Black Skin/White Masks:  
The Performative Sustainability of Whiteness  
(With Apologies to Frantz Fanon)

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This article uses the iconic text Black Skin/White Masks by Frantz Fanon as a metonymic trope to examine the nature of White Studies through the autobiographical frame of a Black critic. The article is structured around three components. First, the socially constructed identity of “Whiteness” as embedded in, emergent from, and critiqued by those in (and of) the project of White Studies. Second, it addresses the question of how White Studies serves as a project for “sustaining Whiteness,” in light of increasing social and cultural critique of Whiteness. Third, the article initiates an argument for the performative nature of Whiteness that crosses borders of race and ethnicity. The article also address issues of authenticity embedded in the politics and intersections of performing race and culture while extending the notion of Whiteness, like Blackness, as a performative accomplishment.

Keywords: performativity; White(ness) Studies; sustainability; authenticity; Frantz Fanon

We wear the mask that grins and lies, It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, This debt we pay to human guile; with torn and bleeding hearts we smile, And mouth with myriad subtleties. Why should the world be otherwise, In counting all our tears and sighs? Nay, let them only see us, while we wear the mask.

—Paul Lawrence Dunbar

In an age when skeptical doubt has taken root in the world, when in the words of a gang of salauds it is no longer possible to find the sense of nonsense, it becomes harder to penetrate to a level where the categories of sense and non-sense are not yet invoked.

—Frantz Fanon

I guess in looks I’m sort of suspect-proof, anyway. You remember what a hard time I used to have in school trying to convince teachers I was really
colored. ... Since I’ve begun to pass for white, nobody has ever doubted that I am a white man. Where I work, the boss is a Southerner and is always cussing out Negroes in my presence, not dreaming I’m one. It is to laugh!

—Langston Hughes

As a Black male professor, some Blacks have accused me of “acting White.” This accusation is different from the practice of “passing for White”—considering my dark brown skin and the dred locks growing on my head. The cultural critique of “acting White” has often come from urban Blacks who consider themselves to be authentic, down, and real. Or worse yet, it comes from some of my Black colleagues, those who have ghettoized themselves within the White ivory tower and see my refusal to further politicize my Black presence as a betrayal. Ultimately, the assessment of “passing for White” works in alignment with the limited performative range of what it means to be a Black man and what it means to be a college professor. Both have stereotypic expectations of a stoic masculinity, a restrained demeanor, and a quick disciplinary impulse. And so for some, I may appear as “the minority teacher...a sth e traditional authoritarian personality . . . John Houseman in racial drag” (Karamcheti, 1995, p. 143).

In the past, the comment on my cultural performance, which often implicates gender and race (as in acting like a White man), was always met with my own creative invective. But lately, with the proliferation of what has been constructed as “White Studies,” I have become interested in the notion of acting White. More important, my interest has deepened into what I construct as the performative sustainability of Whiteness.

My interest is grounded in a reflexive method of extending the scholarship and theorizing on White Studies and with the practice of “performing race.” I mark these as separate but interlocking projects. And if “qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 3), then this is a qualitative study, one that is situated both in the scholarly (cultural) community that produces such discourse and in the dailiness of everyday living where theories are acted out with consequences.

This article is structured around three components: First, the socially constructed identity of “Whiteness” as embedded in, emergent from, and critiqued by those in (and of) the project of White Studies. Second, it poses the question, How does White Studies serve as a project for sustaining Whiteness in a time of an increasing social and cultural critique of Whiteness? Third, I intensively initiate an argument for the performative nature of Whiteness that crosses borders of race and ethnicity. In the process, each section of this article is framed by my own autoethnographically detailed, lived experience in being witness to, performing, and resisting Whiteness.
WHITENESS AS AN OBJECT OF STUDY/CRIQUE

Whether it is (some of) my Black students or (some of) my White students, (some of) my Black colleagues or (some of) my White liberal friends—there are sanctions and reminders of their performative expectations of Whiteness, of Blackness, and particularly of Black maleness. You see, whenever I speak to some White people with directness and honesty, without the mandatory care to temper my tongue, I am perceived as the quintessential “mean Black man.” For historically, when speaking to Whites, Black slaves were forced to sublimate their passion and channel their intention into carefully crafted verbiage that revealed a restrained temperament and an articulate discourse—doting, if not sycophantic behavior, to avoid being perceived as out of control, insolent, disrespectful or worse yet, rebellious. It is this historical reality that in part gave birth to the code-switching double voice and the signifying practices of Black discourse:

The pattern of communication found in the unstable colonial world was governed by radical contingency. The civility of the slave, the colonised and their descendants remains sly. Their signifyin(g) and shape-shifting can still be tactical as well as playful; contestatory as well as compensatory. (Gilroy, 1995, p. 16; see also Gates, 1988)

This requirement of subtle restraint, like the privilege of those who demand it, is “just expected” even if my voice parallels their own unmediated and uncensored tongue. Like Michelle Fine (1997) in her essay “Witnessing Whiteness,” “I find myself trying to understand how whiteness accrues privilege and status; gets itself surrounded by protective pillows of resources and/or benefits of the doubt; how whiteness repels gossip and voyeurism and instead demands dignity” (p. 57). Peter McLaren (1999) began to answer that question when he said, “The codification of whiteness as a social hieroglyph associated with civility, rationality, and political advancement is part of inherited social and cultural formations, formations that were given birth after the early capitalist marriage of industrialism and militarism” (p. 40).

Nakayama and Krizek (1995) reminded me that

the risk for critical researchers who choose to interrogate whiteness, including those in ethnography and cultural studies, is the risk of essentialism. Whatever “whiteness” really means is constituted only through the rhetoric of whiteness. There is no “true essence” to “whiteness”; there are only historical contingent constructions of that social location. (p. 293)²

The performance of Whiteness is a self-reifying practice, a practice that sustains the ability to name and conversely not to be named and the power to speak without being chastised while in the process of chastising others. So
while we lack the semantic availability to fully capture the meaning and function of whiteness, we can at least describe it as a discursive strategy, articulation, or modality. Or we can refer to it perhaps as a form of discursive brokerage, a pattern of negotiation that takes place in conditions generated by specific discursive formations and social relations. (McLaren, 1999, p. 40)

Whiteness “itself” resists codifying. It is only noticeable in its performance.

