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Editors

WHITENESS

THE COMMUNICATION
OF SOCIAL IDENTITY

Contents

Chapter 9

White Enculturation and Bourgeois Ideology

The Discursive Production of "Good (White) Girls"

Dreama Moon

One of the signs of the times is that we really don't know what "white" is.
—*K. Mercer,* Skin Head Sex Thing *(1991, p. 205)*

One change in direction that would be real cool would be the production of a discourse on race that interrogates whiteness.
—*bell hooks,* Yearning *(1990, p. 54)*

Responding to the challenges issued by Mercer and by hooks, this chapter offers a critical reading of whitewomen's narratives around the issue of whiteness. In this project, I draw upon my own experiences with, and tacit knowledge of, whiteness to round out my observations and to assist in "reading" the interview texts. In my reading of the women's narratives, I move away from the customary qualitative imperative of "thick" description (Geertz, 1973) to what Hurtado and Stewart (1997) call "thick"

analysis. Some scholars of color have suggested that studies of whiteness need to focus on developing thick analyses in order to uncover the operations of dominance, while employing a strategy of "minimal documentation" to avoid subjecting those within U.S. society who deal with white racist expression on a daily basis to more suffering than is necessary to get at these operations of power (Hurtado & Stewart, 1997). Heeding this corrective, I focus here on the consequences of discursive choices and communicative practices (regardless of individual intentions) and their connections to, and implications within, larger social relations of domination.

Particularizing Whiteness

In order to displace "whiteness" from a universal stance, Nakayama and Krizek (1995) call for the particularizing of white experience. Such a project is necessary and urgent if we are to understand the diverse ways in which "whiteness" works as a system of domination. This chapter attempts to map a number of white discursive practices that work to produce and reproduce "whiteness." Following Frankenberg (1993), discourses are understood as "historically constituted bodies of ideas providing conceptual frameworks for individuals, made *material* in the design and creation of institutions and shaping daily practices, interpersonal interactions, and social relations" (p. 265; emphasis added). In this way, cultural practices may be seen as material effects of discourses that reproduce situated conceptual frameworks and, in turn, are produced by them. So rather than ask, "What does it mean to be white?" I am primarily preoccupied with another question, *"How* does one get to be (and *remain)* white?" If "whiteness" is socially constructed, as critical scholars claim, then "white" people must be *made*. This "making" of "whiteness," like other identities, is accomplished via a complex enculturative process that begins in the family/home. I argues that white enculturation is framed within two contradictory but interrelated ideological discourses, what Frankenberg terms "evasion of whiteness," and what Rich (1979) calls "white solipsism." In the evasion of whiteness, whites experience a disconnection with issues of race and, indeed, do not "see" that issues of race, racism, racial formation, or the power relations surrounding race as related to their lives. On the other hand, white solipsism configures the world as a white space wherein "whiteness" is perceived as a normative and universal condition. While white solipsism does not necessarily

include a consciously held belief in white superiority, it is a "tunnel-vision which simply does not see nonwhite experience or existence as . . . significant" (Rich, 1979, p. 306). In other words, the white enculturation process simultaneously depends on both the embracement and denial of "whiteness." Thus, the "trick" of white enculturation is racially to produce and reproduce whitepeople through the creation of the illusion of a "white" world, while simultaneously draining that "whiteness" of any elements that would mark it as a specific structural and cultural location. "Whiteness," then, must come to be understood as normative, general, and pervasive, rather than positioned and particular. These two discourses, whiteness-evasion and white solipsism, can be seen as conceptual frameworks that are made material in everyday white practices and that, in turn, are reproduced by them.

Keating (1995) raises a provocative question concerning the relationship between "whiteness" and whitepeople. Despite the difficulty involved in keeping these constructs separate, she insists that such separation is necessary in that we cannot assume that all whitepeople are "carriers" of whiteness. While I agree that it is important not to conflate these terms, I would argue that it is politically unwise to pretend that white *people* somehow are not implicated in the everyday production and reproduction of "whiteness." I would also caution against seeing "whiteness" as a monolithic discourse that is easily read with Other/wise[1] eyes. Nakayama and Krizek (1995) remind us that "whiteness" is complex and crisscrossed by other identities that can change its meaning(s), and thus, it is "whiteness" located at the intersection of gender and class that is the focal point of this chapter.

Producing "Good" White Girls

In the movement toward particularizing white experience, I focus specifically on the intersection of "whiteness" and femininity, in specific, how bourgeois ideology "manages" the contradiction between disembodied views of "whiteness" and embodied views of femininity. In particular, I am interested in the ways in which construction of a bourgeois notion of womanhood plays a central role in the production and reproduction of "whiteness," or, at least, a *particular* type of "whiteness" that seems most closely aligned with relations of domination and white supremacy within the U.S. context. The first site of production of this interstitial "whiteness" is that of home.

