White Fragility

by
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White people in North America live in a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress. This insulated environment of racial protection builds white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress, leading to what I refer to as White Fragility. White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium. This paper explicates the dynamics of White Fragility.

I am a white woman. I am standing beside a black woman. We are facing a group of white people who are seated in front of us. We are in their workplace, and have been hired by their employer to lead them in a dialogue about race. The room is filled with tension and charged with hostility. I have just presented a definition of racism that includes the acknowledgment that whites hold social and institutional power over people of color. A white man is pounding his fist on the table. His face is red and he is furious. As he pounds he yells, "White people have been discriminated against for 25 years! A white person can't get a job anymore!" I look around the room and see 40 employed people, all white. There are no people

of color in this workplace. Something is happening here, and it isn't based in the racial reality of the workplace. I am feeling unnerved by this man's disconnection with that reality, and his lack of sensitivity to the impact this is having on my co-facilitator, the only person of color in the room. Why is this white man so angry? Why is he being so careless about the impact of his anger? Why are all the other white people either sitting in silent agreement with him or tuning out? We have, after all, only articulated a definition of racism.

White people in North America live in a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress.[1] Fine (1997) identifies this insulation when she observes "… how Whiteness accrues privilege and status; gets itself surrounded by protective pillows of resources and/or benefits of the doubt; how Whiteness repels gossip and voyeurism and instead demands dignity" (p. 57). Whites are rarely without these "protective pillows," and when they are, it is usually temporary and by choice. This insulated environment of racial privilege builds white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress.

For many white people, a single required multicultural education course taken in college, or required "cultural competency training" in their workplace, is the only time they may encounter a direct and sustained challenge to their racial understandings. But even in this arena, not all multicultural courses or training programs talk directly about racism, much less address white privilege. It is far more the norm for these courses and programs to use racially coded language such as "urban," "inner city," and "disadvantaged" but to rarely use "white" or "over-advantaged" or "privileged." This racially coded language reproduces racist images and perspectives while it simultaneously reproduces the comfortable illusion that race and its problems are what "they" have, not us. Reasons why the facilitators of these courses and trainings may not directly name the dynamics and beneficiaries of racism range from the lack of a valid analysis of racism by white facilitators, personal and economic survival strategies for facilitators of color, and the overall pressure from management to keep the content comfortable and palatable for whites. However, if and when an educational program does directly address racism and the privileging of whites, common white responses include anger, withdrawal, emotional incapacitation, guilt, argumentation, and cognitive dissonance (all of which reinforce the pressure on facilitators to avoid directly addressing racism). So-called progressive whites may not respond with anger, but may still insulate themselves via claims that they are beyond the need for engaging with the content because they "already had a class on this" or "already know this." These reactions are often seen in anti-racist education endeavors as

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1. Although white racial insulation is somewhat mediated by social class (with poor and working class urban whites being generally less racially insulated than suburban or rural whites), the larger social environment insulates and protects whites as a group through institutions, cultural representations, media, school textbooks, movies, advertising, dominant discourses, etc.

forms of resistance to the challenge of internalized dominance (Whitehead & Wittig, 2005; Horton & Scott, 2004; McGowan, 2000, O'Donnell, 1998). These reactions do indeed function as resistance, but it may be useful to also conceptualize them as the result of the reduced psychosocial stamina that racial insulation inculcates. I call this lack of racial stamina "White Fragility."

Although mainstream definitions of racism are typically some variation of individual "race prejudice", which anyone of any race can have, Whiteness scholars define racism as encompassing economic, political, social, and cultural structures, actions, and beliefs that systematize and perpetuate an unequal distribution of privileges, resources and power between white people and people of color (Hilliard, 1992). This unequal distribution benefits whites and disadvantages people of color overall and as a group. Racism is not fluid in the U.S.; it does not flow back and forth, one day benefiting whites and another day (or even era) benefiting people of color. The direction of power between whites and people of color is historic, traditional, normalized, and deeply embedded in the fabric of U.S. society (Mills, 1999; Feagin, 2006). Whiteness itself refers to the specific dimensions of racism that serve to elevate white people over people of color. This definition counters the dominant representation of racism in mainstream education as isolated in discrete behaviors that some individuals may or may not demonstrate, and goes beyond naming specific privileges (McIntosh, 1988). Whites are theorized as actively shaped, affected, defined, and elevated through their racialization and the individual and collective consciousness' formed within it (Frankenberg, 1997; Morrison, 1992; Tatum, 1997). Recognizing that the terms I am using are not "theory neutral 'descriptors' but theory-laden constructs inseparable from systems of injustice" (Allen, 1996, p.95), I use the terms white and Whiteness to describe a social process. Frankenberg (1993) defines Whiteness as multi-dimensional:

> Whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a 'standpoint,' a place from which White people look at ourselves, at others, and at society. Third, 'Whiteness' refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed. (p.1)

Frankenberg and other theorists (Fine, 1997; Dyer, 1997; Sleeter, 1993; Van Dijk, 1993) use Whiteness to signify a set of locations that are historically, socially, politically and culturally produced, and which are intrinsically linked to dynamic relations of domination. Whiteness is thus conceptualized as a constellation of processes and practices rather than as a discrete entity (i.e. skin color alone). Whiteness is dynamic, relational, and operating at all times and on myriad levels. These processes and practices include basic rights, values, beliefs, perspectives and experiences purported to be commonly shared by all but which are actually only consistently afforded to white people. Whiteness Studies begin with the premise that racism and white privilege exist in both traditional and modern forms, and rather than work to prove its existence, work to reveal it. This article

will explore the dynamics of one aspect of Whiteness and its effects, White Fragility.

Triggers

White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium. Racial stress results from an interruption to what is racially familiar. These interruptions can take a variety of forms and come from a range of sources, including:

- Suggesting that a white person's viewpoint comes from a racialized frame of reference (challenge to objectivity);
- People of color talking directly about their racial perspectives (challenge to white racial codes);
- People of color choosing not to protect the racial feelings of white people in regards to race (challenge to white racial expectations and need/entitlement to racial comfort);
- People of color not being willing to tell their stories or answer questions about their racial experiences (challenge to colonialist relations);
- A fellow white not providing agreement with one's interpretations (challenge to white solidarity);
- Receiving feedback that one's behavior had a racist impact (challenge to white liberalism);
- Suggesting that group membership is significant (challenge to individualism);
- An acknowledgment that access is unequal between racial groups (challenge to meritocracy);
- Being presented with a person of color in a position of leadership (challenge to white authority);
- Being presented with information about other racial groups through, for example, movies in which people of color drive the action but are not in stereotypical roles, or multicultural education (challenge to white centrality).

In a white dominant environment, each of these challenges becomes exceptional. In turn, whites are often at a loss for how to respond in constructive ways. Whites have not had to build the cognitive or affective skills or develop the stamina that would allow for constructive engagement across racial divides. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* (1993) may be useful here. According to Bourdieu, habitus is a socialized subjectivity; a set of dispositions which generate practi-

ces and perceptions. As such, habitus only exists in, through and because of the practices of actors and their interaction with each other and with the rest of their environment. Based on the previous conditions and experiences that produce it, habitus produces and reproduces thoughts, perceptions, expressions and actions. Strategies of response to "disequilibrium" in the habitus are not based on conscious intentionality but rather result from unconscious dispositions towards practice, and depend on the power position the agent occupies in the social structure. White Fragility may be conceptualized as a product of the habitus, a response or "condition" produced and reproduced by the continual social and material advantages of the white structural position.

Omi & Winant posit the U.S. racial order as an "unstable equilibrium," kept equilibrated by the State, but still unstable due to continual conflicts of interests and challenges to the racial order (pp. 78-9). Using Omi & Winant's concept of unstable racial equilibrium, white privilege can be thought of as unstable racial equilibrium at the level of habitus. When any of the above triggers (challenges in the habitus) occur, the resulting disequilibrium becomes intolerable. Because White Fragility finds its support in and is a function of white privilege, fragility and privilege result in responses that function to restore equilibrium and return the resources "lost" via the challenge - resistance towards the trigger, shutting down and/or tuning out, indulgence in emotional incapacitation such as guilt or "hurt feelings", exiting, or a combination of these responses.

