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SOCIOLOGY | REVIEW ARTICLE

Unpacking the invisible knapsack: The invention of white privilege pedagogy

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Abstract: This article uses Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion, an interpretive strategy directed to the hidden or repressed meanings behind texts, to examine the origins of white privilege pedagogy, in particular their foundational technique, "unpacking the invisible knapsack." This article's chief finding is that this pedagogy, though designed to fight racism, has the unintended effect of supporting white privilege. Teaching whites to "unpack their invisible knapsack" does not make them more willing to take action against racial inequality. On the contrary, it makes them more complacent, more at home in an unjust world, and more comfortable with their whiteness. White privilege pedagogy does this by focusing on personal identity (whites' personal identity) over institutional structures, by paying more attention to whites' experiences than to blacks', by falsely claiming that the confession of white privileges leads to social action beneficial to blacks, and by restoring and expanding whites' sense of moral rightness.

Subjects: Sociology; Sociology & Social Policy; Sociology of Culture

Keywords: white privilege; invisible knapsack; racism; antiracism

1. Introduction

Ricoeur (1970) coined the phrase *hermeneutics of suspicion* to delineate a style of interpretation that seeks out disguised, repressed, and disavowed meanings, an approach often used in studies of literature, theory, and intellectual history, but hardly ever in applied fields such as education (Berman, 2001; Stewart, 1989; Thiele, 1991). The reason, no doubt, is that its adversarial posture can appear condescending and disrespectful, especially the assumption that authors are unaware of the meanings and purposes of their own texts. A genuine concern. At the same time, the possibility that a

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leslie Margolin is a professor of rhetoric and counseling at the University of Iowa. This paper builds on some of his earlier publications. It is no coincidence that the subtitle to Leslie Margolin's paper, "Unpacking the invisible knapsack: the invention of white privilege pedagogy," resembles the titles to some of his earlier publications (*A Pedagogy of Privilege*, from 1996 and *Under the Cover of Kindness: The Invention of Social Work*, from 1997) since he has always been interested in the ways privilege and inequality might be unknowingly supported by educational and counseling practices. That is also the theme of his new novel *Reborn Again* (2015) where he examines how a psychiatrist exploits a patient, and what he hopes to discover over the next few years in his research on marriage and family counseling.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This paper examines the ways racism and antiracism are taught in American schools, and concludes that teachers who subscribe to white privilege pedagogy might unknowingly support the racial status quo. Margolin provides compelling evidence that, in contrast to the central message of the *Black Lives Matter* social movement, white privilege pedagogy places disproportional value on white people's lives. Though its overt goal is to end racial inequality, its practice appears to reinforce the primacy of white voices and white experience over black voices and black experience.

widespread educational practice secretly promotes racism is too important to suppress or deny, for any reason, given the long history of suppression and denial surrounding racism in the US, a pattern which has not shown any sign of disappearing.

That is why I use that approach here.

2. The age of racial mystification

With the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, and the introduction of the Civil Rights and Equal Employment Opportunity Commissions in the late 1960s, whites began concealing their racism more carefully than ever before. They began to distance themselves from what they said and what they felt, to dissociate themselves from stereotypical, negative views of blacks, and even began proclaiming the need for integrated neighborhoods, schools, jobs, and public services (Brown et al., 2003; Feagin, 2014). By the end of the 1960s, even the Ku Klux Klan began adding a certain discretion to their discourse, a certain lightness. “We’re not against blacks,” they would soon be saying, “We’re pro-white” (Bonilla-Silva, 2003, p. 16). On the possibility that whites had any need to discontinue their racial domination and to repair the inequities of the past, denial became the new rule.

