

2025

White Concealment

Kirsten T. Edwards
Florida International University
ktedwards@fiu.edu

Recommended Citation

Edwards, Kirsten T. 2025. "White Concealment." *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 11 (1). Article 3.

White Concealment

Kirsten T. Edwards

Abstract

There is a significant body of literature that explores epistemic injustice as ignorance. Most germane to the present essay are explorations of white ignorance—particularly at the intersection of epistemic interdependence and relationality—and its necessity in the maintenance of white supremacy. Most conceptual discussions of white ignorance are concerned with what white people refuse to know, and the implications of that unknowing on nonwhite peoples. In this essay, I consider what white people refuse to say—how they story situations or renarrate as a process by which to sustain power. What information are white people willing to recognize but simultaneously unwilling to allow to be acknowledged in the context of a specific racist situation? How do white people use the feigned absence or irrelevance of information—concealment—as power?

Keywords: white ignorance, Black women, white feminists, Charles W. Mills, gendered antiblackness, epistemic interdependence, relationality, renarration, storytelling, academia

Stories

“The function, the very serious function of racism . . . is distraction.”

—Toni Morrison (1975)

Prologue

I want to tell you a story. It’s a common enough story, although often untold. Your mama probably told you this story many times, in many different ways, in all kinds of languages. *Your mother* wouldn’t dare tell you this story, well at least not with words, probably in other ways... We should talk about that. Maybe share our stories someday. But not today. Today is about this story. Really, this story is a story about stories. An honest story—although fictional—about dishonesty.

The present essay is principally concerned with the relationship between stories and power, or how powered groups marshal stories to maintain power in

particular situations. Inquiry into epistemic (in)justice also occupy this oratorical ecosystem. Relatedly the complexities of power—specifically regarding race and gender—and how those complexities modulate the performance of power animate the questions herein. Such a milieu invites investigation into morality, relationality, “unknowability” (Dotson 2017), and the very conditions that govern human subjectivity. Through this writing exercise, within the parameters allowed by a very particular case, I attempt to explore the distinct characteristics that attenuate dehumanization through interlocution or, said differently, ignorance as the stories the powerful tell.

There is a significant body of literature that explores epistemic injustice as ignorance. Most germane to the present essay are explorations of white ignorance¹—particularly at the intersection of epistemic interdependence and relationality (Pohlhaus 2017)—and its necessity in the maintenance of white supremacy. Most conceptual discussions of white ignorance are concerned with what white people refuse to know, and the implications of that unknowing on nonwhite peoples (Sullivan and Tuana 2007).² In this essay, I consider what white people refuse to say—how they story situations or renarrate as a process by which to sustain power. What information are white people willing to recognize but simultaneously unwilling to allow to be acknowledged in the context of a specific racist situation? How do white people use the feigned absence or irrelevance of information—concealment—as power? I am distinguishing between recognition of discrete information and knowing as a structural and epistemic condition. I take up these distinctions in greater detail in subsequent sections. The purpose of this essay is to extend the study of white ignorance toward the explication of a specific process therein, which I describe as white concealment.

As a point of clarification, I draw most significantly on Charles Mills’s (2007, 2015) definition of white ignorance, supported by the philosophical contributions of others who take up questions of epistemic injustice. Hence, I understand white ignorance broadly as a “non-knowing grounded specifically in white racial privilege,”

¹ See Mills 1997; Sullivan and Tuana 2007; Gross and McGoey 2015; Mueller 2017.

² The essay uses the terms “nonwhite,” “Black,” and “of color” discriminately. “Nonwhite” appears in the essay when I refer to the general characteristics of a concept, such as white ignorance and white concealment, because these concepts apply to the experiences of all people who are not white—people who have been raced outside of the benefits of whiteness. I use “Black” specifically when referring to the explanatory scenario (i.e., Black women’s interactions with white feminists) and concepts relevant to this particular relationship, or when applying concepts drawn from Black philosophical traditions. I use “of color” to mirror the writing of specific scholars when referenced.

“an ignorance . . . not contingent but causally linked to . . . whiteness,” that produces a “refusal to recognize” the extent to which white racial domination shapes the social (political, material, etc.) world (Mills 2015, 217, 219). Later, I engage particular aspects of white ignorance conceptually relevant to white concealment.

The present treatise employs two methodological tools in an effort to focus the study and establish useful parameters for meaning-making. First, it considers white concealment’s relationship to Black women and white feminists, specifically how white concealment manifests as gendered antiblackness weaponized against Black women by white feminists. While white concealment as one process within white ignorance has implications for all nonwhite people, to clarify some of the more nuanced elements of the phenomenon, I find it useful to isolate my analysis to the experiences of Black women in relation to white feminists. This focus also invites more substantive explorations into an intersectional understanding of white ignorance, along with raced and gendered standpoints. Second, a composite story anchors this conceptual analysis. I crafted the anchoring story by drawing on my own experiences as well as the many stories recounted by Black women friends and colleagues contending with white concealment in the academy. I begin with an overview of white ignorance—focusing on its most relevant features for this project—to clarify the conceptual genealogy of the present proposition.

White Ignorance

The term “ignorance” can be deceiving. Ignorance usually refers to an individual’s lack of knowing by virtue of limited experience. In this sense it is a natural, morally neutral fact of life. Conversely, active ignorance, which white ignorance is a form of, is predicated not on limited but instead on powered experiences. Active ignorance is about what dominant groups deliberately do not allow themselves to know in order to justify and subsequently entrench power. It is an *active* refusal to acknowledge knowledge, to acknowledge unjust power. Paul Taylor describes it as “effectively agree[ing] not to know some quite important things about our social world and the people in it. Sometimes this means . . . *declining to engage in inquiry* that seems likely to reveal some claim as a falsehood” (Taylor 2007, 137; emphasis added). White refusal to know silences nonwhite people’s experiential knowings; therefore, white ignorance is an epistemic violence (Dotson 2011; Spivak 1988).

In his groundbreaking text *The Racial Contract*, Mills elucidates the necessity of deliberative ignorance to the furtherance of a racialized system, noting that racism as a system (or social contract)

prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology . . . a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome

that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made. (Mills 1997, 18)

White people trade an accurate reflection on their life as profiteers within a violent society for a falsified description of themselves as moral actors in a “meritocratic” system; a system where they deserve outsized access, and nonwhites experience a world that is fair and aligned with their natural capabilities. Here, I discuss three characteristics of white ignorance that anchor the broader discussion.

One: White ignorance sustains and is sustained by the exploitation of Black labor. One of the pervading distortions made possible by white ignorance is the relationship between Black people and labor (Dancy, Edwards, and Davis 2018; Harley 2008; McKittrick 2006). Mills (1997) contends that the social contract dictates moral and political—inclusive of economic—relations, allowing for the racial contract to be economically exploitative.

Here I invite the reader to consider an expansive interpretation of economies, one that includes intellectual, social, judicial, and moral, alongside monetary economies. A robust view of economic exploitation underscores the ways in which colonial erasure and its correlating violences afford white people the ability to understand themselves as independently productive moral agents. This process catalyzes a disassociation of Black labor from production. If one is object, one is not a producer of labor but instead a means of production. While the Black Enslavement is the most egregious example, Black separation from Black labor remains a functional reality across scales. For instance, one way the process manifests is as unseen and uncompensated labor demanded of Black women academics. Black women are regularly expected to provide additional academic, psychological, and emotional supports to minoritized students, supports needed for matriculation but not provided by the institution. Additionally, they are tasked with extraneous committee duties and endure censure when they do not comply. These are just a few examples of the ways in which academic institutions “property” Black women.³

³ To extend this discussion, Black women are also often assigned to teach “ghettoized” diversity courses. While offering courses that focus on questions of equity and justice marks a university or department as an active participant in a multicultural society—an important marker in postracialism, procuring significant resources—the maintenance of a white masculinist framework ensures that these courses never occupy a central role in academic discourse. Relegating Black women to these classrooms undermines their intellectual expertise, framing the topics discussed as unimportant and extraneous. These are just a few ways Black women academics are “overextended and undervalued” (Harley 2008, 19). Nuanced analyses of Black labor