Factors that inculcate White Fragility

Segregation

The first factor leading to White Fragility is the segregated lives which most white people live (Frankenberg, Lee & Orfield, 2003). Even if whites live in physical proximity to people of color (and this would be exceptional outside of an urban or temporarily mixed class neighborhood), segregation occurs on multiple levels, including representational and informational. Because whites live primarily segregated lives in a white-dominated society, they receive little or no authentic information about racism and are thus unprepared to think about it critically or with complexity. Growing up in segregated environments (schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, media images and historical perspectives), white interests and perspectives are almost always central. An inability to see or consider significance in the perspectives of people of color results (Collins, 2000).

Further, white people are taught not to feel any loss over the absence of people of color in their lives and in fact, this absence is what defines their schools and neighborhoods as "good;" whites come to understand that a "good school" or "good neighborhood" is coded language for "white" (Johnson & Shapiro, 2003). The quality of white space being in large part measured via the absence of people of color (and Blacks in particular) is a profound message indeed, one that is deeply internalized and reinforced daily through normalized discourses about good

schools and neighborhoods. This dynamic of gain rather than loss via racial segregation may be the most profound aspect of white racial socialization of all. Yet, while discourses about what makes a space good are tacitly understood as racially coded, this coding is explicitly denied by whites.

Universalism & Individualism

Whites are taught to see their perspectives as objective and representative of reality (McIntosh, 1988). The belief in objectivity, coupled with positioning white people as outside of culture (and thus the norm for humanity), allows whites to view themselves as universal humans who can represent all of human experience. This is evidenced through an unracialized identity or location, which functions as a kind of blindness; an inability to think about Whiteness as an identity or as a "state" of being that would or could have an impact on one's life. In this position, Whiteness is not recognized or named by white people, and a universal reference point is assumed. White people are just people. Within this construction, whites can represent humanity, while people of color, who are never just people but always most particularly black people, Asian people, etc., can only represent their own racialized experiences (Dyer, 1992).

The discourse of universalism functions similarly to the discourse of individualism but instead of declaring that we all need to see each other as individuals (everyone is different), the person declares that we all need to see each other as human beings (everyone is the same). Of course we are all humans, and I do not critique universalism in general, but when applied to racism, universalism functions to deny the significance of race and the advantages of being white. Further, universalism assumes that whites and people of color have the same realities, the same experiences in the same contexts (i.e. I feel comfortable in this majority white classroom, so you must too), the same responses from others, and assumes that the same doors are open to all. Acknowledging racism as a system of privilege conferred on whites challenges claims to universalism.

At the same time that whites are taught to see their interests and perspectives as universal, they are also taught to value the individual and to see themselves as individuals rather than as part of a racially socialized group. Individualism erases history and hides the ways in which wealth has been distributed and accumulated over generations to benefit whites today. It allows whites to view themselves as unique and original, outside of socialization and unaffected by the relentless racial messages in the culture. Individualism also allows whites to distance themselves from the actions of their racial group and demand to be granted the benefit of the doubt, as individuals, in all cases. A corollary to this unracialized identity is the ability to recognize Whiteness as something that is significant and that operates in society, but to not see how it relates to one's own life. In this form, a white person recognizes Whiteness as real, but as the individual problem of other "bad" white people (DiAngelo, 2010a).

Given the ideology of individualism, whites often respond defensively when linked to other whites as a group or "accused" of collectively benefiting from racism, because as individuals, each white person is "different" from any other white person and expects to be seen as such. This narcissism is not necessarily the result of a consciously held belief that whites are superior to others (although that may play a role), but a result of the white racial insulation ubiquitous in dominant culture (Dawkins, 2004; Frankenberg, Lee & Orfield, 2003); a general white inability to see non-white perspectives as significant, except in sporadic and impotent reflexes, which have little or no long-term momentum or political usefulness (Rich, 1979).

Whites invoke these seemingly contradictory discourses—we are either all unique or we are all the same—interchangeably. Both discourses work to deny white privilege and the significance of race. Further, on the cultural level, being an individual or being a human outside of a racial group is a privilege only afforded to white people. In other words, people of color are almost always seen as "having a race" and described in racial terms ("the black man") but whites rarely are ("the man"), allowing whites to see themselves as objective and non-racialized. In turn, being seen (and seeing ourselves) as individuals outside of race frees whites from the psychic burden of race in a wholly racialized society. Race and racism become their problems, not ours. Challenging these frameworks becomes a kind of unwelcome shock to the system.

The disavowal of race as an organizing factor, both of individual white consciousness and the institutions of society at large, is necessary to support current structures of capitalism and domination, for without it, the correlation between the distribution of social resources and unearned white privilege would be evident (Flax, 1998). The existence of structural inequality undermines the claim that privilege is simply a reflection of hard work and virtue. Therefore, inequality must be hidden or justified as resulting from lack of effort (Mills, 1997; Ryan, 2001). Individualism accomplishes both of these tasks. At the same time, the individual presented as outside these relations cannot exist without its disavowed other. Thus, an essential dichotomy is formed between specifically raced others and the unracialized individual. Whites have deep investments in race, for the abstract depends on the particular (Flax, 1998); they need raced others as the backdrop against which they may rise (Morrison, 1992). Exposing this dichotomy destabilizes white identity.

Entitlement to racial comfort

In the dominant position, whites are almost always racially comfortable and thus have developed unchallenged expectations to remain so (DiAngelo, 2006b). Whites have not had to build tolerance for racial discomfort and thus when racial discomfort arises, whites typically respond as if something is "wrong," and blame the person or event that triggered the discomfort (usually a person of color).

This blame results in a socially-sanctioned array of counter-moves against the perceived source of the discomfort, including: penalization; retaliation; isolation; ostracization; and refusal to continue engagement. White insistence on racial comfort ensures that racism will not be faced. This insistence also functions to punish those who break white codes of comfort. Whites often confuse comfort with safety and state that we don't feel safe when what we really mean is that we don't feel comfortable. This trivializes our history of brutality towards people of color and perverts the reality of that history. Because we don't think complexly about racism, we don't ask ourselves what safety means from a position of societal dominance, or the impact on people of color, given our history, for whites to complain about our safety when we are merely *talking* about racism.

Racial Arrogance

Ideological racism includes strongly positive images of the white self as well as strongly negative images of racial "others" (Feagin, 2000, p. 33). This self-image engenders a self-perpetuating sense of entitlement because many whites believe their financial and professional successes are the result of their own efforts while ignoring the fact of white privilege. Because most whites have not been trained to think complexly about racism in schools (Derman-Sparks, Ramsey & Olsen Edwards, 2006; Sleeter, 1993) or mainstream discourse, and because it benefits white dominance not to do so, we have a very limited understanding of racism. Yet dominance leads to racial arrogance, and in this racial arrogance, whites have no compunction about debating the knowledge of people who have thought complexly about race. Whites generally feel free to dismiss these informed perspectives rather than have the humility to acknowledge that they are unfamiliar, reflect on them further, or seek more information. This intelligence and expertise are often trivialized and countered with simplistic platitudes (i.e. "People just need to…").

Because of white social, economic and political power within a white dominant culture, whites are positioned to legitimize people of color's assertions of racism. Yet whites are the least likely to see, understand, or be invested in validating those assertions and being honest about their consequences, which leads whites to claim that they disagree with perspectives that challenge their worldview, when in fact, they don't understand the perspective.Thus, theyconfuse not understanding with not agreeing. This racial arrogance, coupled with the need for racial comfort, also has whites insisting that people of color explain white racism in the "right" way. The right way is generally politely and rationally, without any show of emotional upset. When explained in a way that white people can see and understand, racism's validity may be granted (references to dynamics of racism that white people do not understand are usually rejected out of hand). However, whites are usually more receptive to validating white racism if that racism is constructed as residing in individual white people other than themselves.

Racial Belonging

White people enjoy a deeply internalized, largely unconscious sense of racial belonging in U.S. society (DiAngelo, 2006b; McIntosh, 1988). This racial belonging is instilled via the whiteness embedded in the culture at large. Everywhere we look, we see our own racial image reflected back to us – in our heroes and heroines, in standards of beauty, in our role-models and teachers, in our textbooks and historical memory, in the media, in religious iconography including the image of god himself, etc. In virtually any situation or image deemed valuable in dominant society, whites belong. Indeed, it is rare for most whites to experience a sense of not belonging, and such experiences are usually very temporary, easily avoidable situations. Racial belonging becomes deeply internalized and taken for granted. In dominant society, interruption of racial belonging is rare and thus destabilizing and frightening to whites.