The (White) Home as Cultural Space

> Unlike other forms of domination, sexism directly shapes and determines
> relations of power in our private lives, in familiar social spaces, in the most
> intimate context—home—and in the most intimate sphere of relations—
> family. Usually, it is within the family that we witness coercive domination
> and learn to accept it. . . . Even though family relations may be, and most
> often are, informed by acceptance of a politic of domination, they are
> simultaneously relations of care and connection. (hooks, 1989, p. 21)

In *Talking Back,* hooks (1989) explores the dynamic and contradictory
tensions among home, family relations, domination, and connection,
arguing that within sexist relations in the family, we can observe the
convergence of two contradictory impulses, "the urge to promote growth
and the urge to inhibit it" (p. 21). The cultural space of home is an
important influence in the formation of identities, with the home being
the first and perhaps the most influential cultural space we experience.
While a physical location, home is not reducible to geography as it also
functions as a cultural space of learning and socialization. It is within the
home that we begin the lifelong process of learning "who we are" in
relation to structural categories that are differently valenced within U.S.
society.

For whitewomen, home is often a contradictory site, as our first home
is likely to be a space of cultural learning about dominant relations of race,
gender, and class and of enculturation into these relations. This encultu-
rative process is often uneven in that it is likely to contain both elements
of resistance (e.g., opposition to patriarchal constructions of gender rela-
tions or to dominant notions of whiteness), and acquiescence (e.g., accep-
tance of dominant ideologies around gender or race). Materially and
ideologically, home may be constructed as an antihegemonic space (i.e.,
families who actively teach and enact antiracism or antisexism), or it may
reproduce dominant hegemony.

While the homeplace is potentially a revolutionary site of resistance to
white supremacy and relations of racial domination among Black people
(hooks, 1990), for whitewomen, home is often a space in which they are
trained to take their "proper" place *within* these relations, in particular,
those of white supremacy.[2] Thus, while home may offer an escape and a
place of refuge from what hooks (1992) calls "the terror of the white gaze"
for persons of color; for many whitewomen, it is often the place in which
they are taught to take on and reproduce the gaze. In short, the (white)
home is often a site of cultural learning and racial indoctrination wherein
dominant notions of "competent" whiteness are reinscribed. Drawing
from in-depth dialogues with whitewomen and my own experience as a
whitewoman, I interrogate some of the communicative practices that
produce and reproduce white supremacy and explore the relationship of
femininity and social class to these practices.

My central argument is that the enculturative process is *racialized*
within the cultural space of the white family/home in that the patriarchal
production of "good girls" within the family is inextricably linked to the
racist production of "good *white* girls." In short, becoming a "good girl"
within the context of white family relations often takes on a racialized
dimension as what it means to be "good" is frequently bound up with
issues of racial loyalty and solidarity.

White Womanhood
as a Bourgeois Construct

Following Davy (1995), the gendered racialization process is seen as
infused with class ideology so that "good girl" status functions as a
"bourgeois construct that provides white women with full access to the
privileges of white womanhood" (p. 204). Historically, the cult of "true"
womanhood has excluded women of color and some whitewomen (e.g.,
poor/lower class) and, as Carby (1987) observes, "the ideology of true
womanhood was as racialized a concept in relation to white women as it
was in its exclusion of black womanhood" (p. 55). As Davy points out,
"whiteness" is most *fully* mobilized at the intersection of bourgeois
ideology, as the symbolism of true (white) womanhood is not that of the
disenfranchised white woman, but that of the respectable "good (white)
girl." Thus, it is at the intersection of race and bourgeois ideology that
white women embody what Davy calls "institutionalized whiteness," or
what Ellison (1992) terms "Optic White, the Right White."[3]

It is important to note that the "middle class-ness" invoked in "Optic
Whiteness" is not defined by economic position, but instead denotes a
"kind of hard-earned 'gentility' in the form of civility (a bedrock concept
of imperialism) that encompasses a plethora of values, morals, and mores
that determine . . . the tenets of respectability in general" (Davy, 1995,
p. 198). Frankie, one of the women I interviewed, relates a story that
illustrates the ways in which whitewomen are often ascribed this "civility"
by whitemen at the interstice of "Optic Whiteness" and femininity:

One time on the reservation I was working at this hamburger joint. The other women were Navajo and this cowboy came in, stepped up to the counter, and I said, "Can I help you?" And he said, "Oh, wow! You're the first civilized person I've seen in weeks!"

