

Certain Privilege: Rethinking White Agency

Cris Mayo

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

In a class discussion about the subtle effects of racism on the ability of people of color to reasonably navigate the world, one black woman said of such situations, “you never know.” While another black woman responded, “if you never know, you do know,” other women of color preferred the initial observation and held that their uneasiness, particularly in situations where white people were the numerical majority, hinged on not knowing, as opposed to knowing, what the contours of interactions would be. The uncertain situations these women describe are not easy situations in which to be, but I will argue that suspicion, uneasiness, and careful interpretive strategies can be useful to white people attempting to work against racism. In part, what I am suggesting is that there is a pedagogical use to the kind of “never knowing” my student raised. By centering “not knowing” as opposed to the more usual pedagogical goal of “knowing,” we might begin to work against the place of white privilege in defining what is useful to know and what should be known. Moving the burden of discomfort and uncertainty onto white people is a better strategy for confronting the problems of racism than concentrating on making white people comfortable in the struggle against racism.

The task of this essay, then, is to argue against the tendency in whiteness studies to remake white identity in order to undo racism. Whiteness is not an identity as we usually understand identity; it is a strategy to maintain white privilege. Further, because whiteness is a strategy to accrue and obscure privilege, it already has too much agency in its own name. Even when whiteness appears empty and naive, because it is a process of converting everything to certainty and self-protection, whiteness relies on an active decision to maintain its own ignorance. This central activity of whiteness has the outcome of preserving white certainty, confidence, and privilege to act as if untroubled by difficult thoughts and situations.

I examine a variety of arguments for better forms of white identity. I argue that rather than supplanting one form of problematic agency and identity with another, we turn instead to thinking about how whites may be part of an alliance against racism in a way that does not work toward white identity. Instead of concentrating on our white selves, we ought to work more toward anti racist goals in ways that may turn out to have nothing to do with the project of white identity-development and more to do with troubling whiteness’s certainty and privilege. I use as one possible model for thinking about educating for social change without encouraging the certainty of the dominant group to frame the terms of understanding, the ally movement that works against homophobia. The work of allies is not to clarify what it means to be not gay, but rather to examine and work against the benefits of those presumed to be heterosexual. In other words, allies trouble the certainty of heterosexuality. While the analogy is not a perfect one, I suggest that the refocusing of energy back to the problem of heterosexism and not the comforts of the heterosexual

may help reframe the approach to white agency. In conclusion, I borrow from the *Race Traitors* a call for using strategies of counterfeit to work against racism.¹ Because counterfeit is intent on upsetting systems of value, it may be a useful counter to strategies of positive white self-development that reinscribe white certainty and white agency. Because in this context, counterfeit works to undermine currency without directing attention to those doing the counterfeit, it may provide a model for understanding white work against racism that does not recenter the white subject.

MARKING PRIVILEGE OR BUILDING IDENTITY

One of the kinds of privilege whiteness affords is confidence in knowing the contours of a situation precisely because whites do not actually have to know very much about any situation. Whites can make assumptions about their welcome, their dominant knowledge, the acceptability of their practices, and rarely need to worry about being challenged because they define the norm. Privilege, in other words, gives whites a way to not know that does not even fully recognize the extent to which they do not know that race matters or that their agency is closely connected with their status. Whiteness is simultaneously self-effacing and powerful. This “privilege illiteracy” as Joe Kinchloe and Shirley Steinberg call it, allows whites to keep a sense of self that appears to be not intruded upon by structural concerns.² Of course, it is the very structural privilege of whiteness that allows whites to be confidently certain of themselves and further it is the mark of privilege that allows them never to see the workings of power that maintain their ease with their unmarked, uncomplicated selves. Even when white identities are complicated by other forms of difference like gender, class, and sexuality, white people may still strategically, if unconsciously, find refuge from uncertainty in white privilege. One form of that white-related quest for certainty is the desire to be seen as “curious” or ignorant, a desire that also maintains privilege because it essentially demands of the one they are trying to know a patient explanation. Even in situations, then, where the power of white certainty stalls, whiteness recuperates its agency by staging its own ignorance as a demand for information and understanding that it expects will be satisfied by someone else. As Alison Jones argues, when dominant groups seek to understand subordinate groups, they “grant a hearing” in which they exert their usual power in a way that appears as an honest invitation but is, in fact, a re-staging of their cultural power in their demand to know the other.³