Whites consistently choose and enjoy racial segregation. Living, working, and playing in racial segregation is unremarkable as long as it is not named or made explicitly intentional. For example, in many anti-racist endeavors, a common exercise is to separate into caucus groups by race in order to discuss issues specific to your racial group, and without the pressure or stress of other groups' presence. Generally, people of color appreciate this opportunity for racial fellowship, but white people typically become very uncomfortable, agitated and upset - even though this temporary separation is in the service of addressing racism. Responses include a disorienting sense of themselves as not just people, but most particularly white people; a curious sense of loss about this contrived and temporary separation which they don't feel about the real and on-going segregation in their daily lives; and anxiety about not knowing what is going on in the groups of color. The irony, again, is that most whites live in racial segregation every day, and in fact, are the group most likely to intentionally choose that segregation (albeit obscured in racially coded language such as seeking "good schools" and "good neighborhoods"). This segregation is unremarkable until it is named as deliberate – i.e. "We are now going to separate by race for a short exercise."I posit that it is the intentionality that is so disquieting – as long as we don't mean to separate, as long as it "just happens" that we live segregated lives, we can maintain a (fragile) identity of racial innocence.

Psychic freedom

Because race is constructed as residing in people of color, whites don't bear the social burden of race. We move easily through our society without a sense of ourselves as racialized subjects (Dyer, 1997). We see race as operating when people of color are present, but all-white spaces as "pure" spaces – untainted by race *vis á vis* the absence of the carriers of race (and thereby the racial polluters) – people of color. This perspective is perfectly captured in a familiar white statement, "I was lucky. I grew up in an all-white neighborhood so I didn't learn anything about ra-

cism." In this discursive move, whiteness gains its meaning through its purported lack of encounter with non-whiteness (Nakayama & Martin, 1999). Because racial segregation is deemed socially valuable while simultaneously unracial and unremarkable, we rarely, if ever, have to think about race and racism, and receive no penalty for not thinking about it. In fact, whites are more likely to be penalized (primarily by other whites) for bringing race up in a social justice context than for ignoring it (however, it is acceptable to bring race up indirectly and in ways that reinforce racist attitudes, i.e. warning other whites to stay away from certain neighborhoods, etc.). This frees whites from carrying the psychic burden of race. Race is for people of color to think about – it is what happens to "them" – they can bring it up if it is an issue for them (although if they do, we can dismiss it as a personal problem, the "race card", or the reason for their problems). This allows whites to devote much more psychological energy to other issues, and prevents us from developing the stamina to sustain attention on an issue as charged and uncomfortable as race.

Constant messages that we are more valuable – through representation in everything

Living in a white dominant context, we receive constant messages that we are better and more important than people of color. These messages operate on multiple levels and are conveyed in a range of ways. For example: our centrality in history textbooks, historical representations and perspectives; our centrality in media and advertising (for example, a recent Vogue magazine cover boldly stated, "The World's Next Top Models" and every woman on the front cover was white); our teachers, role-models, heroes and heroines; everyday discourse on "good" neighborhoods and schools and who is in them; popular TV shows centered around friendship circles that are all white; religious iconography that depicts god, Adam and Eve, and other key figures as white, commentary on new stories about how shocking any crime is that occurs in white suburbs; and, the lack of a sense of loss about the absence of people of color in most white people's lives. While one may explicitly reject the notion that one is inherently better than another, one cannot avoid internalizing the message of white superiority, as it is ubiquitous in mainstream culture (Tatum, 1997; Doane, 1997).

What does White Fragility look like?

A large body of research about children and race demonstrates that children start to construct ideas about race very early; a sense of white superiority and knowledge of racial power codes appears to develop as early as pre-school (Clark, 1963; Derman-Sparks, Ramsey, & Olsen Edwards, 2006). Marty (1999) states,

> As in other Western nations, white children born in the United States inherit the moral predicament of living in a white supremacist society. Raised to experience

their racially based advantages as fair and normal, white children receive little if any instruction regarding the predicament they face, let alone any guidance in how to resolve it. Therefore, they experience or learn about racial tension without understanding Euro-Americans' historical responsibility for it and knowing virtually nothing about their contemporary roles in perpetuating it (p. 51).

At the same time that it is ubiquitous, white superiority also remains unnamed and explicitly denied by most whites. If white children become adults who explicitly oppose racism, as do many, they often organize their identity around a denial of the racially based privileges they hold that reinforce racist disadvantage for others. What is particularly problematic about this contradiction is that white moral objection to racism increases white resistance to acknowledging complicity with it. In a white supremacist context, white identity in large part rests upon a foundation of (superficial) racial toleration and acceptance. Whites who position themselves as liberal often opt to protect what they perceive as their moral reputations, rather than recognize or change their participation in systems of inequity and domination. In so responding, whites invoke the power to choose when, how, and how much to address or challenge racism. Thus, pointing out white advantage will often trigger patterns of confusion, defensiveness and righteous indignation. When confronted with a challenge to white racial codes, many white liberals use the speech of self-defense (Van Dijk, 1992). This discourse enables defenders to protect their moral character against what they perceive as accusation and attack while deflecting any recognition of culpability or need of accountability. Focusing on restoring their moral standing through these tactics, whites are able to avoid the question of white privilege (Marty, 1999, Van Dijk, 1992).

Those who lead whites in discussions of race may find the discourse of self-defense familiar. Via this discourse, whites position themselves as victimized, slammed, blamed, attacked, and being used as "punching bag[s]" (DiAngelo, 2006c). Whites who describe interactions in this way are responding to the articulation of counter narratives; nothing physically out of the ordinary has ever occurred in any inter-racial discussion that I am aware of. These self-defense claims work on multiple levels to: position the speakers as morally superior while obscuring the true power of their social locations; blame others with less social power for their discomfort; falsely position that discomfort as dangerous; and reinscribe racist imagery. This discourse of victimization also enables whites to avoid responsibility for the racial power and privilege they wield. By positioning themselves as victims of anti-racist efforts, they cannot be the beneficiaries of white privilege. Claiming that *they* have been treated unfairly via a challenge to their position or an expectation that they listen to the perspectives and experiences of people of color, they are able to demand that more social resources (such as time and attention) be channeled in their direction to help them cope with this mistreatment.

A cogent example of White Fragility occurred recently during a workplace anti-racism training I co-facilitated with an inter-racial team. One of the white

participants left the session and went back to her desk, upset at receiving (what appeared to the training team as) sensitive and diplomatic feedback on how some of her statements had impacted several people of color in the room. At break, several other white participants approached us (the trainers) and reported that they had talked to the woman at her desk, and she was very upset that her statements had been challenged. They wanted to alert us to the fact that she literally "might be having a heart-attack." Upon questioning from us, they clarified that they meant this *literally*. These co-workers were sincere in their fear that the young woman might actually physically die as a result of the feedback. Of course, when news of the woman's potentially fatal condition reached the rest of the participant group, all attention was immediately focused back onto her and away from the impact she had had on the people of color. As Vodde (2001) states, "If privilege is defined as a legitimization of one's entitlement to resources, it can also be defined as permission to escape or avoid any challenges to this entitlement" (p. 3).

The language of violence that many whites use to describe anti-racist en-deavors is not without significance, as it is another example of the way that White Fragility distorts and perverts reality. By employing terms that connote physical abuse, whites tap into the classic discourse of people of color (particularly African Americans) as dangerous and violent. This discourse perverts the actual direction of danger that exists between whites and others. The history of brutal, extensive, institutionalized and ongoing violence perpetrated by whites against people of color—slavery, genocide, lynching, whipping, forced sterilization and medical experimentation to mention a few—becomes profoundly trivialized when whites claim they don't feel safe or are under attack when in the rare situation of merely talking about race with people of color. The use of this discourse illustrates how fragile and ill-equipped most white people are to confront racial tensions, and their subsequent projection of this tension onto people of color (Morrison, 1992). Goldberg (1993) argues that the questions surrounding racial discourse should not focus so much on how true stereotypes are, but how the truth claims they offer are a part of a larger worldview that authorizes and normalizes forms of domination and control. Further, it is relevant to ask: Under what conditions are those truth-claims clung to most tenaciously?