Whitewomen's credibility within white communities is deeply intertwined with, and dependent on, their "respectability" or production as "good (white) girls." In explicating the function of the politics of respectability, Higginbotham (1993) argues that the construct of respectability has served historically to "invoke whiteness by way of its appeal to bourgeois characteristics," traits that all "good (white) girls," regardless of objective class location, are encouraged to acquire (e.g., purity, temperance, industriousness, and refined manners) (p. 14). Thus, any whitewoman, regardless of class position, can aspire to become a "good (white) girl" through the acquisition of a racialized notion of bourgeois respectability based on racial loyalty. In writing about how whitewomen are able to "empower" themselves via allegiances with "Optic Whiteness," Frye (1992) observes that,

The white girl learns that whiteliness is dignity and respectability. . . . Adopting and cultivating whiteliness as an individual character seems to put it in the woman's own power to lever herself up out of a kind of nonbeing (the status of women in a male supremacist social order) over into a kind of being (the status of white in white supremacist social order). (p. 160; parentheses in the original)

Of course, this "empowerment" for whitewomen is accomplished by aligning themselves with white hegemony and supremacy, a strategy many whitewomen willingly deploy. Next, I explore some of the ways in which bourgeois ideology plays out in white discursive practices among whitewomen.

Bourgeois Decorum and the Reproduction of "Whiteness"

In order to achieve and maintain "good (white) girl" status, whitewomen must be willing to be, if not *actively* engaged with, at least complicitious with the reproduction of white supremacy. One of the ways that racialized notions of respectability often play out within white rela-

tions is through the deployment of what hooks (1994) calls "bourgeois decorum," a repertoire of strategies that censor rigorous opposition and resistance to party lines. By silencing dissenters, the tyranny of bourgeois decorum creates "safe" spaces in which dominant ideologies go unchallenged, harmony is preserved, and the party line is maintained. Within these "safe" spaces, dissenting voices are often punished by exclusion and ostracism from the white community.

Although hooks interrogates the ways in which bourgeois decorum works to silence dissent within feminist and Black communities, it is easily seen how bourgeois notions of respectability also play out in the reproduction of "good (white) girls" and white supremacy. hooks (1994) suggests that "respectable" (read: bourgeois) ways of handling dissension or avoiding conflict depend on the suppression of "critical comments or making them in private, individualized settings where there are no witnesses" (p. 68). Enactments of "Optic Whiteness" require the public presentation of a united (white) front wherein white solidarity and supremacy are discursively reproduced through bourgeois communication practices.

Frankie relates an incident that illustrates the consequences of violating the expectation of white silence in the face of public enactments of white supremacy and domination. During a faculty discussion on curriculum that Frankie attended, a white male stood up and said, "Well, you know, we got two kinds of students here. We have the good students, the successful students, then we have the minority students." No one at the meeting took issue with his remark, and in fact, one of the whitewomen in attendance attempted to appease him by agreeing with him to some extent. Frankie called him on it, "I have a real problem with you labeling minority students as a 'problem.' I really think that's a misrepresentation and inappropriate." The whiteman confronted Frankie after the meeting and the following exchange ensued:

Whiteman: So you think that was the best way to respond to me?
Frankie: Well, I found what you said offensive.
Whiteman: Well, is it your job to go around and monitor other people's language? Couldn't you have waited until the session was over and came and talked to me about it?
Frankie: No, I really don't think so. This was a public debate and yes, I do think it's my job, actually, to call racism when I see it.
Whiteman: Well, I'm leaving. I don't have to put up with this kind of talk and I'm not staying for any more of the day! (At his point, he is screaming and other people are beginning to stare).

Frankie (crying at this point): I don't think you should leave. I think you should
    stay and talk about things.
Whiteman: I don't want to talk.

After the whiteman left, a couple of whitewomen comforted Frankie: "Don't pay any attention to him. That's just the way he is." Frankie says she thought to herself, "Well, that's fine, but where were you when this was going on? Why couldn't you have said something then?", but interestingly, she did not voice these concerns to the whitewomen at the time.

Through such exchanges, whether one is observing or participating, whites learn the penalties for racial betrayal and the rewards for remaining silent in the face of enactments of white supremacy. hooks (1994) notes that the proclivity in bourgeois decorum to equate "truth-telling with betrayal" is an extremely powerful way to guarantee silence, as "no one wants to be regarded as a traitor" (p. 68). Although Frankie's "truth-telling" was clearly interpreted as a display of racial disloyalty, it was also more than that. By confronting the whiteman *publicly,* she appears to have violated the tenets of "true" (white) womanhood and bourgeois decorum (thereby positioning herself as a "bad girl" and a "race traitor"), and disrupted the safety of the space for enactments of white supremacy. But following the dictates of bourgeois decorum, the "good (white) girls" approached Frankie after the public confrontation to *privately* express their "solidarity" with her, thereby gaining the best of both worlds. In short, through a strategy of bourgeois decorum, the "good (white) girls" were able to remain *publicly* aligned with Optic Whiteness, while *privately* communicating empathy and gender loyalty to Frankie as well as their disapproval of the whiteman's racist behavior.