Culture is doing, race is being, and performance plays a similar yet alternat-ing role in the accomplishment of social membership. Dwight Conquergood (1989) told me that “cultures and selves are not given, they are made, even like fictions, they are ‘made up’ . . . they hold out the promise of re-imagining and refashioning the world” (p. 831). In this contribution, I focus on the active engagement of doing and making, which always signals the implication of performance in the construction of identity. The reality of culture exists only in socially negotiated performative acts. It is the sharing of the acts that builds communities of culture. “And since race in itself—in so far as it is anything in itself—refers to some intrinsically insignificant geographical/physical differences between people, it is the imagery of race that is in play” (Dyer, 1997, p. 1).

For Whiteness to be an object of study, it has to be acknowledged as a substantive presence. It must be acknowledged as more than the visual marking by its opposite or more specifically, serving as the standard on which others define what they are through a negative process of what they are not, hence, White—as Saussure (1960) wrote about binary oppositions. Or as Stephanie M. Wildman (1997) stated,

Whiteness is rarely named in conversations about race, except when it is discussed as the opposite of black. Discussions about race are usually constructed along this bipolar axis, making many of the dynamics of social construction of race invisible and thereby perpetuating white privilege. (p. 324)

In this way “whiteness is actually coproduced with other colors, usually alongside blackness, in [a tensive] symbiotic relation. Where whiteness grows as a seemingly ‘natural’ proxy for quality, merit, and advantage, ‘color’ disintegrates to embody deficit or ‘lack’” (Fine, 1997, p. 58).

Whiteness has to be acknowledged as something that is performative, something that does something in the world, or at least in the moment of its engagement. It has to be something that is linked with access, the social construction of power, worth and value—that leads to the (dare I say it) practice of privilege. In a Foucaultian (1974) sense, the discourse on Whiteness systematically forms the objects of which it speaks—involving a presence that is not manifest in the physical, but in the social construction of identity, worth, and value. In extending her discussion of the character of Allie, in the film Single White Female, Ellen Brinks (1995) offered a critique of the character that I wish to apply to White Studies. I quote her at length to capture the substantive worth of her critique:
By universalizing herself as a commodity, Allie loses the ability to define herself as a particular subject. And as the commodified object of desire, her illusory privacy and containment scatters in objectified replication. The Foucaultian lesson Allie fails to learn is that such a loss of self offers other forms of power and privilege. Being the commodity found everywhere and fixed nowhere (like ideology), her power to control expands. In other words, the extent of her subjective dispersion is also a potential measure of her ability to determine it as an object. Homogenized identity does not necessarily restrict or obliterate Allie’s exercise of power. Allie, however, desperately wants to maintain and assert certain class distinctions in the wake of the sartorial homogenizations she has produced. She secures a copyright on her line of software, attempting to control it (and its profits) by exclusive, legal ownership. This includes a built-in mechanism that allows Allie alone to erase the program, at any time she desires. (p. 7)

I find that White Studies offers itself up as an academic construction of a disciplinary commodity and consequently, also all those who check that box of racial distinction. But this is not a commodity as in things to be bought and sold, like dark bodies in a slave trade. The construction of commodity in White Studies is the signifier for myths of nationality and identity. And in spite of some dated idealism of a melting pot or a garden salad, the idealized image of being an American is still linked with Whiteness.

The “objectified replication” of Whiteness is stratified and crosses borders of class and geographical location. So, Toni Morrison (1992) asked the question, “What parts of the invention and development of whiteness play in the construction of what is loosely described as ‘American’?” (p. 9). In beginning to address this poignant query, both in relation to Morrison and my larger concern, I am reminded of the television advertisements for “American Dream,” the new series on the NBC network. Set in the late 1950s early 1960s, the commercial opens with a Black girl trio singing, entertaining a presumably White audience. The image is in black and white; it is old and grainy, actual footage from a time gone by. In fact, the premise is based on nostalgia, that desire to return to a hazily remembered past. These Black bodies serve as a backdrop as we then discover that this series is about the White American dream—situated around, as the announcer says, “one [White] family’s journey through the decade that changed us all.”

Like nostalgia itself “(perhaps the ultimate trope of return) as the excess of history” (Pollock, 1998, p. 93), the series promises to be about returning White people to a “dream of a vanished state of security and order” before the apex of the civil rights movement (Baldwin, 1985, p. 291). The show is a performative act of Whiteness, which seeks to recover and sustain the memory of a White History. In fact, current commercials for the series have “real” White families testifying to the significant meaningfulness of their engaging and viewing the “real” White family that is the center of the series. In their testimony, they cry and replay pivotal scenes that touched their hearts and validated their lived experiences.

In White Studies, “the Foucaultian lesson” that Brinks (1995) wrote about is not lost. During these times of increased talk of multiculturalism and cul-
tural diversity, White Studies claims a kind of visibility for Whiteness that it had long avoided, as it “continue[d] to influence the identity of those both within and without its domain” (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995, p. 291). Charles A. Gallagher (1997) stated that “in large part, [the unclacking of] white identity is a reaction to the entry of historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups into the political arena and the struggle over social resources” (p. 10).

So, I analogize the specificity of Allie’s copyrighting her line of software as White Studies’ interventionist participation in cultural politics and the attempt to maintain that sense of control through discourse. And like the “built-in mechanism that allows Allie alone to erase the program, at any time she desires” (Brinks, 1995, p. 7), Whiteness is the performance that undergirds White Studies. The image of the American dream is upheld.

White Studies is “caught in the act of social definition” (Richards, 1993). And within this sense, White Studies is not defining that which is new, like the initiation of a new disciplinary conversation or a new social construct. It is engaged in a process of redefinition, of reclassifying and redifferentiating that which always and already existed. Howard Winant (1997) stated that whiteness has been deeply fissured by the racial conflicts of the post-civil rights period. Since the 1960’s contemporary racial discourse has been unable to function as a logic of racial superiority and justified exclusion. Therefore it has been forced into recartilcations, representations, reinterpretations of the meaning of race and, perforce, of whiteness. (p. 40)

White Studies is thus a project of redefining the borders and parameters of Whiteness—simultaneously deconstructing and reconstructing. “THE TEXT is able to explore the mechanism of rejection in its heterogeneity because it is a practice that pulverizes unity, making it a process that posits and displaces theses” (Kristeva, 1984, p. 208).