Two: White ignorance enables the denial of complexity, which affords a disregard for Black humanity and agency. It enforces a sociality that ensures white people do not have to comprehend the loss and pain Black people suffer as a result of labor exploitation. Comprehension necessitates a social inquiry that recognizes the moral agency of mutual interlocutors (Anderson 2016; Freire 2007; Gordon 1995; Ortega 2006; Taylor 2007). White ignorance, alternatively, confers a world in which white people are rewarded for not knowing while simultaneously convincing themselves that they are the most knowledgeable. Emmalon Davis (2018, 704) describes these efforts as “epistemic defects” that display an “investment in misunderstanding” and a resistance to employ the necessary “epistemic resources” essential to understand the Other.⁴

Three: White ignorance is about ends, not necessarily means. As such, the Racial Contract is “continually being rewritten” (Mills 1997, 37). Lewis Gordon’s (1995) exploration of Sartre’s conception of bad faith offers an important framing in understanding procedural characteristics of white unknowing. At the institutional level, bad faith impedes human recognition, disintegrating reciprocity essential to humanizing engagement. But the process of disintegrated human recognition does not require absolute rejection of the Other. A particular Black human may be recognized in the context of institutional bad faith if recognition furthers the aims of whiteness. One might consider this a nonsubjectivity, a Black subjectivity allowed for the benefit of whiteness at the expense of other Black people. Considering the global affirmation of whiteness, occupying a central role in said project can feel beneficial in discrete situations, even if not fully empowering. The Black nonsubject may experience the white engagement as affirming, while failing to locate the larger implications for Black life and the relationship of the particular moment to the

experiences illuminate the ongoing practice of enslavement and dehumanization visited upon the Black subject.

Ahmed (2012, 1) also asks us to consider carefully “the uses of diversity by institutions and how the arrival of the term ‘diversity’ involves the departure of other (perhaps more critical) terms, including ‘equality,’ ‘equal opportunities,’ and ‘social justice.’” Ahmed also notes how whiteness frames racism as inevitable and/or a problem nonwhite people must solve through diversity labor. These white renarrations absolve white people of responsibility for responding to racialized violence, while also structurally relegating nonwhite people to exhaustive and unfruitful labor within “spaces that are ... less valued” (Ahmed 2012, 4).

⁴ Elements of this process align with Anderson’s (2016) description of authoritarian moral inquiry, a type of inquiry predicated on unjust social hierarchy. Relatedly, Frye (1983, 75) describes the necessity for one to “look and listen and check and question” in humanizing relations.

ongoing project of Black exploitation. Conversely, a Black subjectivity that altogether does not calculate whiteness—whether resistantly or ambivalently—invites violent correctives.

In his description, Gordon (1995, 30) reminds the reader that “there is no black autobiography in antiblack worlds.” There are, however, “black narratives,” narratives written by or about Black people but framed by whites. As Mills notes,

Slave narratives often had to have white authenticators, for example, white abolitionists, with the racially based epistemic authority to write a preface or appear on stage with the author to confirm that what this worthy Negro said was indeed true. (Mills 2007, 32)

The Black narrative is offered credence in an antiblack world only if it first receives white approval.⁵

The present essay suggests that white ignorance creates conditions that support moral rationalization, denied complexity, Black labor exploitation, and ultimately white dominance. In the next section I discuss what I consider an important but undertheorized process by which these aims are accomplished in particular situations: white concealment.

An Illustration of Power

As mentioned previously, in an attempt to anchor the analysis, I offer a composite story illustrative of white concealment’s principal features. There are three “scenes of subjection” in this story (Hartman 1997). Each scene attempts to (1) concretize white concealment and (2) highlight particular aspects of the idea. The story is followed by a detailed analysis of white concealment.⁶

⁵ Feagin (2010) describes white narrative control as “white racial framing.” Similar to white ignorance, white racial frames provide whites with epistemic resources to justify and maintain racial hierarchies. “This type of aggressive racist framing reinforces whites’ position of superior power and privilege in the U.S. racial hierarchy” (Wingfield and Feagin 2012, 145).

⁶ White characters’ names are deliberate in the story. They denote common Euro-American femme names. Classifying white women according to common Euro-American names has been a part of the African American lexicon for generations. In “Story of Harlem Slang,” Zora Neale Hurston (1990, 228) defines “Miss Anne” simply as “a white woman.” But that simple definition works as expressive code for African American listeners to succinctly denote the particular characteristics of racially problematic white women. In contemporary rhetoric communities of color have created similar associations with names such as “Karen,” “Becky,” and “Susan.”

Cast of Characters

Main

Anne White: White feminist, full professor
Amy Snow: White feminist, academic managerial leader
Aspen Grey: Biracial feminist, early career faculty
Jalese Banks: Black womanist, mid-career faculty
Cecily Billings: Black woman, graduate student

Supporting

LaKiesha Booker: Black womanist, mid-career faculty
Juan Basquez: Latine man, early career faculty

The Exam

Four faculty members, including Anne and Jalese, are gathered with Cecily for her comprehensive exam oral defense. Throughout the meeting, nonwhite committee members—LaKiesha and Juan—have asked Cecily clarifying questions related to her conceptual design, attempting to offer opportunities for response and rectification. Specifically, nonwhite faculty are troubled by critical misreadings of Black feminist scholarship in the exam response. After an hour, it has become clear Cecily is either unwilling or unable to make the necessary conceptual shifts. The room is now tense.

Dr. (LaKiesha) Booker: Cecily, I'm telling you this under no uncertain terms, I am very uncomfortable with your description of "othermothering." This does not align with my read of Collins and, I would venture to say, with any serious scholar of Black feminist or womanist thought.

Dr. (Juan) Basquez: I'm grateful you brought this up, Dr. Booker. I am also concerned, but since Black feminism is not my area of study, I didn't know if I was misreading. But I too feel as if the descriptions provided, for lack of a better word, "mammy-fy" Black women professionals.

LaKiesha: Yes! That's exactly it. Cecily, you say you want to celebrate and support Black women with your scholarship, but this document basically says emotional labor exploitation is somehow inherent to us, to our core being.

Juan: I see in your program of study that you participated in an independent study focused on Black feminist thought. Who directed that study? Dr. Banks?

Jalese: (blank faced) No, no I did not. If I'm not mistaken, Dr. White was the director of that study.

Anne's face turns bright red and she becomes visibly angry. Cecily appears uncomfortable.

After the defense, Jalese and LaKiesha remain in the room.

LaKiesha: Girl, what the hell was that?!

Jalese: Giiiiirrrl... (shakes her head and sighs), I know. I've been telling Cecily for months about this, and other issues with her writing. Honestly, I've spent HOURS and DAYS giving her feedback on drafts, just for her to send something back to me uncorrected with more problems! You have no idea what it took just to get her to this point. Right now, I'm just tired. And the trip part about it is, I know she runs to Anne whenever I correct her. And of course, Anne won't ACTUALLY read the drafts. No, that would be too much work. But she will undermine my advisement with Cecily. Quiet as it's kept, I'm the advisor of record because Anne refused to take her on officially. And you know I didn't even know they were doing that independent study until I had to sign off on Cecily's exam paperwork! You tell me how a historian of Frances Willard is qualified to direct a study of Black feminism?!

LaKiesha: Literally two of this school's five scholars of Black feminism are on Cecily's committee and Anne thought she should teach her about "othermothering"!?

Jalese: [shakes her head and sighs while looking at LaKiesha knowingly]

LaKiesha and Jalese gather their belongings, proceed to walk out the room, and continue to talk. As they cross the threshold of the door, they notice to their left further down the hall, Anne dramatically speaking in hushed tones to Cecily...

The Meeting

*Two weeks after Cecily's oral defense, Jalese is busily working in her campus office. She hears the *ping* of an email notification.*

Subject: Dissertation Committee Changes
From: Cecily Billings
To: Jalese Banks
Cc: Amy Snow

Dear Dr. Banks,
I hope you are well. After deep reflection and conversation with trusted mentors, I have decided to pursue a change in the composition of my dissertation committee...
I am grateful for all your support to this point and wish you much success moving forward.

Respectfully,
Cecily

Jalese stares at the email in disbelief for one full minute. She then focuses on the "Cc" line in confusion.

Jalese: (says to herself aloud) Why is Amy on this email? What does she have to do with this?

Jalese sends an email to Amy's assistant requesting a meeting.

One week later, Jalese and Amy are meeting in the faculty lounge.

Jalese: Thank you for meeting with me. It's good to see you. I don't think I've seen you since you helped LaKiesha and me organize the Black Lives on Campus event. I see you're still getting some wear out of that T-shirt.