Not surprisingly, almost all of the whitewomen I spoke with had experienced similar interactions, most often with white family and friends. In particular, enactments of white supremacy within the white family are an especially thorny issue, one that many are unable to resolve to their satisfaction. If whitewomen confront the behavior, they violate the tenets of bourgeois decorum and risk ostracism and/or excommunication from their communities; whereas if they remain silent, they are able to avoid overt conflict by enacting white solidarity. Few of the whitewomen were willing to engage such enactments of white supremacist fully. For instance, Flo tries to figure a way of dealing with her father-in-law, who "still uses the N-word," that both preserves her status as a "good (white)

girl" and allows her to maintain an understanding of herself as racially tolerant:

> When we are in his house, I have to tell him, do not say that around my children. I'll say, "Ix-nay on the igger-nay." Please don't use that because I don't want my kids using it.

In this way, rather than confront white supremacy, Flo is able to couch her comments within the frame of "appropriate" parental concern with her children's language use, thus using her role as mother as a position from which to censor her father-in-law's racist expression. Of course, this strategy is limited in that, as she later reports, her father-in-law's allegiance with white supremacy is expressed in a multitude of other ways, all of which are likely to influence the developing racial understandings and perspectives of her children—a reality that Flo is at a loss to address.

Much of the time, even partial confrontations with enactments of white supremacy are perceived as too threatening, with whitewomen acquiescing to the Optic Whiteness's requirement of silence. Avoidance tactics of various sorts are often utilized in place of engagement. For example, Kelly comments on how she manages the "agreement to disagree" with her father—whom she describes as racist—through a tactic of avoidance:

> We don't discuss like specifically people with different races. We don't sit around and talk about race.

Or, in another situation in which a white friend of Kelly's expressed a negative stereotype about Black people, she reports:

> I was trying really hard to make sure I didn't say anything.

Frequently, such avoidance behaviors are justified by the claim that whitewomen have nothing to gain by confronting racist behavior. Flo's remarks about her father-in-law most clearly illustrate the rationalization process that undergirds this self-silencing:

> I'm not going to change him. I won't talk about it because he would get angry. I sit there seething. Like he will occasionally talk about "them big Black bucks"—it just appalls me, but it doesn't affect the family because I

will not talk about it. I refuse to talk about it. If I brought it up, there would be conflict. But honestly, I think there's nothing to be gained. I get nothing from it. I don't get satisfaction. I don't get anything if I bring it up to him. I won't do it. There's no sense in it.

Other whitewomen tended to "explain" away enactments of white supremacy by attributing verbalizations of it to proletariat "bad manners." As Gail observes,

All classes are racist, but at least the middle class has the good grace to keep it to themselves.

Flo, too, tries to erase the pervasiveness of white supremacy by localizing it within the lower class and by denigrating her father-in-law:

If we're talking about class, I'm not sure he even has a high school education. He lives in a mobile home and he's from "Ken-tuck-ee" (pronounced with a really bad Southern accent!). I mean, we're talking *real* Appalachia here!

Flo pointedly draws attention to his class difference in relation to her more bourgeois upbringing in a later comment, "*We* were never allowed to say 'n——r.' *Ever!*"

The bourgeois strategy of deferring racism onto the lower classes is well documented (Ehrenreich, 1989; Wellman, 1993); however, what is most telling about the comments of Gail and Flo is that they do not appear to find the *realities* of white supremacy as disturbing as they do the "crassness" of its *verbalization,* something that bourgeois whites are taught not to do (Wellman, 1993).

Expressing frustration at their attempts to deal with family enactments of white supremacy as well as noting their own reluctance to engage them, more "race-conscious" whitewomen employ a different tactic of avoidance, either reducing the amount of time spent with their families and friends, or cutting these ties completely (thus, perhaps becoming "bad girls" and "race traitors"). In discussing the effect of family allegiances with, and enactments of white supremacy, Frankie says,

With my family, I let it go because I love them and that's how they are and I'm not going to change them. When I'm home, I try to let things go by and

not get into fights because I'm only there for a short time and I love them and I know that we think really differently about the world and stuff. But, I don't have an ongoing, day-to-day relationship with them; I only see them one week out of the year.