James Snead (1990) referred to White Studies as a cultural contagion, “not of disease, but a shared awareness of shared energy” (p. 245). Snead went on to define the term in greater detail:

Perhaps the most important aspect of cultural contagion is that by the time one is aware of it, it has already happened. Contagion, being metonymic (con + tangere = “touching together”), involves…an actual process of contacts between people, rather than a quantitative setting of metaphorical value. If collection exists as a guarantor of prospective value, then contagion is a retrospective attempt to assess a propinquity that seems to have always been present in latent form and has already erupted without cause or warning. . . . Even as collection domesticates and organizes barriers and distances, contagion seems to have already made obsolete the barriers to its own spread. (p. 245)

Snead’s usage of the word “collection” is a reference to “universality” and a move toward accumulating “texts, artifacts, nations, peoples as possible” and the homogenization of the state under the rubric of Whiteness (p. 244). I use
Nakayama and Krizek (1995) to follow this up by saying, “The universality of whiteness resides in its already defined position as everything” (p. 293).

Hence, the project of White Studies is conflicted. It is trapped between owning and disowning history, between decentering Whiteness in racial debates while centering Whiteness as an object of study and critique. Mike Hill’s (1997) utterance in “Vipers in Shangri-la Whiteness, Writing, and Other Ordinary Terrors” offers a key point. He stated that “the presence of whiteness alas within our critical reach creates a certain inevitable awkwardness of distance” of which I am personally both attracted to and distanced from (p. 3), in the sense that the awkwardness signals an attempt at a critical objectivity, but is embattled by the vested interests in Whiteness. Hill said, “Whiteness becomes something we both (single out for critique) and avoid (in claiming whiteness for critique, what else can we be, if we happen to be identifiably white?). The epistemological stickiness and ontological wiggling immanent in White Studies is precisely the conflict” (p. 3).

McLaren (1999) further described this dilemma when he said that “Whites are, after all, still accorded the privileges of being White even as they ideologically renounce their whiteness, often with the best intentions” (p. 42). Hence, those White people involved in promoting White Studies position themselves as both subjects and objects in a new ethnography that has self-reifying implications in its simultaneous production of sameness and otherness—on a cultural terrain already stained with history’s legacy.

SUSTAINING WHITENESS THROUGH THE STUDY OF WHITENESS

In college I had my first Black History class. It was a class that I audited because at the time, as an education major, my White advisor did not think that I could make a justification for it fulfilling the university’s American History general education requirement, which I took the same quarter. As I moved from my American (H)istory class to my Black (h)istory class, I came quickly to understand that these histories were fashioned for different purposes. The exclusion of Black history in my American History class signaled the nature of sustaining Whiteness through a study of Whiteness and the exclusion of the significant histories of Others. The focused attention on excavating the history of Blacks in the Black history class foregrounded the specified absence of Blackness elsewhere. It was for me the obvious presence of absence that was disturbing. “The ‘presence of absence’ as I am defining it here has to do with the figurative presence of race and racism, even in the virtual absence of color” (Rosenberg, 1997, p. 80). And we know that white is a color, but that White people are not “coloured”—as history has distinguished these terms (Dyer, 1997).
Sitting in the mass lecture hall of my American History class, among the 10:1 ratio of White to non-White students, I had to learn an un tainted version of history:

But, obviously, I am speaking as an historical creation which has had bitterly to contest its history, to wrestle with it, and finally accept in order to bring myself out of it. My point of view certainly is formed by my history and it is probable that only a creature despised by history finds history a questionable matter. On the other hand, people who imagine that history flatters them (as it does, indeed, since they wrote it) are impaled on their history like a butterfly on a pin and become incapable of seeing or changing themselves, or the world. (Baldwin, 1985, p. 411)

And sitting in the Black history classroom with all Black students, I came to understand issues related to audience and desire and the social construction of necessary knowledge as it related to the university’s general education requirements and the Black students who enrolled in the Black history class. Such is the case with my engagement with White Studies.

The centrifugal forces within White Studies that are intended to engage the abolitionist project of deconstructing and moving away from Whiteness as a dominant paradigm, actually in content and method, becomes centripetal by centering Whiteness in discussions of race and multiculturalism. Trino Grillo and Stephanie M. Wildman (1995) put it best when they said, “This marginalization and obfuscation is evident in . . . the taking back of center-stage from people of color, even in discussions of racism, so that white issues remain or become central in the dialogue” (p. 566).

Ultimately, White Studies, either as a direct intention or an effect, sustains Whiteness through the study of Whiteness. In analyzing Butler’s (1990) theory of performativity, Michael Brown (2000) offered me a meaningful way of understanding and constructing Whiteness within the logics of performativity. I cite him while also taking the liberty to intervene in his utterance to assert the significance of my own argument about the performative nature of Whiteness. Brown said,

Adopting the poststructuralist point that everything is textual (or nothing is prediscursive) allows her to move from speech to gender/sexuality. This brilliant move allows her to stake a number of important theoretical descriptions and insights. Foremost, of course, it provides her with a way to describe and discuss gender that is not essentialising or simply reducible to some immediate social context. (p. 31)

In this same way, I link the notion of performativity to Whiteness and more specifically to critical White Studies. I focus on the proliferation of texts that seek to explore the social manifestations of Whiteness, both from the lived embodied experiences of particular performers and from a clinical/theoretical model that objectifies the issues.
Brown (2000) acknowledged a second key structure in Butler’s (1990) theory of performativity that helps to separate the materiality of White bodies from the enactment of Whiteness. This helps to support an argument that I develop later, which is not only to explore the notion of non-White people performing Whiteness but also to say that the performance of Whiteness is not necessarily perceived as an engagement by all White people.