Amy: Yes! That was a great event. I think it really made many of the white folx on campus uncomfortable. They need it! You know, I wear all Black every time a Black man is murdered by the police. I make it a point to mourn publicly. It definitely makes my white male colleagues uncomfortable. I know, for sure, they all voted for Trump!

Jalese: Yes. I'm sure it does... So, I wanted to talk to you about Cecily.

Amy: (Amy's energy visibly subdues. Her demeanor becomes stoic.) Oh, yes, Cecily. Well, you know, now that I'm an administrator in the graduate school, it's important for me to support Black student self-determination.

Jalese: Umm, ok. I can see that, but what about Black faculty labor?

Amy: Well, if you think about it, this transition actually alleviates labor for you. In my experience as an administrator working through these types of issues, it's best to follow the path of least resistance. I think we made the right choice for Cecily—the most vulnerable person in this situation—and it's important that we give her voice. Don't you agree?

Jalese: I think there are multiple forms of vulnerability and silencing in most situations.

Amy: Hmm, yes. Well, that's something to consider. Maybe we can organize a campus event on multiplicity and intersectionality! I've been doing a lot of reading on intersectionality lately. But anyway, it's been great catching up, Jalese, but I have a one o'clock. Let me know if you have any more event ideas. I'm sure I can get my department to cosponsor. Bye!

The Email

*It has been three weeks of radio silence following Jalese's meeting with Amy. Jalese is casually walking through the quad enjoying the early spring weather as she heads to her Wednesday class. She hears the *ping* of an email notification on her phone.*

Subject: Cecily Billings
From: Aspen Grey
To: Jalese Banks

Dear Jalese,

I wanted to reach out after hearing there was some confusion about Cecily switching advisors late in the process. I am stepping in as her chair and have gotten to know her and her work over the past year, since meeting her during one of the literature review study sessions I facilitate with Anne. When she approached me about the need to change advisors, I did not anticipate it being a contentious transition; sometimes advising relationships just don't work out. I hope that we can all move forward seamlessly from here.

Warmly,
Aspen

Jalese stops in the middle of the walkway. Students and other pedestrians pass to either side of her as she stares at her phone in stunned disbelief.

White Concealment

Concealment: the action of hiding something or preventing it from being known. (Oxford Dictionaries 2015)

Look away! There's nothing to see here.

While others have offered nuanced analyses of white ignorance, fewer have dissected the specific animators therein. I would like to approach white ignorance as a complex system comprised of various instruments, apparatuses, and processes that increase and decrease in relative utility depending on the particular racist situation. White concealment is, thus, one procedural weapon within the larger arsenal of white ignorance.

*White concealment is a particular type of action on the part of white people to protect white ignorance by concealing and/or not acknowledging critical information relevant to a specific racist situation. It is the process through which white people manage Black people by controlling the narrative and blocking engagement with essential components of a Black autobiography.*⁷ White concealment is principally

⁷ Notable complements to this discussion are Billig's (1999) and Eagleton's (1991) engagements with Marx's notion of concealment as a powered practice, though with important distinctions. Marx describes concealment as a routinized forgetting and resulting objectification of labor in the production of commodity inherent to capitalist power (Marx 1915; Billig 1999). Eagleton (1991, 28), remarking on Marx's conception of concealment, describes it as duplicitous. This framing might suggest a certain degree of consciousness in the process. While Marx also evokes notions of secrecy or

about silencing Black voices, but with an intimate twist, this silencing is accomplished through communication with the Black person.⁸

I conceptualize the process of white concealment within the framework of white ignorance because it draws on similar practices for similar aims. White concealment is predicated on white renarration supported by a set of white supremacist ideas, beliefs, and values. White concealment is also ultimately about white hoarding of resources at the expense of Black life; white hoarding made possible through the larger apparatus of Black labor exploitation. In this way, white concealment also works to maintain a particular powered relationship between white and Black people. In the context of a specific racist situation, concealing relevant, but discrete, information enables white people to stay in control of the core issues—and thus maintain their white domination—while Black people expend much needed energy and labor attempting to rationally engage an irrelevant argument.⁹

withholding of truth in describing concealment, he is also clear that the process of concealment is structural and embedded in the capitalist economy, specifically through the use of money, in an essential way that resists cognition. Relatedly, Billig (1999, 313–14), drawing on Freud, depicts Marx’s appeal as a type of “shared repression” or “shared forgetting,” similar to the collective miscognition Mills describes in white ignorance. Billig notes further that “custom, or habit, fixes a price to commodities; and, in consequence, the hidden secret disappears from awareness” (316). The shared lack of awareness embedded in the process of Marxist concealment along with his structural description of the process bears greater alignment with theories of ignorance (Marxist concealment might be described as capitalist ignorance), as opposed to the concept of white concealment that this paper forwards. But what Marxist concealment does illuminate is the centrality of deception (whether self-inflicted or outward facing) in domination.

⁸ Others also theorize the practice of dialogical racist silencing, the kind of silencing camouflaged as communication. Bonilla-Silva’s (2014) account of color-blind racism notes the ways in which white people in the post-civil rights era use coded language to express racist ideas. Similarly, Pollock’s (2004) description of “colormuteness” describes the suppression of race talk in interracial dialogue. Both color-blind racism and colormuteness explore the dialogical tools white people use to maintain racial hierarchies while avoiding public censure for racism.

⁹ The oppressive conditions of white normative professionalism require engagement with irrelevant arguments. For Black people to access and maintain the resources available within neoliberal professional spaces—which is a condition of survival—they are coerced into navigating conversations framed within parameters of white illogic. Many Black people spend a significant amount of time and energy attempting to unravel the initial illogic that they are never able to put forth the more substantive

One might argue the fundamental component of white ignorance—miscognition—is missing from white concealment. But I disagree. While information is known and subsequently concealed in the specific situation, there are larger structural false ideas, beliefs, and values that must be adhered to for white concealment to function: ideas about white superiority, specifically white superior analytical ability that warrants concealment;¹⁰ beliefs about the necessity to censor or control Black voices/autobiography in establishing veracity; and the role of apathetic *intimacy* through white caretaking/direction-setting/management. So to be clear, while the white concealer does possess relevant contextual information about the particular racist situation, what she is refusing to know is that (1) she has created/enabled a racist situation (and thus is culpable in white supremacy), and (2) her refusal to inquire into (i.e., her choice to ignore) relevant information is in protection of her white racial domination, rooted in her (unconscious) belief that she rightfully possesses the moral and intellectual resources to adjudicate the most pertinent aspects of a situation relative to her Black interlocutor.

White concealment is most often preemptive but can also be responsive, working to renarrate violent interactions as benign. It provides “alternative” perspectives for understanding racist interactions, decisions, and outcomes. For example, in the composite story when Amy and Jalese meet, Amy’s suggestion that “it’s important for [her] to support Black student self-determination” is preemptively prepared in advance of her meeting with Jalese but also serves as a reductionist and defensive response to Jalese’s more substantive concerns. Amy—as a white feminist—mobilizes a Black political frame (i.e., self-determination) in order to create a closed-circuit logic, effectively precluding Jalese’s response.

Considering the ways in which white ignorance refuses complexity and inquiry, an analysis of white concealment in action might ask, How is the present narrative concealing important information and critically complex modes of understanding? By

issues. Richeson, Trawalter, and Shelton (2005) suggest that these sorts of interracial professional interactions produce a level of cognitive energy drain that can deplete executive functioning. In many more scenarios, white actors make it clear that any attempt to disrupt the white concealing narrative will come at a price. For instance, Wingfield (2010) notes the range of emotions Black subjects are disallowed in professional settings. Specifically, white professional norms and stereotyping compel Black professionals to engage in emotion work/management in order to camouflage feelings of anger and frustration, which if displayed would result in adverse professional consequences.

¹⁰ See Angela Davis’s (1972) “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves” for a useful discussion on white analytic control and deception toward the maintenance of Black enslavement logics.

what means does this narrative block a more racially inquisitive, and thus incisive, perspective? How does this narrative disallow the testimony of the disempowered?

With this said, white concealment is largely communicative and local. It is not only about the lack of information but also about how particular racist situations are narrated in service to foundational aims of white ignorance and whiteness writ large. White concealment is like the ugly antithesis to counternarrative. While counternarratives position Black autobiographies to disrupt and expose the falsity of dominant narratives (Crenshaw et al. 1995), white concealment works to disrupt and conceal the truth of counternarratives through renarration.