Bonilla-Silva (2006) documents a manifestation of White Fragility in his study of color-blind white racism. He states, "Because the new racial climate in America forbids the open expression of racially based feelings, views, and pos-itions, when whites discuss issues that make them uncomfortable, they become al-most incomprehensible – I, I, I, I don't mean, you know, but…- " (p. 68). Probing forbidden racial issues results in verbal incoherence - digressions, long pauses, repetition, and self-corrections. He suggests that this incoherent talk is a function of talking about race in a world that insists race does not matter. This incoherence is one demonstration that many white people are unprepared to engage, even on a preliminary level, in an exploration of their racial perspectives that could lead to a shift in their understanding of racism. This lack of preparedness results in the

maintenance of white power because the ability to determine which narratives are authorized and which are suppressed is the foundation of cultural domination (Banks, 1996; Said, 1994; Spivak, 1990). Further, this lack of preparedness has further implications, for if whites cannot engage with an exploration of alternate racial perspectives, they can only reinscribe white perspectives as universal.

However, an assertion that whites do not engage with dynamics of racial discourse is somewhat misleading. White people do notice the racial locations of racial others and discuss this freely among themselves, albeit often in coded ways. Their refusal to directly acknowledge this race talk results in a kind of split consciousness that leads to the incoherence Bonilla-Silva documents above (Feagin, 2000; Flax, 1998; hooks, 1992; Morrison, 1992). This denial also guarantees that the racial misinformation that circulates in the culture and frames their perspectives will be left unexamined. The continual retreat from the discomfort of authentic racial engagement in a culture infused withracial disparity limits the ability to form authentic connections across racial lines, and results in a perpetual cycle that works to hold racism in place.

Conclusion

White people often believe that multicultural / anti-racist education is only necessary for those who interact with "minorities" or in "diverse" environments. However, the dynamics discussed here suggest that it is critical that all white people build the stamina to sustain conscious and explicit engagement with race. When whites posit race as non-operative because there are few, if any, people of color in their immediate environments, Whiteness is reinscribed ever more deeply (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006). When whites only notice "raced others," we reinscribe Whiteness by continuing to posit Whiteness as universal and non-Whiteness as other. Further, if we can't listen to or comprehend the perspectives of people of color, we cannot bridge cross-racial divides. A continual retreat from the discomfort of authentic racial engagement results in a perpetual cycle that works to hold racism in place.

While anti-racist efforts ultimately seek to transform institutionalized racism, anti-racist education may be most effective by starting at the micro level. The goal is to generate the development of perspectives and skills that enable all people, regardless of racial location, to be active initiators of change. Since all individuals who live within a racist system are enmeshed in its relations, this means that all are responsible for either perpetuating or transforming that system. However, although all individuals play a role in keeping the system active, the responsibility for change is not equally shared. White racism is ultimately a white problem and the burden for interrupting it belongs to white people (Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 1997; hooks, 1995; Wise, 2003). Conversations about Whiteness might best happen within the context of a larger conversation about racism. It is useful to start at the micro level of analysis, and move to the macro, from the individual out to the

interpersonal, societal and institutional. Starting with the individual and moving outward to the ultimate framework for racism – Whiteness – allows for the pacing that is necessary for many white people for approaching the challenging study of race. In this way, a discourse on Whiteness becomes part of a process rather than an event (Zúñiga, Nagda, & Sevig, 2002).

Many white people have never been given direct or complex information about racism before, and often cannot explicitly see, feel, or understand it (Trepagnier, 2006; Weber, 2001). People of color are generally much more aware of racism on a personal level, but due to the wider society's silence and denial of it, often do not have a macro-level framework from which to analyze their experiences (Sue, 2003; Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Further, dominant society "assigns" different roles to different groups of color (Smith, 2005), and a critical consciousness about racism varies not only between individuals within groups, but also between groups. For example, many African Americans relate having been "prepared" by parents to live in a racist society, while many Asian heritage people say that racism was never directly discussed in their homes (hooks, 1989; Lee, 1996). A macro-level analysis may offer a framework to understand different interpretations and performances across and between racial groups. In this way, all parties benefit and efforts are not solely focused on whites (which works to re-center Whiteness).

Talking directly about white power and privilege, in addition to providing much needed information and shared definitions, is also in itself a powerful interruption of common (and oppressive) discursive patterns around race. At the same time, white people often need to reflect upon racial information and be allowed to make connections between the information and their own lives. Educators can encourage and support white participants in making their engagement a point of analysis. White Fragility doesn't always manifest in overt ways; silence and withdrawal are also functions of fragility. Who speaks, who doesn't speak, when, for how long, and with what emotional valence are all keys to understanding the relational patterns that hold oppression in place (Gee, 1999; Powell, 1997). Viewing white anger, defensiveness, silence, and withdrawal in response to issues of race through the framework of White Fragility may help frame the problem as an issue of stamina-building, and thereby guide our interventions accordingly.

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Chapter 2

Eating the Other

Desire and Resistance

This is theory's acute dilemma: that desire expresses itself most fully where only those absorbed in its delights and torments are present, that it triumphs most completely over other human preoccupations in places sheltered from view. Thus it is paradoxically in hiding that the secrets of desire come to light, that hegemonic impositions and their reversals, evasions, and subversions are at their most honest and active, and that the identities and disjunctures between felt passion and established culture place themselves on most vivid display.

—Joan Cocks
The Oppositional Imagination

Within current debates about race and difference, mass culture is the contemporary location that both publicly declares and perpetuates the idea that there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgment and enjoyment of racial difference. The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture. Cultural taboos around sexuality and desire are transgressed and made explicit as the media bombards folks with a message of difference no longer based on the white supremacist assumption that "blondes have more fun." The "real fun" is to be had by bringing to the surface all those "nasty" unconscious

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fantasies and longings about contact with the Other embedded in the secret (not so secret) deep structure of white supremacy. In many ways it is a contemporary revival of interest in the "primitive," with a distinctly postmodern slant. As Marianna Torgovnick argues in *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects, Modern Lives*:

> What is clear now is that the West's fascination with the primitive has to do with its own crises in identity, with its own need to clearly demarcate subject and object even while flirting with other ways of experiencing the universe.

Certainly from the standpoint of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the hope is that desires for the "primitive" or fantasies about the Other can be continually exploited, and that such exploitation will occur in a manner that reinscribes and maintains the *status quo*. Whether or not desire for contact with the Other, for connection rooted in the longing for pleasure, can act as a critical intervention challenging and subverting racist domination, inviting and enabling critical resistance, is an unrealized political possibility. Exploring how desire for the Other is expressed, manipulated, and transformed by encounters with difference and the different is a critical terrain that can indicate whether these potentially revolutionary longings are ever fulfilled.

Contemporary working-class British slang playfully converges the discourse of desire, sexuality, and the Other, evoking the phrase getting "a bit of the Other" as a way to speak about sexual encounter. Fucking is the Other. Displacing the notion of Otherness from race, ethnicity, skin-color, the body emerges as a site of contestation where sexuality is the metaphoric Other that threatens to take over, consume, transform *via* the experience of pleasure. Desired and sought after, sexual pleasure alters the consenting subject, deconstructing notions of will, control, coercive domination. Commodity culture in the United States exploits conventional thinking about race, gender, and sexual desire by "working" both the idea that racial difference marks one as Other and the assumption that sexual agency expressed within the context of racialized sexual encounter is a conversion experience that alters one's place and participation in contemporary cultural politics. The seductive promise of this encounter is that it will counter the terrorizing force of the *status quo* that makes identity fixed, static, a condition of containment and death. And that it is this willingness to transgress racial boundaries within the realm of the sexual that eradicates the fear that one must always conform to the norm to remain "safe." Difference can seduce precisely because the mainstream impo-

sition of sameness is a provocation that terrorizes. And as Jean Baudrillard suggests in *Fatal Strategies*:

> Provocation—unlike seduction, which allows things to come into play and appear in secret, dual and ambiguous—does not leave you free to be; it calls on you to reveal yourself as you are. It is always blackmail by identity (and thus a symbolic murder, since you are never that, except precisely by being condemned to it).

To make one's self vulnerable to the seduction of difference, to seek an encounter with the Other, does not require that one relinquish forever one's mainstream positionality. When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other. While teaching at Yale, I walked one bright spring day in the downtown area of New Haven, which is close to campus and invariably brings one into contact with many of the poor black people who live nearby, and found myself walking behind a group of very blond, very white, jock type boys. (The downtown area was often talked about as an arena where racist domination of blacks by whites was contested on the sidewalks, as white people, usually male, often jocks, used their bodies to force black people off the sidewalk, to push our bodies aside, without ever looking at us or acknowledging our presence.) Seemingly unaware of my presence, these young men talked about their plans to fuck as many girls from other racial/ethnic groups as they could "catch" before graduation. They "ran" it down. Black girls were high on the list, Native American girls hard to find, Asian girls (all lumped into the same category), deemed easier to entice, were considered "prime targets." Talking about this overheard conversation with my students, I found that it was commonly accepted that one "shopped" for sexual partners in the same way one "shopped" for courses at Yale, and that race and ethnicity was a serious category on which selections were based.