Second, the move allows [Butler] to link the verbs of “being” and “doing” together. In a sense, her work is a sort of structuration theory for literary critics. In the notion of performativity, social structure and human agency are mutually constituted, and their recursivity can produce unintended consequences (hence reiteratives). This point, in turn, allows us to see social action as moments or instances of broader power relations, but not simply explainable by them in some sort of “last instance” because the superstructure of (say) sex and gender. (Brown, 2000, p. 31)

Applied to White Studies, to be White is just that, a state of being defined by the social interpretation of pigmentation or melanin. Whiteness is an act of doing in terms of the social import that is placed on skin and how that manifests into specified behavioral relations to others within and without that now racialized category. Ultimately, using Brown’s logic, grounded in Butler’s notion of performativity, Whiteness has no foundational base for power except for its own iteratives, its own signifying forces to call attention to itself.

But Jill Dolan (2001) warned against the generalized application of performativity when she said,

“Performativity” as metaphor is used increasingly to describe the non-essentialized constructions of marginalized identities. . . contemporary theory’s promiscuous citation of the performative, will prove appropriative unless they’re securely linked not just to new ways of seeing, but to new places and multiple identities. (p. 77)

Her caution is heeded and appropriately applied onto and into the material site of White bodies, the space honed by White Studies, and the individualized performative engagements of Whiteness.

At the core of Butler’s (1990) theory of gender performativity is the identification of “a stylized repetition of acts” (p. 270). There is a suggestion that gender, like in this case, Whiteness, is maintained through a series of meaningfully repeated enactments (acts, actions, and activities) that sustain gender (Whiteness). “It is only through repetition that one draws on the authority of established metaphor, well-worn rhetoric [and] accepted discourse” (Blocker, 1999, p. 66). These repeated enactments then give “the appearance of substance . . . a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (Butler, 1990, p. 271).
And although Butler (1990) later stated that “gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis” (p. 273), I turn to Brinks (1995) again to concretize the seamlessness of performativity, applied not only to gender but also to Whiteness:

As a mode of operation, serial production affects not only the identity of the objects produced but their producers. They stand under a law of equivalence which reduces them to indistinguishable producers, destroying once and for all the fiction of an original, unique, and authentic source of reference. . . . The produced object . . . and the producer . . . collapse into simulacra, literally simulacra of each other. (pp. 6-7)

I value the contribution that Butler (1990) made to viewing Whiteness as performative, but I am want to focus on the issue of awareness. If we are to believe Fine (1997) that “whiteness is actually coproduced with other colors,” then the act of coproduction and noting and denoting difference signals a performative agency in performing Whiteness. In other words, White people who perform Whiteness know that they are White. They know that the skin they live in offers them social privilege. And they know that although they are individuals, the nature of their performance of Whiteness is linked to historical, if not categorical precedence.

The nature of equivalence that Brinks referred to signals a “reflexive, symmetric, and transitive relation between elements of a set that establishes any two elements in the set as equivalent or nonequivalent” (Morris, 1972, p. 443). So, people who are non-White are aware of Whiteness, the genesis of Whiteness, and even the attempt of Whiteness to conceal its genesis; so White people must also acknowledge that active process of concealment and revealment in performance.

In his essay, “Unthinking Whiteness, Rethinking Democracy” McLaren (1999) presented a litany of descriptive critiques of Whiteness, some of which appear throughout this article. I find the following articulation particularly helpful:

Whiteness is not only mythopoetical in the sense that it constructs a totality of illusions formed around the ontological superiority of the European American subject, it is also metastructural in that it connects whiteness across specific differences; it soldiers fugitive, break-away, discourses and rehegemonizes them. (pp. 35-36)

His observation serves less to define what it is, “it” being Whiteness, as much as a description of the ineffable tension in a project struggling between what it strives to reject or strives to become. The narrative of White Studies is recuperative in nature. A recuperative narrative is one that is constructed and told to rescue or to critique ones own culpability in a historical happening. But the very nature of the method in constructing the narrative inhibits the restoration of the subject in the narrative.
A repeated mantra in White Studies, linked with excavating Whiteness, denying Whiteness, and dismantling Whiteness is the notion that privilege requires responsibility. The assertion is often based in the logic of social responsibility and ultimately reduced to giving something back. Although that is a noble deed, and in Black lingo some might even say “that is mighty White,” I often reject sentiments of giving to the less fortunate that are embedded in White Studies. Why should White privilege require responsibility? Is it to make up for, to apologize for, to deflect arguments against privilege? Is it an enactment of what Shannon Jackson (1998) calls in “White Noises,” “a conflicted and ubiquitous state of self-righteousness, guilt, entitlement, romanitcization, objectification, and self censorship” (p. 53)?

I agree that those who have been “blessed” with financial/economic privilege should give and help to support those who have not or give support back to those from whom their wealth has been derived. Because I believe it was Paulo Freire who suggested that washing ones hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral. Maybe my concern is the conflation and assumption that to be White is to be privileged—as opposed to the economic- or class-based issue of privilege.

And so for a moment, I want to examine the separation of economic privilege from Whiteness as an assumed innate quality, though issues of class that are often linked with privilege are also linked to Whiteness. And for the moment, I want to further chance the indulgence of the reader to consider the case of “White trash” as a category of White that is also constructed as Other and marginalized by Whiteness but still assumes/retains the privileges of Whiteness.

Unlike unmarked hegemonic forms of whiteness, the category of white trash is marked as white from the outset. But in addition to being racially marked, it is simultaneously marked as trash, as something that must be discarded, expelled, and disposed of in order for whiteness to achieve and maintain social dominance. Thus, white trash must be understood as both an external and internal threat to whiteness. It is externalized by class difference but made the same through racial identification. White trash lies simultaneously inside and outside of whiteness, becoming the difference within, the white Other that inhabits the core of whiteness. (Newitz & Wray, 1997, pp. 170-171)

And although I agree with Newitz and Wray (1997), I also clearly note that the “White trash” that I knew in my childhood growing up in the south and the ones I know now, clearly claim the authority and privilege of being White. Disregarding issues of class and location, they engage a performance of “better than thou” in the presence of non-Whites; a performance of privilege that they assume to be either a birthright or a historically perceived sanction.