Since white concealment is predicated on communication with the disempowered, it also possesses a particular kind of sadistic intimacy. Unlike dominant narratives that are primarily in service to white communal self-deception, white concealment is about white means of engaging—while simultaneously refusing—the Black. White concealment is what whiteness tells and does not tell, asks and does not ask Black people with the goal of preventing Black people from forwarding perspectives that might disrupt white ignorance.

White concealment’s close communicative strategies mirror white ignorance’s attention to ends as opposed to means. While the most recognizable means of producing white ignorance often require violent silencing and/or avoidance of Black voices (e.g., lynching or the proverbial “echo chamber”), white concealment as a process invites (deceitful, performative) dialogue in an effort to maintain white ignorance. Communication, or lack thereof, is a means. White supremacy is the end.

Some might argue that white concealment is a form of gaslighting. While racist gaslighting may share intersections with white concealment—such as narrative erasure—the two concepts possess important departures. Gaslighters attempt to directly dismiss, degrade, or undermine the minoritized person’s correct perception of a situation (Abramson 2014). White concealers, alternatively, renarrate racist situations, which does not require—and actually avoids—a direct dismissal of the minoritized individual’s perception. The act of “dismissing” a minoritized person’s perception in a public setting could put into question the social justice commitments of a white concealer. For example, a white feminist concealer would be invested in others perceiving her as someone who “believes Black women”; therefore, she would use tactics that assist with avoiding reactions from the Black interlocutor that publicly place her desired identity in question, as might gaslighting. Instead, white concealers attempt to convey unawareness of their racially minoritized interlocutor’s experiences. If gaslighting cannot be avoided, white concealment creates a situation whereby later gaslighting appears more veracious.

Considering the continuously shifting landscape of whiteness—a shifting that is always in service to the entrenchment of power¹¹—the ability to dominate through a variety of mechanisms is particularly useful. I have argued here that white concealment is but one instrument in white ignorance’s broader structure, that it emerges when useful in the context of specific racist situations. In the next section I attempt to describe the racist conditions under which white concealment would be most useful.

Reading White Concealment

Although whiteness is a global condition, its manifestations are geographically and sociologically local (Asante 2016; Shahjahan and Edwards 2022). It is important for race scholars to be able to shrewdly read the particular in light of the general condition of white supremacy. Unlike the larger superstructure, white concealment is not ever-present. Instead, it moves in and out of white ignorance when useful. In the composite story white concealment emerges as the conscious and directed withholding of discrete but relevant information, which allows the white characters to assert dominance while maintaining a misconception (ignorance) of themselves as just. For example:

1. Anne is responsible for Cecily’s misinterpretation of Black feminist “othermothering,” which itself is predicated on Anne’s misperception of herself as qualified and in possession of sufficient scholarly authority to lead a study of Black feminist thought—a position that simultaneously denies Jalese’s scholarly labor and expertise.
2. Relatedly, Anne is silent in the exam during the discussion of “othermothering,” particularly when the question of who supervised the independent study arises. Her silence is a refusal to engage in inquiry, which forecloses the opportunity to question her scholarly authority, as well as, the relevant parameters of the discussion that follow the defense—that is, Cecily’s change in advisement.
3. Anne consistently undermines Jalese’s advisement, while silently orchestrating Jalese’s removal as committee chair. This betrays—if openly addressed—Anne’s assumption of moral and intellectual authority in relation to Jalese. It also reveals a lack of respect for the

¹¹ See Christian 2019; Baldwin 2012; Painter 2010; Lipsitz 2006; Mills 1997; Ignatiev 1995.

broader Black feminist intellectual tradition—for example, the notion that teaching Black feminism does not require prior study.

4. Amy and Aspen refuse to acknowledge the extensive labor Jalese expended in supporting Cecily to exam defense. This is made possible by renarrating the change of advisor as an issue of student “self-determination,” “vulnerability,” and ill-fit.
5. Relatedly, Amy deploys a racialized frame (i.e., ‘Black [student] self-determination’) to undermine the testimony of a Black woman faculty, enabled by concealing the collectivist intent of Black self-determination as a political practice, and instead framing it as an individual act.
6. Amy and Aspen dismiss the corroborating opinions (testimonies) of faculty of color attesting to fundamental challenges with Cecily’s writing—that is, a misreading of Black feminist thought—as opposed to a lack of adequate advisement from Jalese.
7. Aspen renarrates her breach of collegiality and professional disrespect toward Jalese as a matter of “confusion,” “not anticipating” the transition of an advanced graduate student being contentious. Said differently, through renarration, Aspen minimizes the gravity of her decision and the process by which she enacted it. In so doing, she refuses to acknowledge the impact her actions had on Jalese—which itself betrays a disregard for Black relationality and an investment in colonial individualism predicated on extraction and accumulation.
8. Amy knows of both Anne’s and Aspen’s roles but is unwilling to investigate further through honest conversation with Jalese or use her position as an administrator to arrange an open dialogue with deeper inquiry among all parties involved. Amy’s decision not to pursue a more judicious path forward creates the opportunity for her to hastily align with her fellow white women, Anne and Aspen. If (7) obtains, then (8) follows logically: our Black woman protagonist can be disregarded, both personally and as a matter of institutional, structural leadership. Furthermore, open dialogue cannot exist in a context wherein racially minoritized communicative sensibilities could threaten white supremacist ones.

9. Anne, Amy, and Aspen refuse to hear Jalese's autobiography throughout the process. They refuse to allow a Black woman's testimony to stand against two potent, predetermined white supremacist patriarchal narratives: (A) liberal white women are the saviors of Black people, and (B) Black women are harsh abusive matriarchs (advisors) of dysfunctional Black families (students). The second point explicitly activates controlling images that frame Black women as always and already aggressive mothers (Collins 1990). Within such logics, the student's failures are the fault of her Black woman advisor. These same frames camouflage practices of white maternalist warcraft in a patriarchal conquest state, protecting white women from being read by white institutions as threats to Black women's (professional) safety (Vaught et al. 2022). Predictably, the trap of white saviorism is revealed, as the Black student who is "saved" will go on to become a Black woman faculty member who is managed by white feminist colleagues in the same manner as Jalese, thus perpetuating white supremacy.

In the composite story, by engaging in white concealment as renarration, the white feminist characters can comfortably pursue white ignorant practices of white saviorism predicated on the exploitation and denial of a Black woman's labor. Further, the refusal to explore the contours of the issue and the conditions that negatively impacted two Black women is an unambiguous display of resistance to inquiry. The refusal to know in more detail reflects the second characteristic of white ignorance discussed earlier: the denial of complexity for the purposes of white interests (Dotson 2012; Pohlhaus 2012). Reflective of the third characteristic of white ignorance discussed here, while the end goal is silencing of a Black woman, this is accomplished through the means of dialogue. In this specific case, relevant white interests are not simply the exploitation of a Black woman's labor but also the ability to position one's white self as an intellectual, moral, and adjudicatory racial authority. Both pursuits ultimately concretize the goal of white power entrenchment, albeit through the guise of supporting a Black student.

These elements reveal the ways in which white concealment protects white ignorance in this particular racist situation. But why was concealment the vehicle? Of all white ignorance's weapons, why did Anne, Amy, and Aspen choose white concealment? In the next section I theorize possible answers to the above questions.

Gendering White Concealment

“What woman here is so enamored of her own oppression that she cannot see her heelprint upon another woman’s face?” (Lorde 1984, 132)

The perceptive reader will have noticed another important element of the composite story: gender. All of the main characters are women. This was a deliberate choice based on my experiences and the experiences of the Black women reflected in the composite story. Without fail, the stories I have drawn on to construct the composite story indicted liberal white (or white-aspiring) women. I believe this is not a coincidence. And while I do contend there may be all kinds of violent concealments that manifest in situations involving other powered dynamics, the particularities of this concept were best illustrated by focusing on this distinct race-gender context. Thus, I want to consider how white concealment as a particular procedural apparatus within white ignorance is often enacted in engagements between feminist white women and Black women.¹²

Nevertheless, the present exploration does not isolate white concealment to women. Instead, I am suggesting that if the reader accepts the proposition that white ignorance is a complex system, the relevance of white concealment—as a specific procedural weapon within the larger arsenal of white ignorance—may increase under specific gendered situations. In this way, the particularities of liberal white women’s racism—their specific situatedness—offer a rich context for an analysis of white concealment. I draw on feminist standpoint theories to elucidate the above claim. As Sandra Harding (1991) has noted, women (as well as other minoritized peoples, within their specific geographical and social contexts) tend to acquire an epistemic advantage because of their social location. Owing to the subordinated position they occupy within their specific social world, women must be more aware. Their alienation from power demands attention to and facility with the structural reality in which they find themselves. Women on the whole are less obliged to “make excuses