To these young males and their buddies, fucking was a way to confront the Other, as well as a way to make themselves over, to leave behind white "innocence" and enter the world of "experience." As is often the case in this society, they were confident that non-white people had more life experience, were more worldly, sensual, and sexual because they were different. Getting a bit of the Other, in this case engaging in sexual encounters with non-white females, was considered a ritual of transcendence, a movement out into a world of difference

that would transform, an acceptable rite of passage. The direct objective was not simply to sexually possess the Other; it was to be changed in some way by the encounter. "Naturally," the presence of the Other, the body of the Other, was seen as existing to serve the ends of white male desires. Writing about the way difference is recouped in the West in "The 'Primitive' Unconscious of Modern Art, or White Skin, Black Masks," Hal Foster reminds readers that Picasso regarded the tribal objects he had acquired as "witnesses" rather than as "models." Foster critiques this positioning of the Other, emphasizing that this recognition was "contingent upon instrumentality": "In this way, through affinity and use, the primitive is sent up into the service of the Western tradition (which is then seen to have partly produced it)." A similar critique can be made of contemporary trends in inter-racial sexual desire and contact initiated by white males. They claim the body of the colored Other instrumentally, as unexplored terrain, a symbolic frontier that will be fertile ground for their reconstruction of the masculine norm, for asserting themselves as transgressive desiring subjects. They call upon the Other to be both witness and participant in this transformation.

For white boys to openly discuss their desire for colored girls (or boys) publicly announces their break with a white supremacist past that would have such desire articulated only as taboo, as secret, as shame. They see their willingness to openly name their desire for the Other as affirmation of cultural plurality (its impact on sexual preference and choice). Unlike racist white men who historically violated the bodies of black women/women of color to assert their position as colonizer/conqueror, these young men see themselves as non-racists, who choose to transgress racial boundaries within the sexual realm not to dominate the Other, but rather so that they can be acted upon, so that they can be changed utterly. Not at all attuned to those aspects of their sexual fantasies that irrevocably link them to collective white racist domination, they believe their desire for contact represents a progressive change in white attitudes towards non-whites. They do not see themselves as perpetuating racism. To them the most potent indication of that change is the frank expression of longing, the open declaration of desire, the need to be intimate with dark Others. The point is to be changed by this convergence of pleasure and Otherness. One dares—acts—on the assumption that the exploration into the world of difference, into the body of the Other, will provide a greater, more intense pleasure than any that exists in the ordinary world of one's familiar racial group. And even though the conviction is that the familiar world

will remain intact even as one ventures outside it, the hope is that they will reenter that world no longer the same.

The current wave of "imperialist nostalgia" (defined by Renato Rosaldo in *Culture and Truth* as "nostalgia, often found under imperialism, where people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed" or as "a process of yearning for what one has destroyed that is a form of mystification") often obscures contemporary cultural strategies deployed not to mourn but to celebrate the sense of a continuum of "primitivism." In mass culture, imperialist nostalgia takes the form of reenacting and reritualizing in different ways the imperialist, colonizing journey as narrative fantasy of power and desire, of seduction by the Other. This longing is rooted in the atavistic belief that the spirit of the "primitive" resides in the bodies of dark Others whose cultures, traditions, and lifestyles may indeed be irrevocably changed by imperialism, colonization, and racist domination. The desire to make contact with those bodies deemed Other, with no apparent will to dominate, assuages the guilt of the past, even takes the form of a defiant gesture where one denies accountability and historical connection. Most importantly, it establishes a contemporary narrative where the suffering imposed by structures of domination on those designated Other is deflected by an emphasis on seduction and longing where the desire is not to make the Other over in one's image but to become the Other.

Whereas mournful imperialist nostalgia constitutes the betrayed and abandoned world of the Other as an accumulation of lack and loss, contemporary longing for the "primitive" is expressed by the projection onto the Other of a sense of plenty, bounty, a field of dreams. Commenting on this strategy in "Readings in Cultural Resistance," Hal Foster contends, "Difference is thus used productively; indeed, in a social order which seems to know no outside (and which must contrive its own transgressions to redefine its limits), difference is often fabricated in the interests of social control as well as of commodity innovation." Masses of young people dissatisfied by U.S. imperialism, unemployment, lack of economic opportunity, afflicted by the postmodern malaise of alienation, no sense of grounding, no redemptive identity, can be manipulated by cultural strategies that offer Otherness as appeasement, particularly through commodification. The contemporary crises of identity in the west, especially as experienced by white youth, are eased when the "primitive" is recouped *via* a focus on diversity and pluralism which suggests the Other can provide life-sustaining alternatives. Concurrently, diverse ethnic/racial groups can also embrace this

sense of specialness, that histories and experience once seen as worthy only of disdain can be looked upon with awe.

Cultural appropriation of the Other assuages feelings of deprivation and lack that assault the psyches of radical white youth who choose to be disloyal to western civilization. Concurrently, marginalized groups, deemed Other, who have been ignored, rendered invisible, can be seduced by the emphasis on Otherness, by its commodification, because it offers the promise of recognition and reconciliation. When the dominant culture demands that the Other be offered as sign that progressive political change is taking place, that the American Dream can indeed be inclusive of difference, it invites a resurgence of essentialist cultural nationalism. The acknowledged Other must assume recognizable forms. Hence, it is not African American culture formed in resistance to contemporary situations that surfaces, but nostalgic evocation of a "glorious" past. And even though the focus is often on the ways that this past was "superior" to the present, this cultural narrative relies on stereotypes of the "primitive," even as it eschews the term, to evoke a world where black people were in harmony with nature and with one another. This narrative is linked to white western conceptions of the dark Other, not to a radical questioning of those representations.

Should youth of any other color not know how to move closer to the Other, or how to get in touch with the "primitive," consumer culture promises to show the way. It is within the commercial realm of advertising that the drama of Otherness finds expression. Encounters with Otherness are clearly marked as more exciting, more intense, and more threatening. The lure is the combination of pleasure and danger. In the cultural marketplace the Other is coded as having the capacity to be more alive, as holding the secret that will allow those who venture and dare to break with the cultural anhedonia (defined in Sam Keen's *The Passionate Life* as "the insensitivity to pleasure, the incapacity for experiencing happiness") and experience sensual and spiritual renewal. Before his untimely death, Michel Foucault, the quintessential transgressive thinker in the west, confessed that he had real difficulties experiencing pleasure:

> I think that pleasure is a very difficult behavior. It's not as simple as that to enjoy one's self. And I must say that's my dream. I would like and I hope I die of an overdose of pleasure of any kind. Because I think it's really difficult and I always have the feeling that I do not feel *the* pleasure, the complete total pleasure and, for me, it's related to death. Because I think that the kind of pleasure

> I would consider as *the* real pleasure, would be so deep, so intense, so overwhelming that I couldn't survive it. I would die.

Though speaking from the standpoint of his individual experience, Foucault voices a dilemma felt by many in the west. It is precisely that longing for *the* pleasure that has led the white west to sustain a romantic fantasy of the "primitive" and the concrete search for a real primitive paradise, whether that location be a country or a body, a dark continent or dark flesh, perceived as the perfect embodiment of that possibility.

Within this fantasy of Otherness, the longing for pleasure is projected as a force that can disrupt and subvert the will to dominate. It acts to both mediate and challenge. In Lorraine Hansberry's play *Les Blancs*, it is the desire to experience closeness and community that leads the white American journalist Charles to make contact and attempt to establish a friendship with Tshembe, the black revolutionary. Charles struggles to divest himself of white supremacist privilege, eschews the role of colonizer, and refuses racist exoticization of blacks. Yet he continues to assume that he alone can decide the nature of his relationship to a black person. Evoking the idea of a universal transcendent subject, he appeals to Tshembe by repudiating the role of oppressor, declaring, "I am a man who feels like talking." When Tshembe refuses to accept the familiar relationship offered him, refuses to satisfy Charles' longing for camaraderie and contact, he is accused of hating white men. Calling attention to situations where white people have oppressed other white people, Tshembe challenges Charles, declaring that "race is a device—no more, no less," that "it explains nothing at all." Pleased with this disavowal of the importance of race, Charles agrees, stating "race hasn't a thing to do with it." Tshembe then deconstructs the category "race" without minimizing or ignoring the impact of racism, telling him:

> I believe in the recognition of devices as *devices*—but I also believe in the reality of those devices. In one century men choose to hide their conquests under religion, in another under race. So you and I may recognize the fraudulence of the device in both cases, but the fact remains that a man who has a sword run through him because he will not become a Moslem or a Christian—or who is lynched in Mississippi or Zatembe because he is black—is suffering the utter reality of that device of conquest. And it is pointless to pretend that it doesn't *exist*—merely because it is a lie...