Frankie's story speaks of the pain and loss often experienced when whitewomen take a stand against white supremacy. In another example, Betty, mother of a multiracial son, has not seen her family in many years due to their white supremacist stances. Although the fear of ostracism and excommunication no longer works to silence her, Betty talks about how other whitewomen with whom she interacts police her perceived "betrayal":

I've been told [by other whitewomen] that I'm racist against white people. I've been told because I support affirmative action and because I believe that history speaks for itself and a lot of white countries have dominated, exploited, and made slaves out of, and colonies in Africa, India, and so forth, I've been told from that comment that I'm a white racist, racist against white people.

It seems clear that the decision to engage with white supremacy, particularly within the context of white family relations, is not one easily made nor, once made, easily implemented. Here, racial, gender, and class expectations intersect on the bodies of "good (white) girls" and encourage acquiescence to the dictates of "Optic Whiteness."

Euphemizing White Racism

Once established, relations of domination do not persist on their own momentum but must constantly be reproduced in material and discursive ways. A second strategy through which these relations are reinscribed is via the use of *euphemisms,* another manifestation of bourgeois decorum. Scott (1989) observes that "whenever one encounters euphemisms in language, it is a nearly infallible sign that one has stumbled on a delicate subject" (p. 157). Euphemisms are commonly utilized in everyday white discourse around racialized issues such as affirmative action, welfare reform, family values, reverse discrimination, and immigration. Historically, U.S. Americans have been apprised that Japanese Americans were

"relocated" (not imprisoned) during World War II, that African Americans once attended "separate" (not segregated) educational facilities, and that millions of U.S. workers have been "downsized" (not fired). We come to see that euphemisms permit a more "tasteful" discussion of potentially "distasteful" subjects, with euphemization acting as a sort of erasure that obscures the historical agency behind public and private action.

Thus, euphemisms work to mask the facts of domination, rendering them "harmless or sanitized," thereby obscuring the "use of coercion" (Scott, 1989, p. 157). In other words, euphemisms cloak racist expression with a veneer of "bourgeois civility/gentility," while enabling whitepeople freely to express racism—in coded ways—as a signal of white solidarity. In this way, euphemization is often made to perform as a code, or a "secret" way of communicating.

In discussing issues of race, whitepeople frequently shift linguistically into a kind of "white code" that permits them to talk about race-related matters in ways that "render the status quo as 'natural,' remove ourselves from complicity, and secure approval from other whites" (Sleeter, 1995, p. 16). This coded speech, which I call *Whitespeak,* can be understood as a racialized form of euphemistic language in which what is *not* said—or the absences in language, as Derrida suggests—is often far more revealing than what *is* said. Whitespeak functions to disrupt effectively full and direct engagement with white supremacy and its implications by providing whitepeople with discursive and psychic distance from matters of race. In this way, one's own whiteness is evaded and the integrity of white solipsism is maintained. One of the most crucial elements of Whitespeak is the way in which its strategic use depends on the lack of necessary correspondence between symbols and meaning. Three specific manifestations of this aspect of Whitespeak are examined below: the subjectification of racism and race, the erasure of agency, and the disembodiment of subjects.

Subjectifying Racism

One strategy of Whitespeak, subjectification bestows agency on race and racism, forcing them to perform as the "subject," and at the same time, removes human agency and responsibility from the discussion. The following excerpts are examples of the way in which subjectification works and the difficulty in translating statements coded in this manner:

Flo: I don't know why *it* has to be a problem.
Possible Translations: (a) Why is race, white racism, or racial difference a problem? Or, (b) Why don't people of color just shut up about racism and leave us alone?

Cora: I look back and think, maybe *it* wasn't right the way *it* was when I was growing up.
Possible Translations: (a) Maybe racial segregation and white domination was wrong, but I'm still not fully convinced. (b) Now that racism has been rectified, I can reflect on that horrible time in our past. (c) My family and I may have participated in white supremacy but that doesn't mean that we're bad people.

Kelly: When I was growing up, *it* wasn't that big of a deal.
Possible Translations: (a) Race and racism were not relevant issues in the 1970s, or if they were, they weren't issues that I really thought about as they didn't have anything to do with me and my life. (b) Other people's race wasn't a big deal to me, and it never occurred to me that I even had one! (c) In the good old days, white people didn't have to deal with this stuff. (d) See how tolerant I am? I never even *saw* race until "they" made me!

Although I am exaggerating somewhat here for effect, we see that decoding Whitespeak is a slippery task, even for those enculturated into its usage. Furthermore, subjectification allows whitepeople to engage in disengaged discussions of race and racism in ways that clearly communicate that these topics have little to do with them. This disengagement allows whitepeople to deny their own complicity in relations of racial dominations as well as any awareness or understanding of the historical legacy of white supremacy.