¹² This line of inquiry is in conversation with the broader cultural critique of white women as racist provocateurs—colloquially described as “Karens,” “Beckys,” and “Susans.” I also recognize the growing scholarly attention being paid to the particularities of gendered racism. Indeed, Matias’s (2019) edited collection, *Surviving Becky(s)*, explores the complexities of white liberal women’s particular brand of racism, arguing that their “‘one up-one down’ social positioning” produces a desire to “cling onto their whiteness in more nuanced, covert ways” (1). The fact that academia has been one of the primary havens for racially problematic white women (e.g., Rachel Dolezal and Jessica Krug), suggests an overdue professional reckoning.

for [patriarchy's] rampant unfairness" (Alcoff 2007, 44). Collins (1990) offers a more nuanced feminist standpoint analytic by considering the multiple terrains of structural disempowerment Black women navigate, and the subsequent epistemic veracity that is produced therein. Through a complex read of the "Matrix of Domination," Collins brings to bear the varying relations different social identities have with power. This proposition would suggest that the experience of marginalization disallows an uncomplicated engagement with white ignorance.

Plainly stated, women often do not have the luxury of ignorance, even white women. However, white women, unlike Black women, do possess access to whiteness, which means that, regarding race, ignorance is advantageous. The paradox is that, by virtue of their gender, white women have access to epistemic awareness; by virtue of their race—in order to effectively hoard resources—it's advantageous to practice ignorance. White women's oppressive experience under patriarchy can act as a disrupter, a particular kind of second sight (Du Bois 1903; Gooding-Williams 2009), allowing them heightened perspective—whether wanted or unwanted—into structural inequality. Yet, they are also positioned to be seduced by whiteness—even some of its powered masculinist features—and therefore white ignorance (Lugones 2007). Theoretically speaking, an "aware white ignorance" could not function in the same manner as an unaware white ignorance. Different oppressive processes would have to be performed to remain ignorant in a state of epistemic awareness. In this way, white concealment is a reactive by-product of aware white ignorance.

I understand "unaware white ignorance" as a lack of awareness about structural inequality writ large, and an active refusal to know such things about one's world in general. Said differently, it is an investment in understanding the world as fundamentally just, with any inequality being the result of individual deficiencies, incidental interpersonal failures, or chance. By "aware white ignorance," I mean an active investment in not recognizing the multiple and nuanced ways in which white supremacy is shaping one's social context, while simultaneously seeking awareness and acknowledgment of other forms of structural inequality that bear negatively on one's life and the lives of those for whom one identifies.

For an instructive illustration of aware white ignorance, consider a conversation detailed in Inez Goodman's (1902) essay "A Nine-Hour Day for Domestic Servants" between her and another white feminist. The exchange is recounted in Angela Davis's (1981) essay "The Meaning of Emancipation according to Black Women" in *Women, Race & Class*. At the time of the conversation, Goodman is an advocate for domestic workers, a profession predominantly occupied by Black women. Her colleague, Mrs. Jones, is active in a campaign for the rights of clerks, a profession predominantly occupied by white women. Mrs. Jones invites Goodman to sign a petition "urging employers to furnish seats for [white] women clerks" (A. Davis 1981, 96). In response Goodman asks her colleague, "Mrs. Jones, . . . how many hours

a day does your maid stand upon her feet?” Goodman continues to compel Mrs. Jones to recognize the level of taxation the Black domestic worker she employs endures at her behest. In apparent frustration, Mrs. Jones “rose with red cheeks and flashing eyes [proclaiming,] ‘My maid always has Sunday after dinner.’” To which Goodman responds, “Yes, but the clerk has all day Sunday. Please don’t go until I have signed that petition.” (Goodman 1902, 397; quoted in A. Davis 1981, 96, 97).

In this exchange the reader may note that Mrs. Jones is able to recognize and thus empathize with white women clerks. She simultaneously refuses to acknowledge the racially exploitative conditions endured by Black women domestics that sustain her white middle-class lifestyle. As Davis writes, “This feminist activist was perpetrating the very oppression she protested. . . . [But] viewing her servant as a mere extension of herself, the feminist could hardly be *conscious of her own active role* as an oppressor” (A. Davis 1981, 97; emphasis added).

What I find particularly instructive about this scene is Mrs. Jones’s affect. She is described as seemingly humiliated after an interpersonal exchange forces her to acknowledge her role in (gendered) racial inequality. Confronting her implication in the realities of Black women domestics puts into question her self-image as a just feminist actively involved in efforts toward social equality. The reader knows this to be the case because of Mrs. Jones’s response to her newly uncomfortable position; defensiveness and deflection. Goodman does not share how Mrs. Jones’s engagement with the Black domestic she employed was impacted, if at all, by their conversation. What is clear is that in order to resolve this new tension and continue to exploit Black women’s labor, some form of cognitive intervention would be demanded from Mrs. Jones. Herein lies the aim of this project: bringing into relief one of the ways white women who identify as feminists negotiate their acts of domination with their self-perception as just.

White concealment, as a one procedural tool, facilitates white feminist performances of justice, which shield antagonistic assertions of racial authority and enable the (pre)hoarding of intellectual, social, professional, and monetary resources. Similar to epistemic appropriation, as Emmalon Davis (2018) argues, Black women are particularly impacted by these forms of epistemic violences. White feminist performance in service to resource hoarding is possibly best seen in the role of renarration in white concealment. Essential to the practice of concealment is the creation of false narratives that articulate the actions of the white actor as just and supportive. Not unlike Lorde’s (1984, 130) condemnation of white feminist guilt as impotent in the furtherance of antiracism, white feminist renarration is also “defensiveness destructive of communication; [which] becomes a device to protect ignorance.” Concealment in service to the denial of Black voice and Black subjectivity is interpreted as for the greater good. These types of tactics are particularly useful for

white individuals invested in an image of themselves as socially just, “good,” or “nice,” such as white feminists.

The appeal of a passive aggressive ignorance also aligns with the particular race-gendering of white women in the West. White girls and women are often expected to “play nice” to maintain a perception of harmony and avoid conflict and/or social discomfort (Castagno 2019; Morgan 2007). Angelina Castagno (2019, xiv) argues,

Niceness is one mechanism for reifying structural arrangements and ideologies of dominance across lines of race, gender, and social class. It functions not only as a shield to protect (White, [women]) . . . from having to do the hard work of dismantling inequity but also as a disciplining agent for those who attempt or even consider disrupting structures and ideologies of dominance.

Performing niceness requires “avoidance and *reframing*,” which are justified based on one’s “good intentions”—intentions assessed by one’s superior moral and adjudicatory insight (Castagno 2019, x; emphasis added). For an interlocutor invested in appearing nice, white concealment is a useful tool.

The need to conceal, however, betrays a recognition of harm. For instance, Amy does not assist Black women with diversity programming to make more money. Instead, she participates in these activities to position herself as a moral and intellectual authority and to access the cultural cache of relationship with a minoritized community. A professional interest in relationships with Black people would be undermined by a direct confrontation. For clarity, if I consider gendered appeals toward white concealment procedurally, then I might suggest the following:

Conservative white ignorance: “The world is already fair and equal.”

Liberal white ignorance: “The world is unequal, and I’m going to fix it.”

Feminist white ignorance: “Because of all of the work I have done to fix the unequal world, I have the moral authority to adjudicate what information is most relevant in a given situation. My elevated racial consciousness also equips me with the ability to determine which Black women require censure and material constraint, or else they will become obstructive in my pursuit of justice.”

Gendering white concealment clarifies how “feminist” moves camouflage antiblackness.

Intimacies

Mariana Ortega's (2006) conception of a "loving knowing ignorance" assists with elucidating some of the more intimately gendered ways in which white feminists inflict violence upon women of color. She describes loving knowing ignorance as "an ignorance of the thought and experience of women of color that is accompanied by both alleged love for and alleged knowledge about them" (Ortega 2006, 57). Ortega's description of loving, knowing ignorance is inextricably linked with white feminists' desire to appear in relation to women of color, primarily in service to their own professional success. Much of Ortega's theorization is informed by María Lugones's analysis of the "agonistic" relationships white feminists perpetuate against women of color. It is important to note the role of intimate proximity in Lugones's analysis when she writes,

White/Anglo women do one or more of the following to women of color: they ignore us, ostracize us, render us invisible, stereotype us, leave us completely alone, interpret us as crazy. *All of this while we are in their midst.* (Lugones 2003, 83; emphasis added)

Lugones describes an intimacy particular to white feminist terror. The complexity of proximity obfuscates strict notions of subject-object engagement, camouflaging (for white women) while also exposing (for women of color) deleterious intent. Violent intimacy is protective of white feminist egos, allowing them to renarrate themselves outside of structures of domination while simultaneously harming women of color to do so.