In this new age, because “no one, or almost no one, wishes to see themselves as racist” (Memmi, 2000, p. 3), whites feel mostly perplexity and outrage, mostly injustice, when asked to account for their racism. “What an insult to even suggest such a thing!” So they push thoughts of racism out of their minds, they move racist acts out of sight, behind closed doors—to the “backstage” as Leslie Picca and Joe Feagin (2007) put it—where the law can’t touch them, where racism can’t be proved or disproved, can’t be criminalized, deemed unconstitutional, and most times, can’t even be noticed. Racism persists so tenaciously in a country where it is illegal, and where people, when asked about their racism, respond, “Me racist? How dare you!” not only because they deny their racism, but also because they deny it so effectively, not only to others, but to themselves. A “racist,” in white people’s imagination, is someone who does nasty, hateful things to blacks and other people of color, and does so intentionally, much like a criminal commits crimes (Wise, 2008). Since they have not done such things, at least none they are aware of, they cannot be guilty. They may have no trouble recognizing the enormous gap between blacks’ and whites’ income, wealth, housing, nutrition, and health care. They may readily acknowledge that black children attend schools with less access to trained teachers and up-to-date equipment, and that black adults have far greater rates of unemployment, arrest, incarceration, and execution, but rather than blaming themselves—rather than attributing those disparities to a system they created, support, and use to their advantage—whites say those disparities reflect blacks’ own choices: blacks choose to live in bad neighborhoods, they choose to neglect their health and nutrition, they’re not interested in hard work or education, and have higher rates of arrest, incarceration, and execution because they commit more serious crimes more often than whites (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Brown et al., 2003; Reitman, 2006).

If a central part of whites’ racial domination is their denial of that domination, if their domination continues by virtue of its invisibility to whites themselves—by virtue of the fact that it is habitual, automatic, and concealed by good intentions—then the question of how to end that domination seems, at least in part, simple, almost obvious: “make visible what is rendered invisible” (Carby, 1992, p. 193). If one can say, along with Mills (1997, p. 19) that “*white misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception on matters related to race* are among the most pervasive mental phenomena of the past few hundred years, a cognitive and moral economy psychically required for conquest, colonization, and enslavement ... and that these phenomena are in no way *accidental*, but *prescribed* by the terms of the Racial Contract, which requires a certain schedule of structured blindnesses and opacities in order to establish and maintain the white polity,” then the secret to ending that polity depends, it would seem, on helping whites overcome their racial blindnesses and opacities. It depends on helping them see themselves (and blacks too) for who they genuinely are. If racial oppression cannot exist without whites’ denial, then the key to ending that oppression must lie in ending that denial. In the words of Bonilla-Silva (2003, p. 183), “In racial matters as in therapy, the admission of denial is the preamble for the beginning of recovery”

3. Unpacking the invisible knapsack

In the late 1960s, civil rights activists, social workers, and educators began using a variety of techniques (encounter groups, classroom curricula, “t” groups, small group discussions, and sensitivity training) designed to break through whites’ wall of denial. “Racism Awareness Training,” or RAT, was the umbrella term for these techniques, and their basic pedagogical approach to white learners was, “What you need to know is that you’re a racist” (Howard, 1999, p. 218). Since racism, in RAT’s eyes, is fundamental to white culture, part of their collective unconscious, and whites, in their view, can never be more than “anti-racist racists,” it should not be very surprising that RAT never achieved an enthusiastic following among whites (Sivanandan, 1985, p. 29). Which may explain why, around 1990, a more positive, non-confrontational technique was introduced to enlist whites’ support. Peggy McIntosh formulated that technique in accessible, non-threatening language—language innocuous enough to allow whites to examine their role in systems of oppression and domination without forcing them to grapple with uncomfortable levels of complicity or guilt. Among her innovations was the discursive shift from how racism harms blacks to how racism benefits whites: “As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage” (McIntosh, 1988, p. 2). The goal was to help whites see themselves as racial, to help them break out of their cocoon of denial, and confess to themselves and others, in as much detail as possible, the nearly infinite ways their white skin makes them feel at home in the world and allows them to escape the penalties and dangers which nonwhites suffer, a transformation which could be achieved, according to McIntosh, not by addressing whites as if they have “something against” blacks, as if they are prejudiced, practice discrimination, and openly hate, but by seeing them as a class of people who bear no conscious ill-will toward any racial minority, who believe in fair play and civil rights, admire Martin Luther King, Jr., and earnestly wish to understand the world from “diverse” perspectives. Whites’ only sin, if it can be called a sin, is that, unbeknownst to themselves, they came into this world carrying a powerful advantage over other racial groups.