Again and again Tshembe must make it clear to Charles that subject to subject contact between white and black which signals the absence of domination, of an oppressor/oppressed relationship, must emerge through mutual choice and negotiation. That simply by expressing their desire for "intimate" contact with black people, white people do not eradicate the politics of racial domination as they are made manifest in personal interaction.

Mutual recognition of racism, its impact both on those who are dominated and those who dominate, is the only standpoint that makes possible an encounter between races that is not based on denial and fantasy. For it is the ever present reality of racist domination, of white supremacy, that renders problematic the desire of white people to have contact with the Other. Often it is this reality that is most masked when representations of contact between white and non-white, white and black, appear in mass culture. One area where the politics of diversity and its concomitant insistence on inclusive representation have had serious impact is advertising. Now that sophisticated market surveys reveal the extent to which poor and materially underprivileged people of all races/ethnicities consume products, sometimes in a quantity disproportionate to income, it has become more evident that these markets can be appealed to with advertising. Market surveys revealed that black people buy more Pepsi than other soft drinks and suddenly we see more Pepsi commercials with black people in them.

The world of fashion has also come to understand that selling products is heightened by the exploitation of Otherness. The success of Benneton ads, which with their racially diverse images have become a model for various advertising strategies, epitomize this trend. Many ads that focus on Otherness make no explicit comments, or rely solely on visual messages, but the recent fall *Tweeds* catalogue provides an excellent example of the way contemporary culture exploits notions of Otherness with both visual images and text. The catalogue cover shows a map of Egypt. Inserted into the heart of the country, so to speak, is a photo of a white male (an *Out of Africa* type) holding an Egyptian child in his arms. Behind them is not the scenery of Egypt as modern city, but rather shadowy silhouettes resembling huts and palm trees. Inside, the copy quotes Gustave Flaubert's comments from *Flaubert in Egypt*. For seventy-five pages Egypt becomes a landscape of dreams, and its darker-skinned people background, scenery to highlight whiteness, and the longing of whites to inhabit, if only for a time, the world of the Other. The front page copy declares:

We did not want our journey to be filled with snapshots of an antique land. Instead, we wanted to rediscover our clothing in the context of a different culture. Was it possible, we wondered, to express our style in an unaccustomed way, surrounded by Egyptian colors, Egyptian textures, even bathed in an ancient Egyptian light?

Is this not imperialist nostalgia at its best—potent expression of longing for the "primitive"? One desires "a bit of the Other" to enhance the blank landscape of whiteness. Nothing is said in the text about Egyptian people, yet their images are spread throughout its pages. Often their faces are blurred by the camera, a strategy which ensures that readers will not become more enthralled by the images of Otherness than those of whiteness. The point of this photographic attempt at defamiliarization is to distance us from whiteness, so that we will return to it more intently.

In most of the "snapshots," all carefully selected and posed, there is no mutual looking. One desires contact with the Other even as one wishes boundaries to remain intact. When bodies contact one another, touch, it almost always a white hand doing the touching, white hands that rest on the bodies of colored people, unless the Other is a child. One snapshot of "intimate" contact shows two women with their arms linked, the way close friends might link arms. One is an Egyptian woman identified by a caption that reads "with her husband and baby, Ahmedio A'bass, 22, leads a gypsy's life"; the second woman is a white-skinned model. The linked hands suggest that these two women share something, have a basis of contact and indeed they do, they resemble one another, look more alike than different. The message again is that "primitivism," though more apparent in the Other, also resides in the white self. It is not the world of Egypt, of "gypsy" life, that is affirmed by this snapshot, but the ability of white people to roam the world, making contact. Wearing pants while standing next to her dark "sister" who wears a traditional skirt, the white woman appears to be cross-dressing (an ongoing theme in *Tweeds*). Visually the image suggests that she and first world white women like her are liberated, have greater freedom to roam than darker women who live peripatetic lifestyles.

Significantly, the catalogue that followed this one focused on Norway. There the people of Norway are not represented, only the scenery. Are we to assume that white folks from this country are as at "home" in Norway as they are here so there is no need for captions and

explanations? In this visual text, whiteness is the unifying feature—not culture. Of course, for *Tweeds* to exploit Otherness to dramatize "whiteness" while in Egypt, it cannot include darker-skinned models since the play on contrasts that is meant to highlight "whiteness" could not happen nor could the exploitation that urges consumption of the Other whet the appetite in quite the same way; just as inclusion of darker-skinned models in the Norway issue might suggest that the west is not as unified by whiteness as this visual text suggests. Essentially speaking, both catalogues evoke a sense that white people are homogeneous and share "white bread culture."

Those progressive white intellectuals who are particularly critical of "essentialist" notions of identity when writing about mass culture, race, and gender have not focused their critiques on white identity and the way essentialism informs representations of whiteness. It is always the non-white, or in some cases the non-heterosexual Other, who is guilty of essentialism. Few white intellectuals call attention to the way in which the contemporary obsession with white consumption of the dark Other has served as a catalyst for the resurgence of essentialist based racial and ethnic nationalism. Black nationalism, with its emphasis on black separatism, is resurging as a response to the assumption that white cultural imperialism and white yearning to possess the Other are invading black life, appropriating and violating black culture. As a survival strategy, black nationalism surfaces most strongly when white cultural appropriation of black culture threatens to decontextualize and thereby erase knowledge of the specific historical and social context of black experience from which cultural productions and distinct black styles emerge. Yet most white intellectuals writing critically about black culture do not see these constructive dimensions of black nationalism and tend to see it instead as naive essentialism, rooted in notions of ethnic purity that resemble white racist assumptions.

In the essay "Hip, and the Long Front of Color," white critic Andrew Ross interprets Langston Hughes' declaration ("You've taken my blues and gone—You sing 'em on Broadway—And you sing 'em in Hollywood Bowl—And you mixed 'em up with symphonies—And you fixed 'em—So they don't sound like me. Yep, you done taken my blues and gone.") as a "complaint" that "celebrates...folk purism." Yet Hughes' declaration can be heard as a critical comment on appropriation (not a complaint). A distinction must be made between the longing for ongoing cultural recognition of the creative source of particular African American cultural productions that emerge from distinct black

experience, and essentialist investments in notions of ethnic purity that undergird crude versions of black nationalism.

Currently, the commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, *via* exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other's history through a process of decontextualization. Like the "primitivism" Hal Foster maintains "absorbs the primitive, in part *via* the concept of affinity" contemporary notions of "crossover" expand the parameters of cultural production to enable the voice of the non-white Other to be heard by a larger audience even as it denies the specificity of that voice, or as it recoups it for its own use.

This scenario is played out in the film *Heart Condition* when Mooney, a white racist cop, has a heart transplant and receives a heart from Stone, a black man he has been trying to destroy because Stone has seduced Chris, the white call girl that Mooney loves. Transformed by his new "black heart," Mooney learns how to be more seductive, changes his attitudes towards race, and, in perfect Hollywood style, wins the girl in the end. Unabashedly dramatizing a process of "eating the Other" (in ancient religious practices among so called "primitive" people, the heart of a person may be ripped out and eaten so that one can embody that person's spirit or special characteristics), a film like *Heart Condition* addresses the fantasies of a white audience. At the end of the film, Mooney, reunited with Chris through marriage and surrounded by Stone's caring black kin, has become the "father" of Chris and Stone's bi-racial baby who is dark-skinned, the color of his father. Stone, whose ghost has haunted Mooney, is suddenly "history"—gone. Interestingly, this mainstream film suggests that patriarchal struggle over "ownership" (i.e., sexual possession of white women's bodies) is the linchpin of racism. Once Mooney can accept and bond with Stone on the phallocentric basis of their mutual possession and "desire" for Chris, their homosocial bonding makes brotherhood possible and eradicates the racism that has kept them apart. Significantly, patriarchal bonding mediates and becomes the basis for the eradication of racism.