Ortega (2006, 63) writes,

Loving, knowing ignorance . . . involves self-deception . . . the perceiver believes himself or herself to be perceiving lovingly even though this is not the case, and the perceiver wishes to make knowledge claims about the object of perception, even though such claims are not checked or questioned.

Ironically, intimacy (or violent closeness) blocks dialogue and critical knowing. The perception of proximity excuses white feminists' unknowing and silencing under the false presumption of intimacy.

One of the conditions under which violent intimacy is most readily exemplified is white saviorism. Essential to white saviorism is a refusal of Black self-determination as well as the critical role of knowledge produced within Black communities. By disrupting community-based praxis and applying simplistic, prescriptive analyses to observations pertaining to race, white feminist saviors are able to better control the

parameters of advancement for Black women. As Amy's interlude reveals, if a Black woman pursues "self-determination," it must be made possible by a white savior. Similarly, Ortega notes,

Such privileges include being the one who decides which woman of color gets to be let in the club, being able to speak for women of color, being able to feel that she is *the one responsible for their salvation*. (Ortega 2006, 68; emphasis added)

If loving, knowing ignorance describes white feminists' internal self-deceptive attempts at perceiving themselves as just, then white concealment is an avenue to perform or enact that self-deception relationally. White concealment shores up a loving, knowing ignorance within a relevant context, creating and affirming deceptive conditions. For a variety of reasons, white concealment is a particularly useful weapon for white feminists who are invested in the type of white ignorance that allows them to maintain socially just, in critical community, representations of themselves. White women's position within intersecting systems of domination obstructs and animates an array of violences. Mapping the gendered dimensions of white concealment elucidates the expansiveness of white ignorance and assists with the development of multiple registers of resistance.

Race and Precarious Power

Some readers may question my wholesale treatment of Aspen as white.¹³ I mention in the composite story preamble that this character identifies as biracial, but for various reasons to be explored throughout this section, she embodies whiteness in this story. Several scholars have astutely argued that race is sociological and not biological.¹⁴ I will not repeat those arguments here, as they are well established in the literature. Instead, what I will explain is how Aspen moved as white in the present

¹³ While I mention at the beginning of the composite story that Aspen is biracial, I do not make note of this fact again until this section of the essay. I am making this choice deliberately, although I recognize it may cause confusion for some readers. My primary aim is for the reader to experience Aspen as a white woman throughout the essay in the same way that Jalese does in the story. I also want to play with the feeling of "racial disorientation" that someone like Jalese might experience when interacting with someone like Aspen.

¹⁴ See Omi and Winant 2015; Lipsitz 2006; Mills 1997; Crenshaw et al. 1995; Fanon 1967.

story,¹⁵ and the dangers of not recognizing the particularities of this type of movement in analyses of race and power.

Since the earliest imperial encounters, there have been nonwhite people who have conspired with white people to harm other nonwhite people. As Mills (2007) himself contends, power and hegemony produce situations in which Black people are also enticed into expressing white ignorance.¹⁶ Whether it be internalized inferiority,

¹⁵ Here I'm taking a deliberately unorthodox approach to scholarly writing and frankly acknowledging the deep and integral conversations I've had with trusted colleagues to flesh out these very complex and troubling ideas—to heed Moraga's (2002, 32) admonition and "take ... head-on collisions" because "this polite timidity is killing us." These are the kinds of conversations that regularly occur in the development of scholarly writing but are often obfuscated by the publication process. Below I paraphrase an ongoing conversation with Sabina Vaught that took place roughly throughout February 2022. I piece together her comments on drafts, email exchanges, and text messages, as well as my responses. I also add in-text citations when appropriate, as all scholarship is also conversation with the printed ideas of various interlocutors. The final composite quote was then submitted to Sabina for approval: "There seems to be a double bind of stereotypes. On the one hand, we want to identify them, rebut them, avoid them, analyze them, animate them as illustrative of larger systems of thought and materiality, etc. On the other, if they prevent us from describing very real and complex movements of power, we allow them to re-control and reduce our understandings of race/gender social organization, and we consent to in effect hiding repressive power organization and movement. Aspen (or someone else who is otherwise identified as 'marginalized') may well fit into stereotypes, particularly when that person is leaning into/reaching for whiteness. So, what do you do with that? Do you say, well, I can't write about it, because it will entrench race/gender power that I'm fighting? Or be divisive? I don't think so. I think you do what Audre Lorde (1984, 1990) did, which is step directly into it, while also acknowledging the unsteady ground. For instance, if you say you can't talk about the 'tragic mulatto' because it's fucked up, then you can't talk about people who in fact take up that situatedness to fuck over other people, or to submit themselves to systems of power (Guinier and Torres 2002, 61–62). I think it's about saying, these stereotypes are weapons of supremacy, and there may be people who resonate with them. We must look at that unflinchingly. And not see it as verification of the stereotype, but rather, as complication of the way race/gender power works."

¹⁶ Lipsitz (2006, 3) also explores the relationship between the perpetuation of white domination and intra-racial conflict, noting, "The power of whiteness depend[s] not only on white hegemony over separate racialized groups, but also on manipulating racial outsiders to fight against one another, to compete with each other for white

survival, self-promotion, psychosis, or all the above, not all nonwhite people are anti-white supremacy. This is a sordid and painful truth many nonwhite people prefer not to discuss. It has caused much inter- and intra-racial strife among various racially oppressed communities.

Like the complexity of white ignorance, Black participation in white supremacy is also a complex process influenced by one's location within the matrix of domination (Collins 1990). Phenotype, for instance, is one of the most significant arbitrators of whiteness. Because race is most clearly demarcated by physical appearance, how people look, how they physically show up in the world is of significant ontological import in discussions of racialization (Fanon 1967; Guinier and Torres 2002). The history of Creoles in Louisiana or Mestizas in Central and South America, for example, lay bare the role of generational whitening in obtaining white supremacy's privileges. But phenotype should not camouflage the significant role cultural codes play in accessing whiteness. Acculturation transmits important codes and practices that either facilitate or prohibit movement in whiteness, as well as comfort within a nonwhite community.

In the composite story both Cecily and Aspen represent differing types of white collaborators. Cecily characterizes an obviously Black woman both phenotypically and culturally. A person's close proximity to a nonwhite community considerably limits her access to whiteness. This is particularly true for Black people as white supremacy is anchored by antiblackness (Dancy, Edwards, and Davis 2018; Edwards and Shahjahan 2025; Fanon 1967; Sexton 2008; Spillers 1987). Aspen is a different and more dangerous actor. The type of individual Aspen represents has access to both white(ned) phenotype and cultural codes. She is what some refer to as "white passing." While Black people may recognize her as not-quite-white, many white people (particularly those socialized in regions of the world lacking prominent creolized communities, like Latin America or South Louisiana) will regularly assume she is white until corrected. Aspen represents the kind of "Black" person who hears the racist jokes up close because white people do not realize they are in "mixed" company. To be clear, being white-presenting does not expel one from nonwhite communities. The fact of imperialism with its accompanying sexual violences, state-sanctioned boundaries, and forced migrations means that all nonwhite communities have had to embrace varying shades. It is Aspen's cultural markers—her sociopolitical allegiances—that solidify her advantaged relationship within whiteness. Aspen represents those reared with/in whiteness. Their primary *and chosen* cultural framework is white. They often maintain very liminal engagement with Black communities. Apart from Black parentage, their frame of reference is white, and their

approval, and to seek the rewards and privileges of whiteness for themselves at the expense of other racialized populations."

sociality does not provide important cultural insights necessary for navigating whiteness as a Black person. Therefore, even when conceiving of themselves as liberal, they may be more susceptible to participate in modes of white domination that reflect “tacit intentionality” (Gillborn 2005, 499). As Guinier and Torres (2002) argue, one’s racial allegiances are not necessarily or inevitably evidenced by phenotype or parentage.¹⁷ Instead, encounters (whether personal or in community) with antiblackness and corollary extractive resource distributions—which incite a commitment to struggle with communities who have been “raced Black”—evinced Black racial allegiance.