Passive Voice

A related manifestation of Whitespeak is the employment of passive voice, wherein the agent of an action is made to disappear completely (e.g., "Africans were brought to the United States to work as slaves"). Passive voice enables whitepeople to recognize historical events (and thereby demonstrate their tolerance and empathy for racial others), while repressing any connection to them. It does not appear that this strategy is enacted at the conscious level. In fact, many of the whitewomen with whom I spoke seemed to struggle with trying to understand and/or explain

current problems faced by communities of color. However, in their strug-gles for understanding, many whitewomen focus on the personal attributes of people of color rather than on historical and structural explanations. For instance, Blance observes,

> I had a group of Native American kids come to campus for a tour. They were relatively intelligent kids, but had been cloistered on the reservation to the point that they were afraid to come to campus.

The sentence fragment, "[they] had been cloistered," obscures the responsible agent as well as the history surrounding such segregationist actions. We understand cloistering as a problem, but fail to glimpse the historical conditions that have made this cloistering a present-day reality. In this reversal, Blance fails to consider a long history of fear and distrust of whitepeople and reservationization of Indian nations by the (white) U.S. government, and at the same time, the comment seems to suggest that Native Americans have somehow failed to prepare their children adequately for entry into the "white" world of the university. By failing to engage with other possible ways of understanding the behavior of these children, she is free to demonstrate her racial tolerance (which translates into "personal empathy"), while avoiding social responsibility for, and awareness of, the historical conditions and power relations that have contributed to the present state of many Native nations.

In trying to come to grips with the barriers that many people of color face, Sonya, playing devil's advocate, poses the following scenario:

> You're in a ghetto and nobody works because they are all on welfare. This is a broad generalization, but you're used to people in gangs, on dope, hanging out, and that's all you see. Would you get out of it? How would you get out of it?

Both Sonya and Blance seem to grasp vaguely that many people of color face a number of problems within the United States, but their analyses are historically lacking. In short, they begin their analyses from the starting place of the reservation or the ghetto without interrogating the histori-cal and social relations that created these "hidden" spaces in the first place, and that continue to reproduce them. In addition, by "victim blaming" and focusing on individual solutions, they are able to express tolerance (i.e., a "concern" for the "other") while also distancing themselves from any

real involvement with, or personal and social responsibility for the repro-duction of these material conditions or how they have benefited from them. In this way, both Sonya and Blance use passive voice to indicate that "something" happened to "someone" (e.g., "they" somehow ended up on a reservation or in a ghetto), without identifying the historical agents who conspired in these events.

Disembodiment

Last, Whitespeak is also manifested through the employment of disem-bodied subjects, anonymous agents who are ultimately responsible for the perpetuation of racism. These unmarked bodies make life difficult for the rest of us good whitepeople. Blance comments on the problem of racism:

> You really need to look past the race type thing, and I think it's difficult to do because most of society, they may say they do that, but they really don't.

Here, Blance places responsibility for racism on an anonymous "they" who impede the efforts of good whitepeople to overlook racial difference. More directly, Flo says,

> I really don't think about it [her racial identity] at all. If anything, the times that I do think of it, I think, "well, I'm glad I'm white, because they sure do keep the Black people down and, you know, people of color in general." I'm sure it would be much different if I were a different color, but I don't think about it.

Contrary to the usual absences noted in Whitespeak, Flo's remarks reveal a marked level of awareness about the operations of white supremacy, but she employs a "save" by couching this realization in language that attri-butes this oppression to a disembodied "they." To acknowledge actively white social responsibility and accountability in relation to racist oppres-sion—to "name names" as it were—would constitute a violation of the tenets of Whitespeak. Such a violation would betray racial solidarity and would perhaps require the speaker to engage personally with the implica-tions of white supremacy.

Hyperpoliteness

The last aspect of bourgeois decorum that I wish to address is the notion of courteous language, or rather, the way in which bourgeois ideology functions to shore up the operations of white supremacy through the privileging of *form* over content by putting into use a sort of *hyperpoliteness*. Whereas the operations of Whitespeak are most easily identified through attending to the "not-said," the white discursive practice of hyperpoliteness is overly concerned with the "said."