In part, this film offers a version of racial pluralism that challenges racism by suggesting that the white male's life will be richer, more pleasurable, if he accepts diversity. Yet it also offers a model of change that still leaves a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy intact, though no longer based on coercive domination of black people. It insists that white male desire must be sustained by the "labor" (in this case the heart) of a dark Other. The fantasy, of course, is that this labor will no

longer be exacted *via* domination, but will be given willingly. Not surprisingly, most black folks talked about this film as "racist." The young desirable handsome intelligent black male (who we are told *via* his own self-portrait is "hung like a shetland pony") must die so that the aging white male can both restore his potency (he awakens from the transplant to find a replica of a huge black penis standing between his legs) and be more sensitive and loving. Torgovnick reminds readers in *Gone Primitive* that a central element in the western fascination with primitivism is its focus on "overcoming alienation from the body, restoring the body, and hence the self, to a relation of full and easy harmony with nature or the cosmos." It is this conceptualization of the "primitive" and the black male as quintessential representative that is dramatized in *Heart Condition*. One weakness in Torgovnick's work is her refusal to recognize how deeply the idea of the "primitive" is entrenched in the psyches of everyday people, shaping contemporary racist stereotypes, perpetuating racism. When she suggests, "our own culture by and large rejects the association of blackness with rampant sexuality and irrationality, with decadence and corruption, with disease and death," one can only wonder what culture she is claiming as her own.

Films like *Heart Condition* make black culture and black life backdrop, scenery for narratives that essentially focus on white people. Nationalist black voices critique this cultural crossover, its decentering of black experience as it relates to black people, and its insistence that it is acceptable for whites to explore blackness as long as their ultimate agenda is appropriation. Politically "on the case" when they critique white cultural appropriation of black experience that reinscribes it within a "cool" narrative of white supremacy, these voices can not be dismissed as naive. They are misguided when they suggest that white cultural imperialism is best critiqued and resisted by black separatism, or when they evoke outmoded notions of ethnic purity that deny the way in which black people exist in the west, are western, and are at times positively influenced by aspects of white culture.

Steve Perry's essay "The Politics of Crossover" deconstructs notions of racial purity by outlining the diverse inter-cultural exchanges between black and white musicians, yet he seems unable to acknowledge that this reality does not alter the fact that white cultural imperialist appropriation of black culture maintains white supremacy and is a constant threat to black liberation. Even though Perry can admit that successful black crossover artists, such as Prince, carry the "crossover impulse" to the point where it "begins to be a denial of blackness," he is unable to see this as threatening to black people who are daily

resisting racism, advocating ongoing decolonization, and in need of an effective black liberation struggle.

Underlying Perry's condescension, and at times contemptuous attitude towards all expressions of black nationalism, is a traditional leftist insistence on the primacy of class over race. This standpoint inhibits his capacity to understand the specific political needs of black people that are addressed, however inadequately, by essentialist-based black separatism. As Howard Winant clarifies in "Postmodern Racial Politics in the United States: Difference and Inequality," one must understand race to understand class because "in the postmodern political framework of the contemporary United States, hegemony is determined by the articulation of race and class." And most importantly it is the "ability of the right to represent class issues in racial terms" that is "central to the current pattern of conservative hegemony." Certainly an essentialist-based black nationalism imbued with and perpetuating many racial stereotypes is an inadequate and ineffective response to the urgent demand that there be renewed and viable revolutionary black liberation struggle that would take radical politicization of black people, strategies of decolonization, critiques of capitalism, and ongoing resistance to racist domination as its central goals.

Resurgence of black nationalism as an expression of black people's desire to guard against white cultural appropriation indicates the extent to which the commodification of blackness (including the nationalist agenda) has been reinscribed and marketed with an atavistic narrative, a fantasy of Otherness that reduces protest to spectacle and stimulates even greater longing for the "primitive." Given this cultural context, black nationalism is more a gesture of powerlessness than a sign of critical resistance. Who can take seriously Public Enemy's insistence that the dominated and their allies "fight the power" when that declaration is in no way linked to a collective organized struggle. When young black people mouth 1960s' black nationalist rhetoric, don Kente cloth, gold medallions, dread their hair, and diss the white folks they hang out with, they expose the way meaningless commodification strips these signs of political integrity and meaning, denying the possibility that they can serve as a catalyst for concrete political action. As signs, their power to ignite critical consciousness is diffused when they are commodified. Communities of resistance are replaced by communities of consumption. As Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen emphasize in *Channels of Desire*:

> The politics of consumption must be understood as something more than what to buy, or even what to boycott. Consumption is a social relationship, the dominant relationship in our society—

one that makes it harder and harder for people to hold together, to create community. At a time when for many of us the possibility of meaningful change seems to elude our grasp, it is a question of immense social and political proportions. To establish popular initiative, consumerism must be transcended—a difficult but central task facing all people who still seek a better way of life.

Work by black artists that is overtly political and radical is rarely linked to an oppositional political culture. When commodified it is easy for consumers to ignore political messages. And even though a product like rap articulates narratives of coming to critical political consciousness, it also exploits stereotypes and essentialist notions of blackness (like black people have natural rhythm and are more sexual). The television show *In Living Color* is introduced by lyrics that tell listeners "do what you wanna do." Positively, this show advocates transgression, yet it negatively promotes racist stereotypes, sexism, and homophobia. Black youth culture comes to stand for the outer limits of "outness." The commercial nexus exploits the culture's desire (expressed by whites and blacks) to inscribe blackness as "primitive" sign, as wildness, and with it the suggestion that black people have secret access to intense pleasure, particularly pleasures of the body. It is the young black male body that is seen as epitomizing this promise of wildness, of unlimited physical prowess and unbridled eroticism. It was this black body that was most "desired" for its labor in slavery, and it is this body that is most represented in contemporary popular culture as the body to be watched, imitated, desired, possessed. Rather than a sign of pleasure in daily life outside the realm of consumption, the young black male body is represented most graphically as the body in pain.

Regarded fetishisticly in the psycho-sexual racial imagination of youth culture, the real bodies of young black men are daily viciously assaulted by white racist violence, black on black violence, the violence of overwork, and the violence of addiction and disease. In her introduction to *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry states that "there is ordinarily no language for pain," that "physical pain is difficult to express; and that this inexpressibility has political consequences." This is certainly true of black male pain. Black males are unable to fully articulate and acknowledge the pain in their lives. They do not have a public discourse or audience within racist society that enables them to give their pain a hearing. Sadly, black men often evoke racist rhetoric that identifies the black male as animal, speaking of themselves as "endangered species," as "primitive," in their bid to gain recognition of their suffering.

When young black men acquire a powerful public voice and presence *via* cultural production, as has happened with the explosion of rap music, it does not mean that they have a vehicle that will enable them to articulate that pain. Providing narratives that are mainly about power and pleasure, that advocate resistance to racism yet support phallocentrism, rap denies this pain. True, it was conditions of suffering and survival, of poverty, deprivation, and lack that characterized the marginal locations from which breakdancing and rap emerged. Described as "rituals" by participants in the poor urban non-white communities where they first took place, these practices offered individuals a means to gain public recognition and voice. Much of the psychic pain that black people experience daily in a white supremacist context is caused by dehumanizing oppressive forces, forces that render us invisible and deny us recognition. Michael H. (commenting on style in Stuart Ewen's book *All Consuming Images*) also talks about this desire for attention, stating that breakdancing and rap are a way to say "listen to my story, about myself, life, and romance." Rap music provides a public voice for young black men who are usually silenced and overlooked. It emerged in the streets—outside the confines of a domesticity shaped and informed by poverty, outside enclosed spaces where young males body had to be contained and controlled.

In its earliest stages, rap was "a male thing." Young black and brown males could not breakdance and rap in cramped living spaces. Male creativity, expressed in rap and dancing, required wide-open spaces, symbolic frontiers where the body could do its thing, expand, grow, and move, surrounded by a watching crowd. Domestic space, equated with repression and containment, as well as with the "feminine" was resisted and rejected so that an assertive patriarchal paradigm of competitive masculinity and its concomitant emphasis on physical prowess could emerge. As a result, much rap music is riddled with sexism and misogyny. The public story of black male lives narrated by rap music speaks directly to and against white racist domination, but only indirectly hints at the enormity of black male pain. Constructing the black male body as site of pleasure and power, rap and the dances associated with it suggest vibrancy, intensity, and an unsurpassed joy in living. It may very well be that living on the edge, so close to the possibility of being "exterminated" (which is how many young black males feel) heightens one's ability to risk and make one's pleasure more intense. It is this charge, generated by the tension between pleasure and danger, death and desire, that Foucault evokes when he speaks of that *complete total pleasure* that is related to death. Though Foucault is

speaking as an individual, his words resonate in a culture affected by anhedonia—the inability to feel pleasure. In the United States, where our senses are daily assaulted and bombarded to such an extent that an emotional numbness sets in, it may take being "on the edge" for individuals to feel intensely. Hence the overall tendency in the culture is to see young black men as both dangerous and desirable.