Speaking from the positionality of a white-presenting Chicana with an Anglo father, Cherríe Moraga (2002) asks us to complicate racial intimacies and interrogate terrains of solidarity. She charges readers to remember our responsibilities to near-kin oppressions, to not be allured by privileges associated with accessible oppressive identities:

I have had to look critically at my claim to color, at a time when, among white feminist ranks, it is a “politically correct” (and sometimes peripherally advantageous) assertion to make. I must acknowledge the fact that, physically, I have had a choice about making that claim, in contrast to women who have not had such a choice, and have been abused for their color. I must reckon with the fact that for most of my life, by virtue of the very fact that I am white-looking, I identified with and aspired toward white values, and that I rode the wave of that . . . privilege as far as conscience would let me.

. . . I feel angry about this—the years when I refused to recognize privilege, both when it worked against me, and when I worked it, ignorantly, at the expense of others. (Moraga 2002, 32)

Moraga’s critical assessment of her own positionality holds Aspen to account for publicly asserting a Black identity while maintaining an alliance with whiteness. She asks those proximate to whiteness (or other dominant identities) to carefully consider the benefits they incur in racial liminality, and the ramifications of their choices for the survival of the communities with whom they profess identity. As Moraga notes, within frameworks of neoliberal whiteness—frameworks that capitalize on diversity while maintaining white interests—Aspens are aptly positioned to benefit from the gains made by Black communities, while simultaneously

¹⁷ However, the authors are clear that phenotype is a potent impetus for being raced in a racially hierarchal society. And that the experience of being “raced Black” provides important insights for collective resistance (Guinier and Torres 2002, 12).

furthering the aims of white supremacy. Moraga's self-interrogation reminds her readers that political allegiance to the oppressed—particularly for those profiting from the intimacy of kinship—is not automatic but, in fact, painfully deliberate.

In some ways this argument is banal. There is a significant body of feminist philosophy attesting to the role of women-identified people in the entrenchment of patriarchy (see, for example, Johnson 2004; Jones 2020; Rottenberg 2014). Whether it be the adoption of masculinist traits or enacting sexist stereotypes, some women have navigated patriarchy in a variety of deleterious ways to access its resources. Similarly, some Black people collaborate with antiblackness or engage in problematic Black stereotypes to curry favor within white supremacy.

The delicate balance between reaping the benefits reserved for racially minoritized peoples and white comfort is struck by violence. Violence, whether mundane or spectacular, is the foundation of whiteness (Mbembe 2001; Fanon 1967). For a nonacademic example of the ways violence against Black people provides access to whiteness for precariously white individuals, consider the racialization of George Zimmerman. Zimmerman is the son of a white father and a Peruvian mother. Yet his murder of Trayvon Martin in defense of a white neighborhood effectively erased his racial precarity and solidified his access to whiteness. Zimmerman is just one example in a long history of violent invitations into whiteness (see Lipsitz 2006; Painter 2010). A man who spent his life as an “off-white” son paid the price of the ticket into white patriarchy through the blood of Trayvon. Similarly, in the composite story, Aspen reaffirms her allegiance to whiteness by conspiring with other white women to harm Black women and protect white racial authority. (Un)Ironically, her intimacy with Blackness aids the facilitation of white feminist violence.

However, racial treachery is not without risks. If the experiences of Black people passing in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is a warning, one's positionality in whiteness is tenuous at best. White feminists invested in the kinds of sadistic professional intimacies described earlier find individuals like Aspen strategically useful when inserting themselves into racially coded situations. Since whiteness is malleable and shapeshifting (Christian 2019; Painter 2010), Aspen can be “Black” when it is useful to white feminists to have a “Black” person act as the face of racist moves. As a pretenure faculty member amenable to whiteness, Aspen is also more manageable. While inviting her into the fold, white women can also dump racial labor on her as they race her, thus increasing her precarity and undermining the benefits her whitening should bring (Guinier and Torres 2002). Remembering that whiteness is a construct signaled by phenotype, culture, and violent power assists with recognizing the mechanisms that fix white supremacy (Mills 1997). It also lays bare how those whose racial intimacies compromise their access to power and resources navigate domination.

Conclusion

To return to the central argument posed at the beginning of this essay, white ignorance is a complex system made up of a cadre of tools and instruments such as white concealment. Depending on the specifics of the racist situation, the usefulness of white concealment may increase or decrease. Based on the details of the composite story, white concealment is particularly useful in situations where access to white power is liminal, precarious, compromised, or under scrutiny in some way. In situations where a white person's identity pushes her into closer proximity to those who live at the intersections of oppression, deploying white power may require more intimate strategies, particularly if she is invested in projecting herself as just or in relation to the oppressed.

The present treatise reflects a small intervention into the larger study of white ignorance and its multiple machinations. Here I attempt to complicate the idea through a relational perspective. While meta-analyses are important, this project has endeavored to explore the nuanced interdependencies that shape various performances and protections of white ignorance. With greater clarity regarding various epistemic violences, those committed to the liberation of the oppressed can fashion more precise interventions that promote the creation of increasingly just relationships.

The Testimony

Jalese sits at her kitchen table. There is a gold coffee mug to her right, which reads "Black Girl Magic #AMWriting Juice," and a laptop to her left. A cognac-colored leather-bound diary is opened before her. Clear spring sunshine streams through her windows. She looks up with pen still in hand, pensive. After what seems quite a while in deep thought and journaling, she closes the diary and opens the laptop. She begins typing.

Subject: An Invitation to Reflect

From: Jalese Banks

To: Anne White; Amy Snow; Aspen Grey

Dear Anne, Amy, and Aspen:

After much thought I find it necessary to address the three of you as a collective, with my primary intention being to speak back to a particular kind of silencing I have experienced in my recent interactions with the three of you. I come to you with the assumption that, as self-identified feminists and critical scholars, you all will be particularly invested in reparative dialogue. To begin frankly, I experienced your handling of Cecily's advisory transition as the weaponization of white racial power and gendered antiblack violence...

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Emily McRae, Mariana Ortega, and Sabina Vaught for their critical review of early drafts of this essay. “White Concealment” would not exist if not for their thoughtful collegueship. I also appreciate the feedback received from *FPQ*’s anonymous reviewers, which strengthened the arguments in important ways. Finally, I dedicate this essay to the memory of Professor Charles W. Mills—a generous and kind scholar—who took time out of his busy schedule to read the very first draft of this idea in its messiest and most unformed state. Not only did he provide meaningful feedback on my writing, but attentive to my emerging philosophical interests, he also began sharing intellectual opportunities with me. He did not know me. I was a random faculty member in a different discipline who, on the encouragement of a colleague, took the leap and emailed my budding work to the famed Professor Mills. That leap of faith has been one of the sweetest professional decisions I have made.

References

- Abramson, Kate. 2014. “Turning Up the Lights on Gaslighting.” *Philosophical Perspectives* 28 (1): 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpe.12046>.
- Ahmed, Sarah. 2012. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Alcoff, Linda Martín. 2007. “Epistemologies of Ignorance: Three Types.” In *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, edited by Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana. 39–58. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Anderson, Elizabeth. 2016. “The Social Epistemology of Morality: Learning from the Forgotten History of the Abolition of Slavery.” In *The Epistemic Life of Groups: Essays in the Epistemology of Collectives*, edited by Michael S. Brady and Miranda Fricker, 75–94. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Asante, Godfried. 2016. “Glocalized Whiteness: Sustaining and Reproducing Whiteness through “Skin Toning” in Post-Colonial Ghana.” *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 9 (2): 87–103. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17513057.2016.1154184>.
- Baldwin, Andrew. 2012. “Whiteness and Futurity: Towards a Research Agenda.” *Progress in Human Geography* 36 (2): 172–87. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132511414603>.
- Billig, Michael. 1999. “Commodity Fetishism and Repression: Reflections on Marx, Freud and the Psychology of Consumer Capitalism.” *Theory & Psychology* 9 (3): 313–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354399093003>.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 2014. *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*. 4th ed. Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield.