The idea caught on. Suddenly, white privilege became a hot topic at professional conferences, scholars began producing books and articles with titles such as *White Privilege and Male Privilege* (McIntosh, 1988), *Unveiling White Privilege* (Pappas, 1995), *White Privilege, the Rhetoric and Facts* (Murray & Smith, 1995), *White Privilege and Affirmative Action* (Law, 1999), *Invisible Privilege* (Rothenberg, 2000), *Writing and White Privilege* (Bernstein, 2004), *The Persistence of White Privilege* (Wildman, 2005), and *Understanding White Privilege* (Kendall, 2012), and teachers and professors, across the country, began employing “knapsack pedagogy.” The prototype of this pedagogy, introduced by McIntosh’s article, was to seat white students in circles with the knapsack article and their journals on their laps, and ask them to write down how membership in the majority race makes their lives easier, then, one-by-one read those privileges out loud to one another and the group as a whole. McIntosh (1988, p. 5) illustrated such a listing with the following examples: “I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time ... I can avoid spending time with people whom I was trained to mistrust and who have learned to mistrust my kind or me ... I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I want to live ... I can be reasonably sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me ... I can go shopping alone most of the time, fairly well assured that I will not be followed or harassed by store detectives ... I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely and positively represented”

It was an important shift. The old nemesis of the war on racism, the narrow-minded, bad-intentioned white bigot, gave way to the well-meaning, yet unaware white naïf. A new storyline also appeared. Instead of a melodrama centered on callousness, greed, and exploitation, we had a fairy tale: for hundreds of years, a group of people known as “whites” had been living under a spell which granted their wishes and provided endless benefits. Instead of a genie or talisman, the source of this spell was an invisible weightless knapsack about which whites were completely unenlightened. They never noticed it in the way children born to wealth often don’t see anything special in their enormous house, their servants, and plentiful food. Their enchantment was like the air they breathed, unquestioned because it had always been there.

This new storyline can be accepted at face value. Or, following the hermeneutics of suspicion,¹ we can ask: When whites finally awakened, when they opened their eyes and discovered the truth about their magical knapsack, wouldn't they discover that they could not continue to silently and innocently reap its rewards without pangs of guilt? Wouldn't the inequity seem too big, the offense too clear, since whites had done nothing to deserve their enchantment, and other racial groups had been denied its benefits through no fault of their own? This is worth thinking about. Why would whites want to open their eyes only to learn that the system had been rigged in their favor? "If whites, in order to maintain a sense of [themselves] as good and decent people, living in a good and decent society, have been compelled to deny, deny, deny when it comes to racism" (Wise, 2008, p. 64), wouldn't they need some kind of compensation, some kind of incentive, in order to endure the discomfort that would result from asking themselves to stop denying? Wouldn't whites need some kind of reward to persuade them to acknowledge that they had been the passive unknowing recipients of so many advantages since in acknowledging those advantages, they would risk losing their former obliviousness, their former confidence and innocence, not to mention the illusion that they had been living in a meritocracy and in a free, democratic society where doors opened for them because of their abilities and virtues, and not because of the color of their skin? Wouldn't they have to be given something that would balance the loss of all these false notions about themselves?

This is my key hypothesis. What whites gain from confessing and renouncing their privileges, the benefit they receive from participating in white privilege classes, seminars, and workshops, is a new set of misrepresentations, evasions, and self-deceptions. If we assume, along with Foucault (1977, p. 202) and Nietzsche (1910), that knowledge is never disinterested, that it always conceals a purpose—the preservation of a power structure, a race, a class, a community, an ideology—then it is possible to imagine that the knowledge whites gain from unpacking their invisible knapsacks allows them not only to retain their imagined innocence and moral elevation, it allows them to retain the very privileges they claim to be renouncing. A hermeneutics of suspicion suggests, in other words, that white privilege pedagogy operates in large part as an antiracist cover, a sham that allows whites to have their cake and eat it too by providing them the appearance of selflessness and antiracism without requiring them to do anything selfless or antiracist.