Butler (1993) might suggest in the case of White trash that the materiality of their White presence is “the effect of [their presumed] power.” Thus they engage a performance of Whiteness based in being White “as power’s most
productive effect” (Butler, 1993, p. 2). Though I would question whether they could claim all the rights listed in Peggy McIntosh’s (1997) often-cited treatise (or confession), “White Privilege and Male Privilege,” they probably claim most. So this claiming of White privilege is not specific to the race/class link. It must be related to just the racial politics that dichotomize Whites and non-Whites.

The idea of white privilege, then, must be an elliptical reference to the result of discrimination and exclusion of nonwhites. To call the result a privilege, which means a positive, specifically granted absolute advantage, rather than a relative one, clouds the issue of disparities between white and nonwhites. . . . There may also be a tacit assumption lurking that whites are better off in some absolute sense when they are only better off relative to nonwhites. That is, if nonwhites were included in general privileges and not discriminated against, the net long-term effect might be more benefits for whites than they have now. (Zack, 1999, p. 80)

This is of course the abiding logic that both haunts and sustains White Studies. And separated from the specific act of slavery and abiding social and economic disparities, maybe this is also the logic that fuels affirmative action and the notion about creating a level playing field. This is not an argument against, as much as acknowledgment of, the embeddedness of these issues. And “the complexity of these social and cultural relationships should provide neither alibi for quiescence nor an excuse for indifference” (Gilroy, 1995, p. 14).

PERFORMING WHITENESS OUTSIDE OF WHITE BODIES

There is a story that I have told often. I tell it as an object lesson to my students about the singular intersection between race, identity, and performance. I tell the story to invoke the memory of and respect for my father, who passed away more than a year ago. I tell the story as a self-reflexive act, as an act of keeping myself in check. I offer the epilogue of the story here to make a point. “Remember who you are.” I have long pondered my father’s charge. As a man from the south and born in the 1930s, to be a teacher meant to be White. But not just White—as we callously use that word to depict the hue of someone’s skin. For my father, to be a teacher signaled what he often referenced as the four Ps of white-collar professionalism: privilege, positionality, power, and propriety.

For my father, to be a teacher meant to be engaged in a performance of Whiteness. For him, to be a teacher meant to be somewhat distanced from working-class worries, the challenge of racial authority, and having to encounter the tough cultural negotiations of Otherness. But my father’s message to me was as much a warning as it was a charge. On one hand, he wanted me to maintain what he presumed to be a cultural and racial authenticity; to
teach through the “dense particularity” of my being, as a Black man (Mohanty, 1989, p. 13). On the other hand, he was warning me that in spite of or despite my education, that people would always see me first as a Black man, even if I deserved the four Ps of white-collar professionalism, and even if I had assumed the performance of Whiteness that he associated with being a teacher and more important, with being a college professor.

And my father was right. As a tenured Black male professor, I have come to know the limited range of my socially constructed possibility. In times of conflict, the critique easily falls back on the “Other” in this br(other) in relation to the population that is claiming me or disowning me. For other Black folks, the critique falls on what they perceive to be my privilege, positionality, power, and propriety as a professor and the perceived ability to practice power over them, or in exclusion of them. Hence, maybe Whiteness can be studied through “the interlocking axes of power, spatial location, and history”—who I am, what I do, and where I do it (Shome, 1999, p. 109). Maybe, whiteness thus, is not merely a discourse that is contained in societies inhabited by white people; it is not a phenomenon that is enacted only where white bodies exist. Whiteness is not just about bodies and skin color, but rather more about the discursive practices. (Shome, 1999, p. 108)

The critique of me “acting White” is only exacerbated by the social sanctions of not performing a perceived normative Black masculinity. Do they see me as both Caliban and Prospero, a pathetic figure trapped between his own bifurcated identity?5 E. Patrick Johnson (2002) rightly referred to this critique as a circulation of Blackness that is “often ground[ed] in biological essence or . . . a particular brand of [racial] politics as agent of social efficacy” (p. 115). My Black critics, whether those I come in direct contact with or Black cultural critics as a distinct population, serve as border guards checking my Black papers and reviewing my authenticity. Is this The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual that Cruse (1967) wrote about or “The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual” that C. West (1991) wrote about? Is this that tensive location of operating within “the White power structure and cultural apparatus, and the inner realities of the Black world”—a world that is experienced in the dailiness of cultural interaction and articulated by Black cultural critics who both redeem and reify Blackness, creating a narrow performative range for being Black?

In his essay “...to be real: The Dissident Forms of Black Expressive Culture,” Gilroy (1995) offered a substantive response to intracommunal critique of Blackness. His comments unveil the tensions and contradictions, the stronghold and the pressures, for an intraracial performative control that is not unlike the interracial sanctions on identity.

The desire to affirm and celebrate unbroken continuity [in racial identity or the performance of race] is clearly a response to racisms that deny any historical currency to black life. However, that same continuity and the notions of time, civilisation, nationality and ethnicity to which it is irretrievably bound are a poisoned
chalice, seductively presented by the very order of power which subaltern cul-
tures, routed from slavery and anticolonialism action promise to abolish.
(Gilroy, 1995, p. 23)

The promise of authenticity is really a trap (Spangler, 2002). On the side of
Whites, the critique of me quickly falls back on Blackness and specifically
Black maleness—which is constructed at once as exotic and bestial (cold,
crude, mean, unfeeling) and always oppositional to and suspect by White-
ness. “They objectively cut away slices of my reality. [And] I am laid bare”
from both sides (Fanon, 1967, p. 116). So maybe,

as an ideological formation transformed into a principle of life into an ensemble
of social relations and practices, whiteness (like blackness) needs to be under-
stood as conjunctural, as a composite social hieroglyph that shifts denotative
and connotative emphasis depending on how its elements are combined and on
the contexts in which it operates. (Haymes, 1995, as cited in McLaren, 1999, p. 35)

Which is to say, it is not about all White people, but about people performing
Whiteness; what Catherine Fox (2002) referred to as disarticulating, a separa-
tion between the materiality of bodies and performative expectations of
being. “It is analogous to masculinity: just as masculinity has some correla-
tion to maleness yet is not a fundamental characteristic of it, whiteliness is not
essentially attached to color” (Fox, 2002, p. 199).6

Fox’s (2002) argument for disarticulation is a separation between the mate-
rial reality of being from the performative engagement of doing. Although
the two White bodies and the performance of Whiteness might suggest each
other, they are not inherently dependent on the other—as much as having the
acknowledgment of the other’s existential presence in the world. Hence,
maybe a person of color may be able to perform Whiteness with the knowl-
dge of how Whiteness is enacted and the effects of Whiteness. Yet, the effec-
tiveness or the impact of such performances is of course contingent among
the audience and the relative value/politics that they place on the relation-
ship between skin, culture, and performance.

