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What Does White Supremacy Look Like Today?

Explorer Café, 11 November 2015
Jacob A. Bennett, NTT English Instructor
This presentation begins with some framing terminology, defining “white supremacy” and then expanding and complicating that definition; then introduces and defines the related concepts of “colonial ideology” and “racialization.” These definitions are followed by a partial exploration of a history of legal and penal statutes that have, with or without intentionally racist motivation, eventuated in an overwhelming and disparately negative impact on black-skinned individuals, their families, and their communities.
The latter portion of the presentation focuses on a small number of examples of contemporary poetry and poetics, indicating the presence in that field (as in other fields of creative production and academic inquiry, as in the general population of America) of an ongoing discourse regarding race, appropriation, gender, and other aspects of the “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” described by bell hooks.
It seems important to note, as do hooks, Kelley, Omi, Winant, and Horne (among others, and in their own ways), that the racial hierarchies identified herein are artificial in their construction, yet devastatingly real in their inculcation.
It also seems important to note, as is made both implicit and explicit in the content of the list of texts created and performed by black or African-American authors, that the perpetuation of white supremacy—the circulation of its colonial ideology—is not a process owned solely by avowed white supremacists, the KKK and their ilk, but a kind of thinking also present in the actions and utterances of well-meaning “liberals” and “progressives,” as well as in intraracial “colorism” or the denigration of dark-skinned characters and persons.
The final four slides present a list of works cited directly in the presentation, but also many other texts for suggested reading. My hope, implied by the “concluding questions,” is to extend the discourse beyond a handful of disputes about the nature of this or that poet’s work, and to address more extensively and directly the ways in which racial hierarchies (not to mention those of gender and class and religion) impact our lives as students, teachers, and staff on a college campus devoted and committed to “contribute to the common good.”
Strict definitions imply conscious belief and intent: “White supremacy is believing not only that white people are superior based on their skin color, but that they have the right to rule over other people”
Expanded framing admits complex of colonial, racial, economic, gendered hierarchies: “I often use the phrase ‘imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy’ to describe the interlocking political systems that are the foundation of our nation’s politics”

“Anticipating the explosion of work we now call ‘postcolonial studies,’ [Aimé] Césaire reveals how the circulation of colonial ideology—an ideology of racial and cultural hierarchy—is as essential to colonial rule as the police and the use of forced labor.”

“This of course did not occur overnight. [...] With slavery, however, a racially based understanding of society was set in motion which resulted in the shaping of a specific racial identity not only for the slaves but for the European settlers as well.”

“Then there was the developing notion of ‘whiteness,’ smoothing tensions between and among people hailing from the ‘old’ continent, which was propelled by the need for European unity to confront raging Africans and indigenes[...].”

“racialization” is a socio-historical process that subsumes complex cultural difference: “the establishment and maintenance of a ‘color line’”

Ibo, Yoruba, Fulani, Irish → “black”

English, Irish, German → “white”

"In statutes enacted at various times between the 1720s and 1750s, slaves in Boston were forbidden to buy provisions in market; carry a stick or a cane; keep hogs or swine; or stroll about the streets, lanes, or Common at night or at all on Sunday. Punishments for violation of these laws ranged up to 20 lashes, depending on aggravating factors."

The Compromise of 1850 revised the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, federalizing marshals and deputies even in “free states” under threat of harsh penalty ($1000 fine in 19th-century dollars!) for refusing pursuit of self-emancipated ex-slaves.
Civil Rights Act of 1866 passed over President Andrew Jackson’s veto, proclaiming that “all citizens enjoy basic civil rights in the same manner ‘enjoyed by white persons.’”

Johnson denounced the law: “The distinction of race and color is by the bill made to operate in favor of the colored and against the white race.”

“The Reconstruction Acts inaugurated the period of Radical Reconstruction, when a politically mobilized black community, with its white allies, brought the Republican Party to power throughout the South. [...] It was a remarkable, unprecedented effort to build an interracial democracy on the ashes of slavery.”

"The Ku Klux Klan and kindred groups began a campaign of murder, assault and arson that can only be described as homegrown American terrorism. [...] As a result of a bargain after the disputed presidential election of 1876, the Republican Rutherford B. Hayes assumed the Oval Office and disavowed further national efforts to enforce the rights of black citizens [...] Political and economic inequality, summarized in the phrase Jim Crow, had come into being across the South."