Take whites' guilt. Westcott (2004) and Applebaum (2010) have likened white privilege discourse to Foucault's concept of the sexual confessional not only in the need for confessors to make detailed public admissions and to do so before an authority figure who prescribes, consoles, judges, and forgives, but in the shared belief that confession heals (Foucault, 1978). In other words, through the confession of their privileges, whites may regain the sense of their moral rightness. This discourse may be less about changing an unjust system than it is about freeing those who operate that system to think of themselves as innocent, egalitarian, and antiracist. As Levine-Rasky (2000, p. 276) summed up, "The confession releases the bearer of white privilege from the responsibility of action." And in the words of Butler (1995, p. 443), the white privilege confessional is dedicated to "the production of the saintly white person, the responsible white person, the politically accountable white subject. In the place of a thorough analysis of race or racialization, we witness—obscenely, yet another self-glorification in which whiteness is equated with moral rectitude." And in so far as white privilege confessors define themselves as non-oppressive and antiracist, as far better than ordinary whites, they can continue to reap the rewards of ordinary whites without serious damage to their self-image. They can even act as if it is their responsibility to show others the way. They can insist that their antiracist views should be acknowledged and celebrated, and that future conversations about race and racism should be organized around their own anxieties, opinions, and struggles. Above all, they can imagine that the world wants to know, in minute detail, what it means to have been born white in America, as if speaking about their whiteness marks them off, to a certain extent, as heroic, as if sharing the details of their whiteness and privileges somehow undermines the old order—anticipates the coming revolution (see Wise, 2008).

The critical point is that white privilege pedagogy, in insisting that whites rise to tell their racial stories, authorizes blacks and other people of color to remain seated and silent; it authorizes them to keep their racial needs and experiences to themselves, precisely what happened to Heather, a Native American, who appeared in one of the vignettes provided by the Midwest Critical Whiteness Collective in their article, “McIntosh as Synecdoche.” According to the vignette, while “each of the white participants in a white privilege workshop ... were able to identify one or two privileges in their daily lives,” Heather could only listen. She found it “difficult ... to participate because she lacked privilege due to skin color” (Lensmire et al., 2013, p. 420). It may be unclear why the Midwest Critical Whiteness Collective included this anecdote since they did not comment on it. The authors only explained Heather’s inability to participate by referencing her Native American ancestry. But this much is certain: The absence of commentary makes the Native American woman’s silence appear normal and acceptable. Similarly, the wealth of detail and commentary on the white learners’ responses makes them seem more central, more important and deserving of attention.

The almost exclusive focus on whites’ experience not only diminishes the experience of people of color, it serves as a distraction. It glosses over the question of how blacks’ and other racial minorities’ interests are served by whites holding forth on what it means to be white in America, and whether people of color might benefit more, not by stripping whites of their privileges (if such a thing were possible), but by finding the means to possess them too. In other words, the discourse that claims to support blacks’ interests by denouncing whites’ privileges fails to consider how whites’ privileges can be extended to blacks, and how blacks may in fact deserve what whites already have. This is a significant omission since McIntosh (1988, p. 13) herself acknowledges that many of the privileges she lists (like the “privilege” of living in a neighborhood of one’s choice, a place that’s safe, where one’s neighbors don’t harm you), are not privileges at all, but “should be the norm in a just society and should be considered as the entitlement of everyone.” The irony here is that McIntosh’s main concern, and the main concern of white privilege pedagogy in general, despite its antiracist front, is not with extending these basic human rights to people of color so much as giving whites a chance to hold forth about their own and others’ experiences. It’s not about giving blacks more voice, nor is it about helping blacks and other racial minorities achieve liberation and equality. Rather, it’s about giving whites the authority to speak for and about blacks, as if whites’ version of history has somehow been neglected, as if it is some sort of key ingredient, the missing link that prevents whites from shedding the unwanted mantle of oppressor. As one white privilege educator put it (without hint of irony), “Until we, the privileged White folk in America, tell ourselves the story of our country as it happened for everyone who has lived here ... we will not truly understand who we are. Nor will we become other than oppressors” (Washburn, 2007, p. 4).

How does confessing white privilege affect racial inequality? To one white woman who participated in these workshops, “It was never quite clear what the point of these confessions were. It was not as if other participants did not know the confessor in question had her/his proclaimed privilege. It did not appear that these individual confessions actually led to any political projects to dismantle the projects of domination that enabled their privilege. *Rather the confessions became the political project themselves*” (Smith, 2013, italics added). The Midwest Critical Whiteness Collective makes the very same point. In their words, the white privilege confessional “teaches participants that the crucial action they need to take as white people is to confess their privileges rather than, for example, take racial action” (Lensmire et al., 2013, p. 441).