In this way, I am refining Ann Louis Keating’s (1995) caution about
overgeneralizing character in “shift[in]g from ‘whiteness’ to ‘white people’”
(p. 907) to the shift from “White people” to “Whiteness.” In discussing
the racial politics of “an all-white, mostly atheist, Australian gospel choir,” E. P.
Johnson (2002) acknowledged the racialized performative shift from White-
ness to Blackness; yet he cautioned that

negotiating any identity is a dangerous adventure, particularly in a postmodern
world where we have come to recognize that identities are made, not given. We
also must realize that the postmodern push to theorize identity discursively
must be balanced with theories of corporeality and materiality. (p. 118)

And although I neither claim nor accept the accusation of “acting White,”
is it possible for someone to engage an insurgent unadorned cross-racial per-
formance? A performance in which not only borders of cultural practice are assumed but also the presumed authority of that racial positionality? Maybe—not. For these are the perceptual criteria on which I was critiqued. I know that my “Black” skin and my “nappy” hair cannot be disregarded. But maybe as Walter Johnson (1999) said in “Reading Bodies and Marking Race,” this is just “visible sign to invisible essence” (p. 139). Like the selection process of slave traders that Johnson referenced, they look at what my body does, such as where my body is positioned and my mouth, as variables in their evaluation.

I find that the distinction Fox (2002) made between the “recognition of social structures” and making a “liberatory move” is an apt critique of White Studies. It is a call for a greater sense of self-implicature and a more pronounced subversion of cultural practices. And maybe it casts a critical gaze on the embodied performance and the directionality of racism. A racism that is not always about crossing borders of racial divide but could also be accomplished within the boundaries of specified communities—based both in the being (of skin color) and the doing (of performing race). This is directed to not only my Black critics (or Black cultural critics in general) but also the internalized racism and finger pointing that occurs between Whites, within the frame of White Studies, with some claiming to be more liberal than others.

Fox’s (2002) notion of disarticulating is similarly linked to José Esteban Muñoz’s (1999) construction of disidentification: “Disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications” (p. 31). The core link between these concepts is a critical distancing to gain perspective. Fox stated,

Critical thinking, when disarticulated from a particular ideological standpoint, offers us a means of engaging in the self-reflexivity needed to question the truth of our positions. To begin to move away from whiteness, we might construe critical thinking as a self-reflexive process that is pragmatically oriented, rather than as a right answer or a point of arrival. (p. 204)

Disarticulation establishes a critical distancing that also propels us to think forward about the implication and complication of our performances of race and gender. And how our theorizing in these areas is always complicated by our complicity in maintaining or subverting these structures. It is about reconfiguring masks and strategies of oppression and representing empowerment through authentic presentations of the self. Their thoughts echo how Fanon (1967) used the term “disalientation” to signal a similar project of liberation (p. 231).

The phrase “acting White” is a performative in the sense of how Austin (1962) used that term to reference words spoken or written that do not simply exist, but do something, they commit an act when uttered, when directed.
Like “the protean N-word,” it invokes and denies a history at the same time, it coalesces the critical intention within any description (Kennedy, 2002, p. 3). And like “de Certeau’s [1984] notion of practices as ‘enunciations’ imbricated in ‘contexts of use’” this utterance signals a collision between history, race, and expectations of cultural performance (Dimitriadis, 1999, p. 356). When directed to me, it is a signifier that lands on a resistant signified. So I resist the accusation of “acting White” on the grounds of its vindictive and derogatory intention and that it is culturally/racially alienating. Yet within that accusation there is a kernel of unorganized or maybe indigenous theorizing that suggests the performative accomplishment of Whiteness, which can be separated and projected on any body.

But even though the accusation of “acting White” might be the perceptual truth for those who cast those stones, I am far from living Whiteness. There is a disconnect between the performative act and the embodied presence. To what degree do I experience a conflation of [my] body and identity and, in turn, foregrounding the “impossibility of obliterating the ‘difference’ that comprises representation”—specifically here, the difference between the “me” (my body/identity), the “not/me” (not my identity), and the “not-not me” (maybe my body/identity and maybe not)? (Hamera, 1993, p. 54)

I find that Hamera’s (1993) re-choreography of Schechner (1985) is a wonderfully disturbing description that fits my response to the accusation often hurled at me as a Black male professor. But I must admit my complicity. I know that I have “greedily” engaged my education, maybe to “make western [White] culture [my] own” (Fanon, 1963, p. 218). To gain entry into the academy, to what degree must I engage a particular performance of language and McLaren’s (1999) notion of an “articulatory whiteness” (p. 36)? To what degree does that gain me entry as a testament of my ability to perform academic, to perform teacher, to negotiate and display the scholarly apparatus of institutional (cultural) membership, to be socially acceptable—in exclusion to other aspects of my performative Black self? Maybe I have allowed “whiteness [to] enter my consciousness” (Shome, 1999, p. 113). Which of course, was my father’s greatest hope and fear.