We need to come up with an alternative to this form of noblesse oblige that, instead of relying on the certainty of the white actor, pushes them to see the limits of their understanding precisely because they are white in a white dominant society. Rather than encouraging white students to know themselves more comfortably as whites or as inhabiting a positive white identity, we ought to make pedagogical use of the form of unknowing that opened this essay. While I am not arguing that the discomforts of racism or any other bias are good for people, the kind of critical reading of self and social structure that they potentially encourage is a better way to be in the world than the kind of ignorant, self satisfaction that power and privilege encourages. Further, by moving all of us engaged in anti racist pedagogy into a position of “never knowing,” we move away from what I see as a troublesome trend

in selling white critical studies or whiteness studies that encourages whites to see certainty and identity for themselves that is defined around their racial identity and their ability to act with certainty.

Despite the concerns and repudiations of some scholars, whiteness studies has increasingly gained credibility and representation in curricula and publishing. Whiteness studies is largely concerned with not replicating white dominant forms of knowledge and yet, I will argue, some strains of whiteness studies, particularly in education, problematically recentralize white agency and identity in their attempts to dismantle white privilege. That whiteness studies might be a problem itself is not a new observation. At least one purported founder of whiteness studies has been concerned that the over concentration on “whiteness” without attention to how it is structured in relation to “blackness” has missed the theoretical point of discussing race in the first place. David Roediger, who does not identify as working in “whiteness studies” but is often so identified, has argued that the reason for bringing up “whiteness” was not to separate and reify it, but rather to place the construction of whiteness in an historical context that examines the stakes in claiming any racial, class, or other identity. As he sees it, those concerned with “whiteness” should study structural negotiations of power and strategies for framing justice claims in order to examine how whiteness works to make alliances against particular people in particular contexts.⁴ Another group working against white privilege, the Race Traitors, also concentrates on the strategic uses of whiteness and repudiation of whiteness. Despite some problematic tendencies toward heroic white individualism, Race Traitors, in their call for disloyalty to the white race, argue for the end of whiteness.⁵ Because they concentrate on strategies to undermine race privilege, like the strategy of counterfeit⁶ I will later discuss, they work against the need for an identity developed prior to action. Instead, they argue that whiteness is a structural phenomenon, a kind of privilege place-holder, predicated on structural privilege and that those structures need to be dismantled. There are fine criticisms of the Race Traitors’ shortcomings, but I will argue that whiteness studies also has some problems with individualizing race, even as it attempts to bring white people into careful consideration of race relations.⁷

Whiteness theory shares many of the goals of Race Traitors, but emphasizes the need to build a sense of identity in white students in order to encourage them to work against racism. In so doing, it hopes to provide whites with a legitimate way to enter into antiracist discourse, to overcome their sense of alienation from the civil rights struggle, and to supplant a sense of paralysis with a re-examination of the activity of whiteness. One potential difficulty and promise of whiteness studies is its alleviation of white feelings of non-identity. The main political point in marking a previously unmarked identity was to undo the privilege that allows the “unmarked” quality of whiteness by providing a label and then studying the history and effects of claims to whiteness. The potentially problematic side effect is to imply that whiteness as an area of study is in some way parallel to other identity studies (like African American studies, women’s studies, Latina/o studies, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender [lgbt] studies) where “pride” and rediscovery of previously covered

over or ignored histories are part of the project. “White pride” would, of course, be a politically distasteful goal, given that whiteness is not a personal or community identity, but has been a strategy to maintain inequities of privilege and power.

