be willfully ignorant to not synonymize nationalism with White nationalism.

The White Triangle disseminates and proliferates its racist creed via distortions and ignorance. Meaning, it can only excel at the expense of intellect. Here we find a similar paradox of this emboldened en/whitening epistemology, just like that of the White triangle, being propagated. On the one hand, such an epistemological stance is *boldly* racist and actively disseminated through the President's Twitter account, his press conferences, and in every policy that he puts forth as his way of 'Making America Great Again' (LaFrance, 2017). The bold racism is demonstrated by the public proliferation of White student groups⁴ and growing support of White supremacist, Richard Spencer. Yet, on the other hand, Whiteness, having not always been presented in such bold ways during the colorblind epoch, still draws upon Bonilla-Silva's (2006) abstract liberalism to espouse the idea that such an epistemology is equitable and just. That is, this epistemological moment is characterized by boldly accepting White supremacist ideals, almost branding the White triangle on the chest, so to speak, yet in its boldness it still hides itself by drawing from the colorblind practices. Specifically, emboldening en/whitening epistemology perverts its pseudo-bold racist intent by reframing it as a pseudo-sense of civil liberties. That alt-right speaker, Milo Yiannopoulos, can feign victimization after his hate speech, reframed as free speech, was canceled due to protests at UC Berkeley, is exactly how perverted emboldened en/whitening epistemology can be⁵. This epistemological irrational rationale is no different than the White female Kentucky county clerk, Kim Davis, who, like Yiannopoulos, employed civil rights vocabulary – once used to decry the institutional oppression of People of Color – such as freedom of speech and religion, to justify her discrimination against giving a gay couple their marriage license. This is tantamount to a male domestic abuser, who pontificates his beatings as cool, yet when protesters decry his actions feels entitled to self-proclaim himself a victim of hate! In this delusional, ahistorical, and anti-factual perversion of what constitutes hate speech, free speech, civil rights, freedom, and American ideals, more and more folks are so befuddled with the issue of race such that Whiteness once again soars under the radar.

Like the secret White Triangle society causing racist abominations throughout the galaxy, Whiteness yet again becomes, once more, the 'invisible' racism that Scheurich and Young (1997) call the most dangerous. What often helps to cover up that which is, to be sure, unmistakably racist, is this bob-and-weave performance of Whiteness in which an emboldened White supremacist position is made to appear 'not racist.' Yet a triangle is a triangle, and no matter how you dress it up, it will never be a circle; a sign often connoted with unity, completeness, encompassing, humanitarian, and life.

White dwarf, White logic

A White dwarf is described as a low mass star that has exhausted all its nuclear matter such that its glow is only sustained by electron degeneracy pressure. Befitting is this metaphor to emboldening en/whitening epistemology in that there is no substance, factual Truths, and/or science to substantiate it, yet it exists at the mercy of its pressured degeneration and the narcissistic love for its own glow (see Matias, 2016). Take for example, xenophobic racism, which, is simply another alternative fact that is attempting to legitimize itself as knowledge in order to justify emboldening en/whitening epistemology. Xenophobia is described by the Oxford dictionary as a 'dislike of or prejudice against people from other countries'⁶. This played out during the first two weeks in office, where President Trump enacted executive orders that stemmed from one of his main campaign promises, with multiple attempts to ban Muslim travel to the US⁷ (Domonoske, 2017). Although many US Americans engaged in airport protests, claiming that detaining Muslims – many of who had green cards or were refugees – was unconstitutional, many others remained silent, passively allowing the fear of the Other to justify their compliance to the anti-Muslim immigration ban. Their complicity to xenophobia is no different than how racism operates writ large (see Wimmer, 1997). In fact, during WWII bystanders were complicit in the institutional murder of 6 million Jews because as they bore witness to the discrimination of Jews they, much like today's onlookers, chose to look the other way⁸. Need we remind folks, that bearing witness to a crime despite your inaction to that crime, according to the US court system, is still aiding and abetting that crime and is subject to prosecution.

Almost 70% of violent crimes are perpetrated by White males⁹, not black or brown men. Most US domestic terrorism is perpetrated by White males¹⁰, not Muslims. Yet, despite these factual Truths, prejudiced individuals hold onto the White lies embedded in xenophobic racism as a means to justify their own prejudice and racist ideologies. Regardless of whether or not supporters of this false White logic want to admit that it is (1) supported by White lies, (2) is racist, and (3) is running on degenerate facts just like White dwarfs do, the point remains, more folks complying to this epistemological moment are opting to dwarf their own intellect in a senseless dumbfuckery to bask in White light.

This phenomenon mirrors the same xenophobic anti-immigrant racism that impacts Latino students by denying programs such as bilingual education (Villenas & Deyhle, 1999). The perverted logic of xenophobic racism embedded in emboldening en/whitening epistemology is this: since I don't like them, do everything to hurt them. And, this is the most disparaging aspect of all. In the end, logic, substance, matter, or Truth are not enough to debunk the one remaining Truth and knowledge of White supremacy: Whiteness needs no substance to emit its glow.

Plainly vanilla-ed

A marked characteristic of this emboldened en/whitening epistemological moment is erroneously equating plain vanilla to that of the *crème de la crème*. This is clearly seen in many of the President Trump's nominees for national offices such as secretary of education nominee, Betsy DeVos, many of whom have had no prior experience, credentials, or even a track record of success in a given field. With respect to DeVos' nomination, educational research even documents her failed attempt on endorsing charter schools in Detroit schools¹¹ yet, these plainly vanilla-ed nominees not only represent the bottom of the crop, they – amidst an en/whitening epistemology – feel entitled to be deemed experts without expertise.