Is the notion of performing Blackness, like the notion of performing Whiteness, a recursive act of illuminating and reenacting historical images, stylistics, positionalities, arts, languages, and politics? Yes—at least in the company of those who place value on those performances or those who recognize the danger in those performances. Is there “a sign of a deeper set of racial qualities” (E. P. Johnson, 2002, p. 139)? Does the fact that my scholarship often focuses on issues of race and cultural performance signify my performance of Blackness? Does the fact that I am now critiquing White Studies exemplify a performance of Blackness? Or does my positionality as a tenured professor counteract my Blackness?
Am I engaged in an act of *passing for* Black, what Blocker (1999) saw “as a result of performative color,” as my research becomes a “site of subversion” (p. 122)? And for that matter, do people who call themselves *White*, pass for White? “They [came] through Ellis Island, where Giorgio becomes Joe, Pappavasiliu becomes Palmer, Evangelos becomes Evans, Goldsmith becomes Smith or Gold, and Avakian becomes King” (Baldwin, 1985, p. xix). Do I perform a hybrid Blackness foregrounding that side of my identity as I cross borders between many communities, conforming to shifting performances of authenticity?

Matthew Spangler (2002) stated that “authenticity is obscured, fragmented, confused, and ultimately lost in a complex web of signification that promises the genuine article but is always unable to deliver. Paradoxically, however, the very absence of authenticity is one of authenticity’s pleasures” (p. 125). And although I appreciate the thought, under the surveillance of critique, I do not feel immediate pleasure in my authenticity. And as Angela Davis told me (as she is channeled through Anna Deavere Smith (1993), in *Fires in the Mirror*), I am beginning to think that “race has become . . . an increasingly obsolete way of constructing community because it is based on unchangeable immutable biological facts in a very pseudo-scientific way” (p. 30).

**APOLOGIES TO FRANTZ FANON (A CONCLUSION)**

[Apology. A justification (from Greek apo-, “defense,” plus logos, “discourse”)]

Throughout this article, I have been engaged in a performative act, iterating and reiterating logics against Whiteness that are not new, but remarks the meaning. But mine is not exclusively a “racialized narrative.” It is not Patricia Turner’s (1993) notion of the “conspiracy narratives,” nor the “contamination narratives” that Black people tell of how Whites are either complicitous against Blacks or desire to inflict disease on non-White populations. It is a narrative that uncovers a space of contestation that is always and already present and energizes the performative resistance against the uncritical proliferation of Whiteness. The meaningfulness of my reiterations are less in the texts cited than in the wake of those that history did not document on paper, but whose voices echo and whose shadows we always walk in. For like my father, Baldwin (1985) wrote, “Later, in the midnight hour, the missing identity aches” (p. xix).

In his now iconic text, *Black Skin/White Masks*, which has served as a metonymic trope for this essay, Fanon (1967) acknowledged that although the project of liberation is one that should be hard fought, it is a dual responsibil-
ity. It is a responsibility that requires Black people and White people to gather and commune.

The Negro is not. Any more than the white man. Both must turn their backs on inhuman voices which were those of their respective ancestors in order that authentic communication be possible. Before it can adopt a positive voice, freedom requires an effort at disalienation. . . . It is through the effort to recapture the self and to scrutinize the self, it is through the lasting tension of their freedom that men will be able to create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world. (Fanon, 1967, p. 231)

And in *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon (1963) also told me that the elite may “attempt to settle the colonial problem around a green baize table” or within the sanctity of the academic arena, but to be meaningful it cannot just be rhetoric (p. 61). It has to be an enacted resistance that matches the “history of resistance” by colonized people (Fanon, 1963, p. 69). It has to be embodied behavior that has material consequences in the relations between people.

So although I applaud the new abolitionists in White Studies, what does it truly mean to renounce Whiteness or even to disengage performances of Whiteness? Is this disengagement or disinvestment in Whiteness possible? What are the effects? I agree with many who have offered advice and caution. I agree with Howard Winant (1997) when he said,

New abolitionists could also benefit from a recognition that on a pragmatic basis, whites can ally with racially defined minorities without renouncing their whiteness. If they truly agree that race is a socially constructed concept, as they claim, new abolitionists should also be able to recognize that racial identities are not either-or matters, not closed concepts that must be upheld in a reaction fashion or disavowed in a comprehensive act of renunciation. (p. 50)

It demands not only a sincere commitment to practicing what you preach but also claiming the fullness of that socially and historically constructed identity that has brought us to this place in time.

And as problematic as the notion of authenticity is, White people must present themselves in their true skin, they cannot renounce their racial reality as much as engage in new performances that seek to subvert social perceptions of a specified racial identity. I agree with Chris Cuomo and Kim Hall (1990): “Instead of understanding the conditional nature of racial boundaries as an excuse to deny the privilege and responsibility implicit in white identity, antiracist thinkers [should] aim toward undermining racial hierarchies, along with false naturalistic conceptions of racial boundaries” (p. 2). And I agree with Geraldine Harris’s (1999) response when she said, “In short, antiracist whiteness must perform new relations with the subjectivities, the ideologies, and the material legacies of those historical relations” (p. 184). I would suspect that like gender itself, that through this “performatives accomplishment . . . the social audience, including the actors themselves [may] come

It has been the unreflexive element in most of the scholarship and performances that gather under the rubric of White Studies that I have found particularly telling, and what I think that Nakayama and Krizek (1995) alluded to in their research. But for me, it is not what or what not is being said, but how it is/ and how it is not being said and why. Citing James West (1993), Nakayama and Krizek alluded to the issue of intention when they wrote about how discourses, overtly or covertly operate within relations of power in the “institutions and politics that produce ‘knowledge’” (p. 304). In the actual quote, J. West stated, “Although many discourses do not focus on power as an overt central topic, ALL discourses are enacted within relations of power” (p. 213).

Conversely, John T. Warren (2001) talked about “the trap of intent,” when referring to the impulse and objective of writing on the abolition of Whiteness, the claiming or disclaiming of Whiteness (p. 453).

Although I agree with them, I am more interested in the actual rhetorical messaging of White Studies, the actual doing, writing, and performing— which links the theorizing of Whiteness back to the performative act of Whiteness in which “relations of ‘whiteness’ are structurally recreated” (Apple, 1997, p. 124). It is the very nature of performativity within White Studies that “undermines the easy location of identity in part by undermining the coherence of categories like the personal and the political, by seeing individual acts as inseparable from complex discursive power relations” (Blocker, 1999, p. 25).