Despite some very legitimate pedagogical concerns, whiteness studies is overly concerned with packaging itself in a way that makes white students comfortable with engaging in anti racist activity. Here are just a sampling of the variety of explanations for the need for positive white identity or transformation of whiteness. Some theorists argue whites need a new identity in that the old version of whiteness has been so problematized as the source of racism that white students cannot see themselves as able to do any work if they are saddled with “whiteness as racism.” This argument for remaking whiteness contends that as white students study about other people’s identity, they need a parallel identity for themselves in order to envision their place in movements against racism. As Kincheloe and Steinberg put it, whiteness studies needs to help “antiracist whites in search of a new identity.”⁸ Flagg, too, argues for a “positive White racial identity” that helps whites to see that they have a race and that they can understand the problems of racism in more detail if race becomes a category of meaning for them.⁹ Henry Giroux argues that lack of white identity is behind white racist assaults on campus.¹⁰ He argues, “All students need to feel that they have a personal stake in their racial identity (however fluid, unstable, and transitory), an identity that will allow them to assert a view of political agency in which they can join with diverse groups.”¹¹ Other whiteness theorists argue that understanding their implicatedness in racism can hurt white students and unless their identity can be reformed, they will be unable to act against racism. Linda Martin Alcoff argues that “‘feeling white’ when coupled with a repudiation can disable a positive self-image as well as a felt relation to community and history, and generally disorient identity formation.”¹² As Alison Bailey puts it, “At present, white identity is constituted by and benefits from injustice. Transformative work demands that whites explore how to rearticulate our identities in ways that do not depend on the subordination of people of color.”¹³ Barbara Applebaum argues we need to take seriously the alienation of white students and help provide them with “a constructive self-image to aspire to.”¹⁴ Each of these arguments attempts to move whiteness into a parallel relationship with blackness, as if the strategy of whiteness had a cultural home that could, upon sufficient discovery or rearticulation, provide the base for action against racism. Making whiteness into an identity, whether one in need of recovery or radical change, misses the way whiteness has simply been a strategy to maintain privilege. Its very emptiness may be part of how it works, but adding detail to it does not dismantle any of its relation to privilege.

WHITE MISSIONARY PEDAGOGY

Another aspect of agency-centered trouble is reflected in the sense of missionary struggle in multicultural education and whiteness studies. One book on the difficulties of multicultural pedagogy, for instance, suggests that those teaching multiculturalism are “heroes.”¹⁵ Alice MacIntyre attempts to combine a recognition that whiteness is structurally invisible with her own intention to work against that structure by “making [her] whiteness public.” She argues that, “*Volunteering to*

make our whiteness public suggests a willingness on the part of white people to expose our whiteness to critique.”¹⁶ Voluntarism and heroism are each problematic concepts because they do not engage structures or acknowledge their debt to others, they engage individuals. Given that whiteness studies arose out of critical race theory, African American Studies, Latino/a studies, Asian American studies, Marxist history, Women’s studies, queer studies, the civil rights movement and the women’s movement, it is much more likely that white people have been pushed, not volunteered, into acknowledging their structural identity. Indeed, the idea that one could volunteer to recognize one’s privilege in a context where so many people have been critical of that privilege only indicates another situation in which white blindness fails to acknowledge the fact that people other than whites have been calling for challenges to white privilege. Instead of acknowledging outside critiques, whites not only make themselves appear as the actor of their own dismantling of whiteness, but also set the terms for the rearticulation of whiteness in order to provide themselves with a more certain base for their action. We might better examine who did the work to get the white subject into the discussion of racism and why. In the context of second wave feminism, for instance, it is clear that white women did not largely volunteer to address their racism. Women of color were very clearly responsible for insisting that white women label their race and go back into white communities to undo racism. This process of being called upon to do the kind of critical work that one ought to have found out on one’s own is not the stuff of heroes, nor is it something for which one volunteers. Indeed, the individualizing move of discourses of heroism and voluntarism disconnect the subject from the motivating context and parallel the kind of effacing of power that defines whiteness.

Even if we take identities to be processes, white identity is only as good as the work that it does against racism, not the work it does in reifying whiteness. So the action that a white person might take to challenge racism need not entail any solidification of white identity, but would rather be an activity that would undo the context that provides meaning for whiteness. In other words, the act that might be considered a subversive act against white privilege would be undertaken in the register of action against racism, not in the register of consideration of identity. Further, the concentration on whiteness by itself misses the degree to which identities are relationally constituted and constituted through action. Shifting from self-discovery to relationality gives us a way to examine history and current political formation for the alliances and shifts that already attend racial identity and anti racist work.