Where the Midwest Collective and I differ: while they see the white privilege confessional as only a small part of or stand-in for (synecdoche) how to teach antiracism to whites (“confessing white privilege does not give [confessors] ... much insight into their lives as racialized beings, nor does it intervene in changing the structures that privileges some lives over others” (p. 422)), I see it as a practice that enlarges and supports the very racist structures it purports to combat. This is similar to Applebaum’s (2010, p. 17, 19) position that “whiteness becomes reinscribed and recentered in the very processes that attempt to work against social justice ... white privilege is something that people tend to assert even as they seek to change it.” Far from relinquishing whites’ privileges, as the confessional project

claims to do, it concentrates on them in an increasingly detailed way, not only by requiring whites to talk about their racial advantages at length, but by promoting the myth that whites can repudiate those advantages at the personal level without dismantling them at the institutional level, that they can, in the words of white privilege theorist Ignatiev (1996, p. 289), simply “wash away their whiteness ...” In other words, white privilege pedagogy constructs and promotes the myth that where racism is concerned, individual identity is what matters most, and that whites’ individual identity, who they are, is more important than blacks’ individual identity or who they are. As white privilege educator Curry-Stevens (2007, p. 53) explained, somewhat regretfully, to embrace the sensibilities of white privilege pedagogy “requires us to place the needs of privileged learners on par with (and occasionally above) those who are oppressed. This is not an easy embrace because it requires that the traditional primacy of the needs of the oppressed stand the possibility of being eclipsed by the learning needs of the privileged.”

What is at issue here is not only the primacy of the “learning needs” of the privileged over those of the oppressed, but the myth that whites have some sort of stake in divesting themselves of their privileges, the false notion that once they learned they had unfair advantages over other racial groups, they would voluntarily give them up. This brings to mind a *New Yorker* cartoon (Saxon, September 12 1983) depicting a prosperous-looking white man on a walk in the woods with his grandson. “It’s good to know about trees,” he tells the little boy, and then adds, “Just remember, nobody ever made any big money knowing about trees.” Now imagine that same prosperous-looking white man teaching his grandson about whites’ privileges. Consistent with his monetary focus, he might say, “It’s good to know about being white because it makes a lot of money for us—an awful lot.” Of course, even if the white grandfather were to advise the little boy to view whites’ racial privileges in a negative way, even if he were to say, “It’s good to know about your racial privileges, and how unfair they are. Just remember, now it’s your job to walk away from them,” it wouldn’t make a difference. That’s because, despite whites’ desire to renounce their privileges at the personal level, the world would continue to re-inscribe them at the institutional level (Applebaum, 2010). Whites’ advantages, in other words, are built in, part of a vast institutional system given to whites without any need for them to ask or seek them out, a consequence not of what they do or don’t do, but of how they are perceived.

By glossing over and denying that re-inscription, by operating as if whites’ privileges can be dissolved to the degree whites engage in an in-depth personal exploration of their own racist attitudes, experiences, and consciousness (as opposed to the attitudes, experiences, and consciousness of the oppressed), whites gain license to remain preoccupied with themselves, an outcome supported by yet another myth of white privilege pedagogy, “the myth of equivalency”—the notion that whites and blacks are subject to the same kinds of oppressions. This is accomplished by having white students consider their various social statuses apart from race (e.g. by asking them to focus instead on their social class, age, religion, gender, ability, sexual orientation, etc.), and how, as a result of occupying one or more lower status (e.g. poor, aged, non-Christian, female, deaf, gay, etc.), they have experienced something akin to racial oppression. As a workshop leader described one of these exercises, “students begin by thinking of a time when they have felt oppressed (i.e. when they have been denied access to resources based on one or more of their social locations). They then write or draw a picture about the situation in their journal, and how it made them feel” (Samuels, 2004, pp. 4–5). Such exercises not only place whites on the same (or higher) political and moral plane as blacks, they give whites a justification to remain preoccupied with their own bodies, feelings, and points of view. As a result of this focus, white privilege pedagogy has as its main effect, not an eradication or even a lessening of racial inequality, but rather its magnification: the insistence that whites situate themselves under the discursive spotlight, with people of color again displaced to the sidelines. As a white privilege educator (Kendall, 2012, p. 17) described her motivations to participate in this project, “Doing the personal work required to understand what it means to be white is the foundation for me in striving to build a just world. I believe it is that for all of us who are white.”