- Castagno, Angelina E. 2019. "Mapping the Contours of Niceness in Education." In *The Price of Nice: How Good Intentions Maintain Educational Inequity*, edited by Angelina E. Castagno, ix–xxiv. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Christian, Michelle. 2019. "A Global Critical Race and Racism Framework: Racial Entanglements and Deep and Malleable Whiteness." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 5 (2): 169–85. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332649218783220>.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 1990. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas, eds. 1995. *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*. New York: New Press.
- Dancy, T. Elon, Kirsten T. Edwards, and James Earl Davis. 2018. "Historically White Universities and Plantation Politics: Anti-Blackness and Higher Education in the Black Lives Matter Era." *Urban Education* 53 (2): 176–95. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085918754328>.
- Davis, Angela. 1972. "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves." *Massachusetts Review* 13 (1/2): 81–100.
- . 1981. *Women, Race & Class*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Davis, Emmalon. 2018. "On Epistemic Appropriation." *Ethics* 128 (4): 702–27. <https://doi.org/10.1086/697490>.
- Dotson, Kristie. 2011. "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing." *Hypatia* 26 (2): 236–57. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2011.01177.x>.
- . 2012. "A Cautionary Tale: On Limiting Epistemic Oppression." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 33 (1): 24–47. <https://doi.org/10.1353/fro.2012.a472779>.
- . 2017. "Theorizing Jane Crow, Theorizing Unknowability." *Social Epistemology* 31 (5): 417–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2017.1346721>.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. 1903. *The Souls of Black Folks*. Chicago: A. C. McClurg.
- Eagleton, Terry. 1991. *Ideology: An Introduction*. London: Verso.
- Edwards, Kirsten T., and Riyad A. Shahjahan. 2025. "Antiblackness as Global Aspiration? Centering Black Studies in Global Higher Education Research." *Educational Researcher* 54 (1): 46–55. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X241281051>.
- Fanon, Frantz. 1967. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove Press.
- Feagin, Joe R. 2010. *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing*. New York: Routledge.
- Freire, Paulo. 2007. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Continuum International.

- Frye, Marilyn. 1983. *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. Freedom, CA: Crossing Press.
- Gillborn, David. 2005. "Education Policy as an Act of White Supremacy: Whiteness, Critical Race Theory and Education Reform." *Journal of Education Policy* 20 (4): 485–505. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930500132346>.
- Gooding-Williams, Robert. 2009. *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Goodman, Inez. 1902. "A Nine-Hour Day for Domestic Servants." *The Independent* 54, no. 2779 (February 13): 397–400.
- Gordon, Lewis R. 1995. *Fanon and the Crisis of the European Man: An Essay on Philosophy and the Human Sciences*. New York: Routledge.
- Gross, Matthias, and Linsey McGoey, eds. 2015. *Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Guinier, Lani, and Gerald Torres. 2002. *The Miner's Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Harding, Sandra. 1991. *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Harley, Debra A. 2008. "Maids of Academe: African American Women Faculty at Predominately White Institutions." *Journal of African American Studies* 12 (1): 19–36. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-007-9030-5>.
- Hartman, Saidiya V. 1997. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. 1990. "Story in Harlem Slang." In *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore*, edited by Alan Dundes, 222–29. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Ignatiev, Noel. 1995. *How the Irish Became White*. New York: Routledge.
- Johnson, Allan G. 2004. "Patriarchy, the System: An It, Not a He, a Them, or an Us." In *Women's Lives: Multicultural Perspectives*, 3rd ed., edited by Gwyn Kirk and Margo Okazawa-Rey, 25–32. Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Jones, El. 2020. "A Woman's Going to Send the Bombs." *Nova Scotia Advocate*, November 21. <https://nsadvocate.org/2020/11/21/a-womans-going-to-send-the-drones-a-poem-by-el-jones/>.
- Lipsitz, George. 2006. *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*. Rev. ed. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Lorde, Audre. 1984. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Freedom, CA: Crossing Press.
- . 1990. "I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing across Sexualities." In *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*, edited by Gloria Anzaldúa, 321–25. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.

- Lugones, María. 1987. "Playfulness, "World"-Travelling, and Loving Perception." *Hypatia* 2 (2): 3–19. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1987.tb01062.x>.
- . 2003. *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- . 2007. "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System." *Hypatia* 22 (1): 186–219. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2007.tb01156.x>.
- Marx, Karl. 1915. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Vol. 1, *The Process of Capitalist Production*. Translated by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling. Edited by Frederick Engels. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr.
- Matias, Cheryl E., ed. 2019. *Surviving Becky(s): Pedagogies for Deconstructing Whiteness and Gender*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Mbembe, Achille. 2001. *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- McKittrick, Katherine. 2006. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Mills, Charles W. 1997. *The Racial Contract*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- . 2007. "White Ignorance." In *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, edited by Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, 11–38. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- . 2015. "Global White Ignorance." In *Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies*, edited by Matthias Gross and Linsey McGoey, 217–27. New York: Routledge.
- Moraga, Cherríe L. 2002. "La Güera." In *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 3rd ed., edited by Cherríe L. Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa, 24–33. Berkeley, CA: Third Woman Press.
- Morgan, Marcyliena. 2007. "When and Where We Enter: Social Context and Desire in Women's Discourse." *Gender and Language* 1 (1): 119–29. <https://doi.org/10.1558/genl.2007.1.1.119>.
- Morrison, Toni. 1975. Speech given in panel presentation for "Black Studies Center Public Dialogue, Part 2." Portland State University, Portland, OR, May 30. Transcript and audio recording from Portland State Library's *Special Collection: Oregon Public Speakers*. <https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/orspeakers/90/>.
- Mueller, Jennifer C. 2017. "Producing Colorblindness: Everyday Mechanisms of White Ignorance." *Social Problems* 64 (2): 219–38.
- Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. 2015. *Racial Formation in the United States*. 3rd ed. New York: Routledge.
- Ortega, Mariana. 2006. "Being Lovingly, Knowingly Ignorant: White Feminism and Women of Color." *Hypatia* 21 (3): 56–74. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2006.tb01113.x>.

- Oxford Dictionaries. 2015. S.v. "Concealment." <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/concealment>, archived at the Wayback Machine.
- Painter, Nell Irvin. 2010. *The History of White People*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Pohlhaus, Gaile, Jr. 2012. "Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice: Toward a Theory of *Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance*." *Hypatia* 27 (4): 715–35. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2011.01222.x>.
- . 2017. "Varieties of Epistemic Injustice." In *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, edited by Ian James Kidd, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus Jr., 13–26. New York: Routledge.
- Pollock, Mica. 2004. *Colormute: Race Talk Dilemmas in an American School*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Richeson, Jennifer A., Sophie Trawalter, and J. Nicole Shelton. 2005. "African Americans' Implicit Racial Attitudes and the Depletion of Executive Function after Interracial Interactions." *Social Cognition* 23 (4): 336–52. <https://doi.org/10.1521/soco.2005.23.4.336>.
- Rottenberg, Catherine. 2014. "Happiness and the Liberal Imagination: How Superwoman Became Balanced." *Feminist Studies* 40 (1): 144–68. <https://doi.org/10.1353/fem.2014.0007>.
- Sexton, Jared. 2008. *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiculturalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Shahjahan, Riyad A., and Kirsten T. Edwards. 2022. "Whiteness as Futurity and Globalization of Higher Education." *Higher Education* 83 (4): 747–64. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00702-x>.
- Spillers, Hortense J. 1987. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17 (2): 65–81. <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 271–313. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Sullivan, Shannon, and Nancy Tuana. 2007. Introduction to *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, edited by Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, 1–10. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Taylor, Paul C. 2007. "Race Problems, Unknown Publics, Paralysis, and Faith." In *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, edited by Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, 135–52. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Vaught, Sabina, Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy, and Jeremiah Chin. 2022. *The School–Prison Trust*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Wingfield, Adia Harvey. 2010. "Are Some Emotions Marked 'Whites Only'? Racialized Feeling Rules in Professional Workplaces." *Social Problems* 57 (2): 251–68. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2010.57.2.251>.

Wingfield, Adia Harvey, and Joe Feagin. 2012. "The Racial Dialectic: President Barack Obama and the White Racial Frame." *Qualitative Sociology* 35 (2): 143–62. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-012-9223-7>.

KIRSTEN T. EDWARDS is associate professor and chair in the Department of Educational Policy Studies, as well as core affiliate faculty for African & African Diaspora Studies and the Center for Women's & Gender Studies at Florida International University in Miami, Florida. Her research merges Black studies, gender studies, and curriculum studies. More specifically, Dr. Edwards is interested in antiblackness as a feature of the globalization of higher education, and the ways in which antiblackness animates correlative asymmetries in educational environments.