We need fuller vocabularies for understanding why certain forms of identity can more easily form alliances with other forms. As Herbert Aptheker has argued, historically, “(1) antiracism is more common among the so-called lower classes than among the so-called upper class; (2) antiracism especially appears among white people who have had significant experiences with people of African origin; and (3) antiracism seems to be more common among women than men.”¹⁷ So the particular forms of identity that white people inhabit are complicated by other factors and centralizing “white identity” as if it were seamless also neglects the difficulty many

white appearing people have in maintaining privilege all the time. In a book that helps white pre-service teachers understand themselves as white, one student interviewed finds the conceptual narrowness of its version of whiteness unable to account for other vectors of identity. In this example, a white student who waitresses attempts to challenge the racist assumptions of her co-workers about black people not tipping as much as whites. The student tries to move beyond simply citing the whiteness of the situation and use a more complex vocabulary of race and class relations, explaining why she thought white co-workers were especially aggrieved. She also explains why she thought black people, sensing white wait staff hostility, would be less than forthcoming with tips. But the researcher's commentary does not allow this complexity, commenting that the student misunderstood how pervasive whiteness was. Instead of grappling with complexity, sometimes whiteness studies reflects a fully reified understanding of whiteness as the main and only operative category of difference, despite the student's clear attempt to complicate identity and to talk about the specific contours of particular interactions.¹⁸ Because whiteness becomes, in that text, the only term of difference that is salient in the interaction, the complexity of power relations and associations is missed. Indeed, if whiteness studies concentrates too much on white identity, the surrounding context threatens to fade from view, as do the actions of white people and people of color working together. We would also do well to remember that as much as whiteness was embraced for its wages, those wages were often "spurious."¹⁹

EXCEPTIONALITY

By making white action and identity the center, in fact, whiteness studies threatens to revivify the white privilege they are seeking to critique. The fact that one might act uncertainly need not be a bind. The loss of certainty will only be a problem if one too easily presumes one's actions ought to have guaranteed results. Here is where white unknowing in the service of anti racism diverges from the unknowing of people of color invoked in the introduction. White people are more apt to act as if they are certain when they should not. Rather than being certain of their activities, white students should be uncomfortable about their complicity in systems they would prefer to opt out of. The site of their agency is also the site of their anxiety. That we might fix this by giving them a greater sense of agency seems mistaken. Concern with agency sometimes seems an antidote to a paralyzing sense of liberal guilt but I rather suspect that liberal guilt is more of a stalling tactic. The only way some people may be willing to enter the fray against racism is if they get constant positive feedback and recognition of their exceptionality.

Part of the desire for recognition of exceptionality, in the words of Audrey Thompson, is a desire to pass as "not the average white person."²⁰ As a tactic to avoid the pesky stage of liberal guilt, this might be a quick strategy, but I think it underscores another aspect of voluntarism that is mistaken. The desire for "white exceptionality" also continues to keep whiteness in play as the central salient feature of identity and in so doing simplifies the variety of deployments of "whiteness" and thus levels what is has meant to be white, as it neglects moments of alliance and common cause that have not been entirely structured around a white/non-white binary. Whiteness is not always the most salient term of identity in every situation

and indeed, the tendency of white people to make it so, that is, to assert their cultural power and value, can be quite problematic for alliances.

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 and that because of their whiteness, they are better than anyone else.²¹ While many writers are critical of the Race Traitors, suggesting that abolitionism is too aesthetic or voluntaristic, critics themselves do not fully follow through on their own intent to examine, for instance, the “deployment” of whiteness.²² When Foucault argues that sexuality was deployed, he marks out the growth of institutional and discursive sites of power and examines how those interactions between nodes of power formed an understanding of subjectivity around sexuality.²³ In other words, sexuality became a “thing” that could be examined and could be the secret to the self only through institutional practices and discourses that formed it. While perhaps somewhat akin to suggesting gays should focus on “becoming gay,” rather than abiding by given definitions of identity, he is nonetheless concerned that rendering the identity “gay” as certain would have problematic political effects.