White privilege theorists are quick to point out, however, that psychological and intellectual change among whites is never enough. Thus, McIntosh (1988, p. 19) ends her essay on white privilege with a question, “What will we do with such knowledge?” which she answers in the vaguest, most inconclusive terms: “As we know from watching men, it is an open question whether we will choose to use unearned advantage to weaken hidden systems of advantage, and whether we will use any of our arbitrarily-awarded power to try to reconstruct power systems on a broader base.” For Rothenberg (2000, p. 1) also, the professed goal of whites enlightening themselves about their privileges is to *do* something with that knowledge—to translate it into some form of social action. In her words, “Once we understand how white privilege operates, we can begin to take steps to dismantle it.” The problem, unfortunately, is that white privilege pedagogy is silent on those next steps, or, at the very least, inconsistent and vague. The Midwest Critical Whiteness Collective concludes their essay by proposing “that white supremacy needs to replace white privilege as the central concern of our antiracist efforts. Much work remains to be done” (p. 429), again without saying how a refocus on “white supremacy” would change anything, and without specifying the kind of “work” that needs to be done. This lack of detail suggests that white privilege pedagogy has no language with which to speak, think, or question racism that does not rely on white privilege as a foundational assumption. Given its historical focus on whites’ experience over blacks’ and individual consciousness over social structure that tradition appears uniquely ill-suited to addressing black peoples’ needs and preparing students for social action. At the same time, if it were to acknowledge that miss fit—if it were to acknowledge that its purpose is not to change society, but rather to give whites more opportunity and authority to talk about themselves—it would give away its hidden purpose, and risk undoing itself. Foucault’s (1978, p. 86) words are instructive:

Power is tolerable only on the condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its mechanisms. Would power be accepted if it were entirely cynical? For it, secrecy is not in the nature of an abuse; it is indispensable to its operation.

4. Conclusion

What does all this mean for the project of ending racism? If white privilege pedagogy constitutes antiracism through deception, by falsely insisting that racism can be lessened by focusing on personal identity over institutional structure, by paying more attention to whites’ experience than to blacks’, and by falsely claiming that the confession of white privileges leads to social action beneficial to blacks, then whites, in participating in those deceptions, are caught in their machinery just as much as people of color. In some ways they are more caught. For as whites reinstate their privileges, they have to learn to ignore that very reinstatement, to hide the effects of their preeminence in complex delusions, to alter their sense of time, place, and person. Not unlike Don Quixote for whom the ordinary country inn is really a fortress with towers of shining silver, those engaged in white privilege pedagogy are called upon to believe that they are undergoing some sort of radical transformation, to believe that their privileges really can be renounced at will, and to believe that those renunciations really do offer a solution to systemic oppression and privilege.

This reading of white privilege pedagogy is not intended to suggest that whites lack the capacity to behave in an ethically responsible way. Rather, it is to suggest the absurdity of believing that what matters most for the cause of black liberation and equality is what whites have to say about themselves. As McWhorter (2015) put it, “it’s a safe bet that most black people are more interested in there being adequate public transportation from their neighborhood to where they need to work than that white people attend encounter group sessions where they learn how lucky they are to have cars. It’s a safe bet that most black people are more interested in whether their kids learn anything in their school than whether white people are reminded that their kids probably go to a better school.” It’s also a safe bet, to extend McWhorter’s argument, that most black people would prefer not only more speaking opportunity for themselves, but also more listening opportunity for whites. How nice, for instance, if whites took the time to ponder the words, “Black lives matter,” particularly when black people speak them?

Whether whites do this is partly a question of cognition. Whites need to learn how to pay attention to racial others and try to understand what they say. But it is also a question of motivation. Whites need a reason to decline center stage in favor of a seat in the audience. They need a reason to discontinue affirming their privileges before an audience that receives those affirmations as signs of courage, selflessness, benevolence, and honesty. They need a reason to give up so effective a way to publicly proclaim, without penalty, how good it is to be white.

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Note

1. Westphal (2008, pp. 116–117) contrasts the taken-for-granted acceptance of textual evidence with the type of aggressive cross-examination characterized by a hermeneutics of suspicion as “like the difference between the questioning of the witness by one attorney, who seeks to recover what the witness heard and saw, and the questioning of the other attorney, who seeks to discredit the testimony of the witness not just in terms of capacity (Was it really too dark to get a good look at the gunman’s face, especially at a distance?) but especially in terms of hidden motivations to say what the first wants to hear (Hasn’t the prosecutor agreed to lessen charges pending against you in return for your testimony? Isn’t there a history of bad blood between you and the defendant?).”

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