White Studies would benefit from the redundancy of a critical self-reflexivity. Self-reflexivity as a personal engagement “unmasks complex political/ideological agenda hidden in our writing,” in our performing, and in our public utterances (Richardson, 1998, p. 359). The primary benefit of such an impulse, which is most notably acknowledged in good autoethnographic performances, is not just the ability of seeing the self see the self (of White people talking about Whiteness and/or privilege) but also using that twice-removed visionary knowledge of the self, to enact, articulate, and construct a template of critical social change for the Self and Others: “to make a political difference” (Pelias, 1999, p. 165).

The caution in/to White Studies is not to reflexively note and critique a behavior, or how others perceive the behavior, and then reify that problematic identification in the manner of articulating the acknowledgement, thereby engaging in a strategic slight of hand that redirects the critical gaze away from the actual performance of Whiteness in the moment of its engagement. I believe that this is the caution that Nakayama and Krizek (1995) signaled when they said,

By viewing whiteness as a rhetorical construction, we avoid searching for any essential nature of whiteness. Instead, we seek an understanding of the ways
that this rhetorical construction makes itself visible and invisible, eluding analysis yet exerting influence over everyday life. (p. 293)

Does my critique of White Studies “effectively deconstruct the ground out from under well-meaning White folks who want to turn their gaze back on Whiteness as a racial category?”

Maybe it does. Maybe it does not. The more important question for me to ask of others and myself is on what ground do we all stand as cultural critics? The ground is not stable. It provides no valence between intent and outcome, between objective purpose and subjective involvement. The ground is constituted with the dense sediments of cultural experience. And the borders of those territories are marked, not by invisible lines or once existent walls but by bodies in place and space; bodies that relate to each other in the actuality of being and in the wake of history. We are always and already implicated in our actions, and the nature of our agency is always contextualized within time and space. So although the ground shifts beneath our feet, it is never completely removed. We are all left standing on the convictions of our conscience, and it is the residual traces of that ground that offer us support.

We who are engaged in doing the work of Critical Cultural Studies, “rais[ing] questions about the margins and the centers, especially around categories of race, class, and gender” (Giroux, 1992, p. 202), regardless of the skin we live in (Wills, 1997), might want to engage Norman Denzin’s (1997) notion of a feminist/materialist reflexivity:

It problematizes the concept of a subject that can know itself outside unconscious desire. At the same time, it calls for a relentless critique of that form of writing (and narrative desire) that presumes a unified identity capable of writing about the lives of others without writing about the self. (pp. 222-223)

Denzin’s construction is also signaled by Cornel West (1993) when speaking of the necessary direction of Black cultural workers; a critique that, although not as prominent in this article, still parallels that of White Studies. He stated,

Black [nay all] cultural workers must constitute and sustain discursive and institutional networks that deconstruct earlier . . . strategies for identity formation, demystify power relations that incorporate class, patriarchal, and homophobic biases, and construct more multivalent and multidimensional responses that articulate the complexity and diversity of [cultural/racial] practice in the modern and postmodern world. (p. 19)

This charge is one that unites the effort of Cultural Studies critics to question the very nature of writing about others, ourselves, how we see ourselves and how others see us—in light of our fragmented identities and our competing intentions.
In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison’s (1992) closing line states: “All of us, readers and writers, are bereft when criticism remains too polite or too fearful to notice disrupting darkness before its eyes” (p. 91). So, if within this article I sound like a resistant reader of White Studies, I am. To me the narrative of White Studies “contributes to the nation’s performativity, and it is an attempt to reformulate the means by which the nation was imagined” (Blocker, 1999, p. 119). I am resistant to its manner, but not its projected purpose. Like I am resistant to Whiteness and not White people. In fact, I am willing to be a benefactor of the promises and possibilities of a critically reflexive White Studies.

White Studies is appropriately situated in the overarching project of Cultural Studies, what Manthia Diawara (1993) effectively stated, “often delineates ways of life by elaborating them quite literally, embarrassing and baffling previous theoretical understanding of those forms of life” (p. 262). White Studies helps to further the process of unraveling and giving close examination of power and the situatedness of “Whiteness” as a performative presence in social relations. And, hence, one of the major promises and possibilities in White Studies is that it begins to reposition the critical gaze of race talk, not just on “people of color,” as that phrase is problematically used to reify difference, but also on the multiple axes of racial associations. The benefits of this procedural possibility were signaled by bell hooks (1992):

Generally, this process of repositioning has the power to deconstruct practices of racism and make possible the disassociation of whiteness with terror in the black imagination. As critical intervention, it allows for the recognition that progressive white people who are anti-racist might be able to understand the way in which their cultural practice reinscribes white supremacy without promoting paralyzing guilt or denial. (p. 346)

The critically reflexive possibilities within *The White Studies Project* also begins to establish an empathic impulse that helps to disassociate Blackness (Otherness) with terror in the White imagination.

Signaling William F. Pinar’s (1993) work on critiquing school curriculum, the potential benefit of White Studies is that it can assist in the struggle begun by minority and oppressed groups in “understanding ourselves as racial texts. By exploring the denied past, we might push back the blacked-out, repressed areas and in so doing understand our nonsynchronous identity as Americans” (p. 63). In doing so, White Studies must continue to negotiate the delicate balance between *decentering* Whiteness and *recentering* Whiteness within the discourses of race. White Studies must continually question and examine the relationship between intention, method, and effect. On this note, maybe I should end as Fanon (1967) did in *Black Skin/White Masks* with a prayer of hope:

“O my body, make of me always a man who questions!” (p. 232)
NOTES

1. Epigrams—the opening stanza from the poem “We Wear the Mask” by Paul Lawrence Dunbar (1993); Frantz Fanon (1967, p. 9); and from Langston Hughes’s (1962) “Passing” in Ways of White Folks (p. 51).

2. A modified version of this essay appears in Nakayama and Martin (1999).


4. Here I translate my father’s actual utterance. He would often speak about the privilege of dressing up when they go to work, the ability not to get their hands dirty while working, and the ability to work with their heads and not their hands. Maybe more important, he would speak of their ability to make decisions that effect other people’s lives and the ability not to be questioned about where they are going and what they are doing.

5. Here I am signaling Fanon’s (1967) interpretation of Shakespeare’s The Tempest in terms of colonialism.


10. A reviewer of this essay posed this question.

REFERENCES


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