Rather than “deploying whiteness” in the service of identity, whiteness studies might better spend its time examining the historical strategies used to fight racism. Because within those strategies are examples of alliance whose work was ultimately about dismantling the unfair privilege that attached to some people and building new forms of relations among groups that would, in turn, refigure power imbalances. Here is where the ally movement against homophobia provides a different model for understanding relationality of identity. Ally groups meet to discuss the pervasiveness of homophobia and develop strategies to work against the invisibility of queer and queer-supportive people. To be an ally does not necessarily mean that one is heterosexual, but rather that one will be present for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students or colleagues in need of support. When allies post the pink triangle on a lavender background on their doors or in their offices, they mark those spaces publicly as visible LGBT-supportive spaces. The actual identity of the ally is not the point. The focus is instead on the possibility of alliance among people dedicated to ending homophobia. In effect, they are engaged in a project intent on de-universalizing heterosexual privilege by marking out their support for non-heterosexual people. Further, because allies mark their action but not their own sexual identities, they potentially trouble the link between identity and action that whiteness studies finds so necessary.

Because they do not centralize their own identities, nor can they be certain of the outcome of their re-marking of public space, allies are engaged in an act parallel to that of the Race Traitors’ counterfeit. Race Traitors argue that abolishing the white race will only take the actions of a few who begin to dismantle and trouble what white privilege means. Because privilege relies on its certainty, the destabilizing effects of breaking its hold need not be pervasive. Like the ally movement, acts of traitorous counterfeit (a form of counterfeit intent on upsetting a system of value, not profiting

from it) will change the pervasiveness of white privilege. “How many will it take? No one can say for sure. It is a bit like the problem of currency: how much counterfeit money has to circulate in order to destroy the value of the official currency? The answer is, nowhere near a majority — just enough to undermine public confidence in the official stuff.”²⁴ Their point here is that whiteness presumes particular actions by white people and if even a few white people could act disloyally to white alliance, whiteness would lose currency.

In order to be a successful counterfeiter, one must remain hidden. Counterfeit, then, requires that the counterfeiter not become a hero or missionary. To the contrary, the counterfeiter must remain beside the point in order that counterfeit circulate. Counterfeit may of course be successful in terms of passing false money and action off as real, in which case the counterfeiter benefits from the traditional economy’s understanding of false goods as real. The action of performing against norms, in other words, is uncertain. Even imagining what white counterfeit would look like is difficult, because whites are not skilled at working in ways that do not make themselves visible. This is not an easy strategy because it demands that the process of the work and the outcome are congruent, that the focus on challenging racism remain the problem of racism and not the project of the white self.

There is likely no one way or even a certain way to ensure that antiracist projects have success. While there has certainly been progress in challenging racism, its persistence continues to demand equally persistent forms of response. People do, of course, refigure their relationship to race and racism and forms of racial identity and community also shift. As Aptheker reminds us, there is a long history of white work against racism in the United States and we have perhaps become politically inclined toward not mentioning it for fear it will appear we somehow lessen our attention to the pervasiveness of racism in the United States. But there is much in his account that can be of use, particularly to our students whose knowledge of history always tends to make them think that the state of affairs that face us now are exactly how it has ever been. As Sarah Grimke put it in 1838, it was “the duty of abolitionists to identify themselves with these oppressed Americans, by sitting with them in places of worship, by appearing with them on the streets, by giving them countenance in steamboats and stages, by visiting them at their homes and encouraging them to visit us, receiving them as we do our white fellow-citizens.”²⁵ The point was not to identify as whites, then, but to act against the privileges of whiteness while identifying with the struggles of those African Americans who faced them. Understanding uncertainty and counterfeit as strategies for fighting racism may help white students — and white instructors — to understand that it is not so much who we are, but what we do. Because the context for our action is dauntingly uncertain, we also may be reminded of the need to continually engage.

1. “When Does the Unreasonable Act Make Sense?” in *Race Traitor*, ed. Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey (New York: Routledge, 1996), 36-37.