The prefix *hyper* as employed in *hyperpoliteness* is analogous to its usage in Baudrillard (1983) to signify that something is more real than the real. In his usage, the real is no longer a "given," but instead is seen as artificially (re)produced according to a model (e.g., the cosmetically produced "natural" look). In the present case, this (re)production is exemplified by the production of "true (white) womanhood" wherein a racialized bourgeois ideal of womanhood stands in for the real and multiple forms that womanhood may take (Baudrillard, 1983; Best & Kellner, 1991). In this case, the model of "true womanhood" becomes a determinant of the real, and the boundary between the hyperreality and everyday life is erased in white supremacist discourse (Best & Kellner, 1991). Thus, hyperpoliteness signifies an excessive concern with language forms, similar to what the Right calls "political correctness," an ahistorical and decontextualized approach to language use.

Many of us can perhaps remember a time during childhood when we received parental admonishments for using impolite language. For instance, I was admonished to not refer to my Aunt Mary as "fat," or to our neighbor, Joan, as "stinky." However, the admonishment did not, and was not intended to challenge my perception—indeed, the *reality*—of Aunt Mary's "fatness" or Joan's "stinkiness"—but simply to silence expression of it. This is similar to how hyperpoliteness works within Optic Whiteness. Many whitewomen related stories involving parental messages around the use of racist ("impolite") language. For those whitewomen who received them, such admonitions often occurred outside of an explanatory context that would situate such language use historically and perhaps enlarge understandings of race relations and their own place within them.

Let me illustrate the workings of hyperpoliteness further with two incidents related by Gail and Flo. In Gail's story, she and her mother are discussing the use of racist language. Gail's mother shared that she had used racist epithets as a child without a full understanding of what she was saying. Gail's grandmother, upon hearing her mother use the N-word, had admonished her for using the racist epithet, explaining that "it was a bad word for Black people." In the second story, Flo relates an incident concerning (white) childhood rhymes:

> My mother taught me . . . remember "eeney, meeney, miney, mo," that old song? I first learned it from a little kid across the way and he said, "catch a n——r by his toe." I didn't know what a "n——r" was. And my mother told me, "Honey, let's change that because that is not a nice word. *That's a word for people with Black skin.*" And to this day, I have to sit and try to remember what the word *really is* because we've always said, "catch a piggy by its toe" or "catch a llama" or whatever, but we were never allowed to say "n——r."

Thus, in the absence of providing a context within which Gail and Flo could come to understand the historical derivation of the racial epithet as a *white* cultural construct rather than simply a (impolite) "word for Black people," their mothers' focus on "polite" language may have reinforced the "reality" for them that Black people are indeed n——rs, as indicated by Flo's remark, "I have to sit and remember what the word *really is*."

In the absence of historical context and explanation, the deployment of hyperpoliteness tends to reinscribe racism and support white silence around issues of race. While no "respectable" white mother may want her child to speak the "N-word," it would seem important that the white child also be made to understand the ways in which whites *produce* Black people as such. Many of the whitewomen I spoke with said that, as children, they simply were told to not use racist epithets; however, without further explanation, such admonishments often serve to cement racist stereotypes of others, while maintaining bourgeois decorum by discouraging the articulation of such attitudes, as Gail put it, by "having the good sense to keep it to themselves."

This "delicacy" in regard to language use pervades notions of hyperpoliteness as conceptualized in white minds, and is manifested in everyday situations wherein one might encounter visible cultural differences. For some whitewomen, it sometimes seems that simply *seeing* or noticing race borders on impoliteness. For instance, Tanya relates a story that illustrates this propensity toward color blindness:

> There was this woman in a class that I was in and I was talking about her to my boyfriend and he said, "who are you talking about? The Black woman?" And I said, "Well, yeah, I guess she is." I hadn't really thought about her as the "Black woman in the class," but she was. But I was talking about her technique and stuff, so what I was looking at her for was for her[self], you

know, the fact that she was an advanced student in the class, not the fact that she was the Black woman in the class.

The tenets of hyperpoliteness shore up both white evasion and white solipsism by requiring that whitepeople not "see" race, which then allows us to deny our own racial situatedness. The nature of this self-imposed "color blindness" becomes apparent later in our conversation when Tanya asserts that she does not see skin color as a relevant sign in her dealings with people, nor does she believe that others see her as racialized. Tanya says,

> I mean, I think I'm white, [but] in the same way that I think white people don't think about it much, I don't think of it much. When people talk to me, I don't think that they talk to me and think about me as a white person. They think about me as a professor, or a woman.

Seeking clarification, I asked Tanya if she meant that she believed that other *white* people don't think of her as white, or if she meant that *all* people do not "see" her as white. She responded with this question: "Do *you* think of you as white when you talk to me? Do you?" I responded that I did, which led her to further elaborate on her perspective:

> I mean, I think about talking to other people like Susan, or John, or William [other whitepeople]. I don't think about them as "white," but I don't think of Dorothy as Black either.