That the US endorsed meritocratic system has finally exposed itself in all its falsity is what brazen individuals who subscribe to en/whitening epistemology are now boldly latching onto. In its place is the blind acceptance of White mediocrity over meritocracy, qualification, and/or science. This 'bum rush' to hold tightly onto Whiteness above all scientific rationale is so great that narratives perverting what constitutes meritocracy are inundating society. For example, the idea that President Trump is a hero to blue collar workers¹² is one of the greatest perversions knowing that he, himself, has never done anything for the working class, nor has ever been economically under wealthy. Although this perverted sense of fictive kinship is nothing new in US economy, (see Alexander, 2012; Allen, 2009; Roediger, 1999; Thandeka, 1999) it is a notable return to Whiteness at its best. Plainly (vanilla), Whiteness in this epistemological moment is so irrational that its supremacy becomes more important than economic equity, educational merit, or humanity altogether. And, for that simple fact, no rational understanding is needed.

Recommendations

So exactly what is the concerned, humanistic, and racially just individual to do amidst this emboldening en/whitening epistemological moment? We, the authors, know all too well that succumbing to it, remaining silent, or suppressing the reality of it, only furthers Whiteness in ways that will continue to divide our humanity. That is not an option. Indeed, the question remains, to what degree is race, let alone Whiteness, fully identified, understood, and articulated after generations of denying its existence? Herein lies the greatest quandary. If one proclaims to be a moral human being, how then do they reconcile their moral consciousness when bearing false witness to race for years? And now left with a willful racial ignorance, how then are they to advocate against White supremacy? Although we offer guidelines, we acknowledge that these are but mere basic guidelines.

- (1) Racism is a symptom of White supremacy because society would not be preoccupied with racism if White supremacy did not exist. Knowing this, folks must focus on studying about how Whiteness upholds institutional White supremacy. Do the work of reading and learning.

Jumping too hastily on racially just projects without understanding the disease of White supremacy itself leaves one willfully ignorant of the true racial dynamics.

- (2) Upon learning Whiteness, one gains a valuable knowledge set that will provide vocabulary and concepts. Meaning, instead of relying on the good old 'That's racist' argumentation, understanding Whiteness will better detail how it might be racist. Armed with this knowledge, the expectation then is to challenge the normativity of Whiteness in everyday speech, thought, and actions. Unless this happens, the emboldening of en/whitening epistemology will run uncontested.
- (3) Return to a coloring of epistemologies that not only recognizes the need of inclusion of other voices, ideologies, and dissent, but also questions the fundamentals of our perfunctory epistemology. As Scheurich and Young (1997) so prophetically question 'Are we not seeing the biases of our time just like those a hundred years ago did not see the biases of their time' (p. 12). And, when the emboldening en/whitening epistemology is this resolute, Whites (and People of Color) will defiantly refuse to admit that they too might rely on racist epistemologies. They will do this, often by exerting their institutional power, by denigrating, belittling, or dismissing the necessity to identify, expose, and reveal how Whiteness operates writ large. To be clear, these folk will try to silence the exposure of Whiteness for fear of being exposed themselves.

Conclusion

In the 2016 US presidential campaigns, US society witnessed how presidential nominee, Donald J. Trump, capitalized off Whiteness rhetoric as a means to rally those individuals who already harbored deep-rooted prejudice; hence the public endorsement of White supremacist groups such as leaders from the Ku Klux Klan. By self-aggrandizing and perversely pre-packaging Whiteness as an ideology that has been discriminated against or victimized by diversity or political correctness, Trump offered racists a way of justifying discrimination toward women, People of Color, immigrants, and Muslim Americans. In this emboldened en/whitening moment, hate speech by White supremacists are wrongly considered free speech, Whiteness incorrectly presents itself as in need of civil protection, and willfully ignorant, ahistorical #alternativefacts reign supreme over historical reality. All of which sadly resembles the fascism behind Nazism.

We can pretend to not see once again; falsely remaining 'colorblind' to the encroaching dawn of Whiteness. Or, we can have the emotional ovaries to be bold enough to see the Devil in the face. And, only in standing up to the Devil of Whiteness himself, can we bring the love of heaven back down to this hellish hate.

Special note

To US Americans, hopefully we wake up to an America that we can truly believe in once again.

Notes

1. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/24/domestic-terrorism-charleston_n_7654720.html
2. <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/alternative-right>
3. <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/steve-bannon-trump-tower-interview-trumps-strategist-plots-new-political-movement-948747>
4. <http://www.thecollegefix.com/post/25223/>
5. <http://www.cnn.com/2017/02/02/us/milo-yiannopoulos-ivory-tower/index.html>
6. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/xenophobia>
7. <http://www.cnn.com/2017/01/28/politics/donald-trump-executive-order-immigration-reaction/>
8. <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10,008,207>
9. <http://www.politifact.com/punditfact/statements/2015/apr/02/sally-kohn/sally-kohn-White-men-69-percent-arrested-violent/>
10. <http://time.com/3,934,980/right-wing-extremists-White-terrorism-islamist-jihadi-dangerous/>

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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