2. Joe Kincheloe and Shirley Steinberg, “Addressing the Crisis of Whiteness,” *White Reign: Deploying Whiteness in America*, ed. Joe Kincheloe, Shirley R. Steinberg, Nelson M. Rodriguez, and Ronald E. Chennault (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1998), 21.

3. Alison Jones, "The Limits of Cross Cultural Dialogue: Pedagogy, Desire, and Absolution in the Classroom," *Educational Theory* 49, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 307.
4. David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1999), 13.
5. "When Does the Unreasonable Act Make Sense?" 35.
6. *Ibid.*, 36-37.
7. Kinchloe and Steinberg in "Addressing the Crisis of Whiteness," for instance, contend that race traitors want to appropriate nonwhite status for themselves, 22.
8. *Ibid.*, 21.
9. Barbara Flagg, "Was Blind, But Now I See: White Race Consciousness and the Requirement of Discriminatory Intent," 91 *Michigan Law Rev.* (1993), 953, 969.
10. Henry Giroux, "Rewriting the Discourse of Racial Identity," *Harvard Education Review* 67, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 296.
11. Giroux, "Rewriting," 297.
12. Linda Martin Alcoff, "What Should White People Do?" *Hypatia* 13, no. 3 (Summer 1998): 7.
13. Alison Bailey, "Locating Traitorous Identities: Toward a View of Privilege-Cognizant White Character," *Hypatia* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1998), 28.
14. Barbara Applebaum and Erin Stoik, "On the Meaning and Necessity of a Positive White Identity," *Philosophy of Education 2000*, ed. Lynda Stone (Urbana: Philosophy of Education Society, 2001), 308.
15. Rudolfo Chavez Chavez, "Engaging the Multicultural Education Terrain: A Holographic Montage for Engagers," *Speaking the Unpleasant: the Politics of (Non) Engagement in the Multicultural Education Terrain*, ed. Rudolfo Chavez Chavez and James O'Donnell (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 6.
16. Alice MacIntyre, *Making Meaning of Whiteness: Exploring Racial Identity with White Teachers*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 41-42.
17. Herbert Aptheker, *Antiracism in U. S. History: The First Two Hundred Years* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), xiv.
18. MacIntyre, *Making Meaning of Whiteness*, 73.
19. Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 13.
20. See Audrey Thompson, "Tiffany: Friend of People of Color: White Investments in Antiracism," *Qualitative Studies in Education* 16, no. 1 (2003): 7-29.
21. Christine Sleeter, "White Racism," *Multicultural Education* 1, no. 4 (1994): 8.
22. Kinchloe and Steinberg, "Addressing the Crisis of Whiteness," 3-30.
23. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Volume One: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990).
24. "When Does the Unreasonable Act Make Sense?" 36-37.
25. Sarah Grimke quoted in Herbert Aptheker, *The History of Antiracism in U. S. History: The First Two Hundred Years* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 138.

My class eventually became *Constructions of Whiteness*, and over the two years that I have taught it, many of my students (who have included just about every race, gender identity and sexual orientation) interviewed white people on campus or in their families about their understanding of American history and how it relates to whiteness. Some students simply wanted to know how others around them would define their own whiteness. Others were troubled by their own family members' racism and wanted to understand how and why certain prejudices formed. Still others wanted to show the impact of white privilege (or white skin privilege) is the societal privilege that benefits white people over non-white people, particularly if they are otherwise under the same social, political, or economic circumstances. With roots in European colonialism, the spread of the British Empire, and the enactment of the Atlantic slave trade, white privilege has developed over centuries, in circumstances that have broadly sought to protect white racial privileges, various national citizenships and other rights or Whites in America tend (on average) to be more culturally individualistic, while those from other groups tend (again, on average) to exhibit more collectivist social values. The group of which I am part, Asian-Americans, would be "privileged" on this index, since our rate (6.6) is well below that of whites. But would it really be wise for me to tackle the social problem of suicide by zooming in on some idea of "Asian privilege"? Her team was curious about the impact of teaching people about white privilege. Would it make people more sympathetic toward poor blacks? However it turns out there are certain questions that are verboten. 1. If white privilege is an issue why aren't Asians impacted in terms of wealth, life expectancy and incarceration?