Tanya later admits that there are times when she does "see" color as relevant, such as when she is discussing racial issues or when seeking the perspectives of people of color on popular cultural texts about their particular racial group.

A recurrent finding in the study of whiteness is the fact that whitepeople do not consider their "whiteness" a salient aspect of their identity per se (Hurtado & Stewart, 1997; Martin, Krizek, Nakayama, & Bradford, 1996, and Chapter 2 in this volume; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995, and Chapter 5 in this volume). Although race is a powerful organizing principle within U.S. society, there has been a norm of explicitly ignoring racial difference among whitepeople (Frankenberg, 1993; Tatum, 1992). Tanya seems to adhere to the belief, common to many of the whitewomen with whom I spoke, that it is somehow rude to "notice" skin color and that liberal whites are not supposed to "see" color.

Among many whitepeople, not noticing race is often considered "polite and humanistic; that it indicates a certain political consciousness. So not 'seeing' is turned on its head to mean 'politeness' or generosity when in fact it only reinforces the existing power arrangements" (Hurtado & Stewart, 1997, p. 299). Writing about the discourse on color blindness, Gotanda (1991) further notes that nonrecognition of race—assuming that this is even possible or desirable—fosters the systematic denial of relations of racial domination and subordination, and the psychological repression of individuals' recognition of those relations (and their place within them), thereby perpetuating them. In sum, hyperpoliteness often acts as a ploy that enables whitepeople to avoid engagement with the realities of white supremacy and its implications in their own lives.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored some of the white cultural communication practices by which "whiteness" is made. I began by framing this discussion of the white enculturative process within two interrelated ideologies, whiteness-evasion and white solipsism, arguing that these two discourses both produce and are reproduced by white communication practices. I have been primarily concerned with a particular form of "whiteness" situated at the interstice of bourgeois ideology and "whiteness," an institutionalized type of "whiteness" most closely aligned with white supremacy. In exploring the white enculturation process, the home has been configured as a crucial cultural space, one in which the white gaze is frequently (re)produced. Rather than a site of liberation, the home, for whitewomen, is often a hegemonic space of indoctrination into white supremacy. In interrogating the ways in which a certain notion of womanhood is interpellated into this interstitial space, whitewomen's respectability within white communities is seen as deeply implicated in their production of "good (white) girls," girls who are racially loyal.

In addition, I have framed hooks's notion of bourgeois decorum within the workings of "whiteness" and delineated a number of bourgeois communication practices that constitute what I call Whitespeak that are devoted to both the reproduction of "good (white) girls" and the production of safe space wherein the white party line can be maintained. These discursive practices work to maintain white racial loyalty and solidarity, and to silence opposition. I also examined some of the specific strategies

of Whitespeak used to silence dissent within white communities, such as configuring truth-telling as racial betrayal, and have explored how euphemisms and hyperpoliteness are used to avoid engagement with white supremacy and its implications in the lives of whitepeople.

The articulation of white inter/cultural practices is an important and necessary step in the move to demystify "whiteness" and to disrupt its power to deceive and terrify. However, laundry lists of cultural practices are not sufficient to the task of ending white supremacy. I suggest that whitewomen, in particular, have an important role to play in efforts to end white supremacy and in rearticulating a different vision for whitepeople based on (an)other kind of solidarity rooted in a "political and ethical understanding of racism and rejection of dominance" (hooks, 1992, p. 14). As the often-silent benefactors of both white supremacy *and* legal protections that were made possible by civil rights movements led by people of color, whitewomen in particular have a moral and ethical responsibility to place the abolition of white supremacy at the forefront of their personal and political agendas. As primary socialization agents of white children, whitewomen can build "home" as antihegemonic spaces in which engagement with the movement against white supremacy is made a cultural norm.

Notes

1. Nakayama (1994) articulates and performs a method of reading that is "wise" to "other" ways of seeing. He argues that the development of strategies of resistance depend on reading Other/wise, a tactic of reading that works against the dominant or preferred reading codes circulating in a society.

2. Here I follow the understanding of white supremacy articulated by Harris (1993). She suggests that rather than viewing white supremacy in terms of the self-conscious racism of white supremacist hate groups, it is more useful to reconfigure white supremacy as "a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings" (p. 1714).

3. In Ellison's (1992) *Invisible Man*, "Optic White" is a type of white paint. The paint became the store's best-seller after the store owners began to push it, claiming that, "Our white is so white you can paint a chunka coal and you'd have to crack it open with a sledge hammer to prove it wasn't white clear through!" (p. 190). Hence, the store owners' slogan, "If it's Optic White, it's the Right White!"

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