Certainly the relationship between the experience of Otherness, of pleasure and death, is explored in the film *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, which critiques white male imperialist domination even though this dimension of the movie was rarely mentioned when it was discussed in this country. Reviewers of the film did not talk about the representation of black characters, one would have assumed from such writing that the cast was all white and British. Yet black males are a part of the community of subordinates who are dominated by one controlling white man. After he has killed her lover, his blonde white wife speaks to the dark-skinned cook, who clearly represents non-white immigrants, about the links between death and pleasure. It is he who explains to her the way blackness is viewed in the white imagination. The cook tells her that black foods are desired because they remind those who eat them of death, and that this is why they cost so much. When they are eaten (in the film, always and only by white people), the cook as native informant tells us it is a way to flirt with death, to flaunt one's power. He says that to eat black food is a way to say "death, I am eating you" and thereby conquering fear and acknowledging power. White racism, imperialism, and sexist domination prevail by courageous consumption. It is by eating the Other (in this case, death) that one asserts power and privilege.

A similar confrontation may be taking place within popular culture in this society as young white people seek contact with dark Others. They may long to conquer their fear of darkness and death. On the reactionary right, white youth may be simply seeking to affirm "white power" when they flirt with having contact with the Other. Yet there are many white youths who desire to move beyond whiteness. Critical of white imperialism and "into" difference, they desire cultural spaces where boundaries can be transgressed, where new and alternative relations can be formed. These desires are dramatized by two contemporary films, John Waters' *Hairspray* and the more recent film by Jim Jarmusch, *Mystery Train*. In *Hairspray*, the "cool" white people, working-class Traci and her middle-class boyfriend, transgress class and race boundaries to dance with black folks. She says to him as they stand in a rat-infested alley with winos walking about, "I wish I was

dark-skinned." And he replies, "Traci, our souls are black even though our skin is white." Blackness—the culture, the music, the people—is once again associated with pleasure as well as death and decay. Yet their recognition of the particular pleasures and sorrows black folks experience does not lead to cultural appropriation but to an appreciation that extends into the realm of the political—Traci dares to support racial integration. In this film, the longing and desire whites express for contact with black culture is coupled with the recognition of the culture's value. One does not transgress boundaries to stay the same, to reassert white domination. *Hairspray* is nearly unique in its attempt to construct a fictive universe where white working class "undesirables" are in solidarity with black people. When Traci says she wants to be black, blackness becomes a metaphor for freedom, an end to boundaries. Blackness is vital not because it represents the "primitive" but because it invites engagement in a revolutionary ethos that dares to challenge and disrupt the *status quo*. Like white rappers MC Search and Prime Minister Pete Nice who state that they "want to bring forth some sort of positive message to black people, that there are white people out there who understand what this is all about, who understand we have to get past all the hatred," Traci shifts her positionality to stand in solidarity with black people. She is concerned about her freedom and sees her liberation linked to black liberation and an effort to end racist domination.

Expressing a similar solidarity with the agenda of "liberation," which includes freedom to transgress, Sandra Bernhard, in her new film *Without You I'm Nothing*, also associates blackness with this struggle. In the March issue of *Interview* she says that the movie has "this whole black theme, which is like a personal metaphor for being on the outside." This statement shows that Bernhard's sense of blackness is both problematic and complex. The film opens with her pretending she is black. Dressed in African clothing, she renders problematic the question of race and identity, for this representation suggests that racial identity can be socially constructed even as it implies that cultural appropriation falls short because it is always imitation, fake. Conversely, she contrasts her attempt to be a black woman in drag with the black female's attempt to imitate a white female look. Bernhard's film suggests that alternative white culture derives its standpoint, its impetus from black culture. Identifying herself with marginalized Others, Bernhard's Jewish heritage as well as her sexually ambiguous erotic practices are experiences that already place her outside the mainstream. Yet the film does not clarify the nature of her identification with black culture. Throughout the film, she places herself in a relationship of

comparison and competition with black women, seemingly exposing white female envy of black women and their desire to "be" imitation black women; yet she also pokes fun at black females. The unidentified black woman who appears in the film, like a phantom, looking at herself in the mirror has no name and no voice. Yet her image is always contrasted with that of Bernhard. Is she the fantasy Other Bernhard desires to become? Is she the fantasy Other Bernhard desires? The last scene of the film seems to confirm that black womanhood is the yardstick Bernhard uses to measure herself. Though she playfully suggests in the film that the work of black women singers like Nina Simone and Diana Ross is derivative, "stolen" from her work, this inversion of reality ironically calls attention to the way white women have "borrowed" from black women without acknowledging the debt they owe. In many ways, the film critiques white cultural appropriation of "blackness" that leaves no trace. Indeed, Bernhard identifies that she had her artistic beginnings working in black clubs, among black people. Though acknowledging where she is coming from, the film shows Bernhard clearly defining an artistic performance space that only she as a white woman can inhabit. Black women have no public, paying audience for our funny imitations of white girls. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine any setting other than an all black space where black women could use comedy to critique and ridicule white womanhood in the way Bernhard mocks black womanhood.

Closing the scene shrouded in a cloak that resembles an American flag, Bernhard unveils her nearly nude body. The film ends with the figure of the black woman, who has heretofore only been in the background, foregrounded as the only remaining audience watching this seductive performance. As though she is seeking acknowledgment of her identity, her power, Bernhard stares at the black woman, who returns her look with a contemptuous gaze. As if this look of disinterest and dismissal is not enough to convey her indifference, she removes a tube of red lipstick from her purse and writes on the table "fuck Sandra Bernhard." Her message seems to be: "you may need black culture since without us you are nothing, but black women have no need of you." In the film, all the white women strip, flaunt their sexuality, and appear to be directing their attention to a black male gaze. It is this standpoint that the film suggests may lead them to ignore black women and only notice what black women think of them when we are "right up in their face."

Bernhard's film walks a critical tightrope. On one hand it mocks white appropriation of black culture, white desire for black (as in the scene

where Bernhard with a blonde white girl persona is seen being "boned" by a black man whom we later find is mainly concerned about his hair—i.e., his own image) even as the film works as spectacle largely because of the clever ways Bernhard "uses" black culture and standard racial stereotypes. Since so many of the representations of blackness in the film are stereotypes it does not really go against the Hollywood cinematic grain. And like the *Tweeds* catalogue on Egypt, ultimately black people are reduced, as Bernhard declares in *Interview*, to "a personal metaphor." Blackness is the backdrop of Otherness she uses to insist on and clarify her status as Other, as cool, hip, and transgressive. Even though she lets audiences know that as an entertainment "rookie" she had her start working in close association with black people, the point is to name where she begins to highlight how far she has come. When Bernhard "arrives," able to exploit Otherness in a big time way, she arrives alone, not in the company of black associates. They are scenery, backdrop, background. Yet the end of the film problematizes this leave-taking. Is Bernhard leaving black folks or has she been rejected and dismissed? Maybe it's mutual. Like her entertainment cohort Madonna, Bernhard leaves her encounters with the Other richer than she was at the onset. We have no idea how the Other leaves her.

When I began thinking and doing research for this piece, I talked to folks from various locations about whether they thought the focus on race, Otherness, and difference in mass culture was challenging racism. There was overall agreement that the message that acknowledgment and exploration of racial difference can be pleasurable represents a breakthrough, a challenge to white supremacy, to various systems of domination. The over-riding fear is that cultural, ethnic, and racial differences will be continually commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate—that the Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten. After weeks of debating with one another about the distinction between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation, students in my introductory course on black literature were convinced that something radical was happening, that these issues were "coming out in the open." Within a context where desire for contact with those who are different or deemed Other is not considered bad, politically incorrect, or wrong-minded, we can begin to conceptualize and identify ways that desire informs our political choices and affiliations. Acknowledging ways the desire for pleasure, and that includes erotic longings, informs our politics, our understanding of difference, we may know better how desire disrupts, subverts, and makes resistance possible. We cannot, however, accept these new images uncritically.