Fast forward to 1960s: “The name Special Weapons Attack Team [...] made some elected officials wince [...]. What emerged instead was Special Weapons and Tactics.”

With a name change, “Los Angeles’ SWAT team tested its mettle in 1969 against a local Black Panther militia[...].”

Despite similar rates of concomitant violence, 1970s’ “war on drugs” leads to 1980s’ **harsher penalties** for crack cocaine—much more frequently used by “black” than other races/ethnicities—than for powder cocaine offenses.


Fair Sentencing Act signed into law in 2010.

There is a long tradition of white supremacy in African-American literature, featuring racially black characters who pass, or seek to pass, as white; wish to be white or otherwise idealize whiteness; or look down on darker-skinned characters:
Phillis Wheatley’s “His Excellency George Washington” (1776)

James Weldon Johnson’s The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1912)

Jean Toomer’s Cane (1923)

Wallace Thurman’s The Blacker the Berry (1929)

Nella Larsen’s Passing (1929)

Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye (1970)

Whoopi Goldberg’s The Spook Show (1984)

Danzy Senna’s Caucasia (1998)

Kendrick Lamar’s “The Blacker the Berry” (2015)
The Goddess comes, she moves divinely fair,
Olive and laurel binds her golden hair:
Wherever shines this native of the skies,
Unnumber’d charms and recent graces rise.
-Wheatley’s poem to Washington

“Their pages also reveal the unsuspected fact that prejudice against the Negro is exerting a pressure which [...] is actually and constantly forcing an unascertainable number of fair-complexioned colored people over into the white race.”
-Publisher’s note to 1912 edition of Johnson’s Autobiography

“In my body were many bloods, some dark blood, all blended in the fire of six or more generations. [...] But if people wanted to say this dark blood was Negro blood and if they then wanted to call me a Negro—this was up to them. Fourteen years of my life I had lived in the white group, four years I had lived in the colored group. In my experience there had been no main difference between the two.”
-Unpublished autobiography by Toomer
“More acutely than ever before Emma Lou began to feel that her luscious black complexion was somewhat of a liability, and that her marked color variation from the other people in her environment was a decided curse. **Not that she minded being black**, being a Negro necessitated having a colored skin, **but she did mind being too black.**”

- Thurman’s *The Blacker the Berry*

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She wore an old white skirt draped over her head and called it “long blond hair.” She said her ambition was to sail on the Love Boat, but with a headful of pigtails that “don’t do nuffin’, don’t blow in the wind,” she wouldn’t be welcomed aboard. **She had tried other ways not to be black, but bathing in Clorox didn’t work.**

- Review of Goldberg’s “Little Girl”

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So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street?
When **gang banging make me kill a nigga blacker than me**?
Hypocrite!

- Lamar’s “The Blacker the Berry”
a review of responses to perceived appropriation of, insensitivity to, or outright racism against black or African-American culture:
But remember the tennis match we watched that year?
Right before our eyes

some tough little European blonde
pitted against that big black girl from Alabama,
cornrowed hair and Zulu bangles on her arms,
some outrageous name like Vondella Aphrodite—

We were just walking past the lounge
   and got sucked in by the screen above the bar,
   and pretty soon
we started to care about who won,

putting ourselves into each whacked return
as the volleys went back and forth and back
like some contest between
the old world and the new,

and you loved her complicated hair
and her to-hell-with-everybody stare,
and I,
   I couldn’t help wanting
   the white girl to come out on top,
because she was one of my kind, my tribe,
with her pale eyes and thin lips
“I once had a colleague who wrote what some readers perceived to be a racist poem. [...] When asked what his thinking was while working on the poem, my colleague said this poem is for white people.”

“Did he mean it was for white people to see themselves and their thinking? He did not say that. He said it was for white people. What I heard was, I don’t need to explain myself to you, black girl.

[...]

And though I realized this was me thinking as him, and not in fact him speaking, when offense is being taken offense is heard everywhere, even in the imagination.”

because white men can’t police their imagination
black men are dying

“To me, you are naive when it comes to the subject of American racism. [...] It seems foolish and costly to think that the topic of race belongs only to brown-skinned Americans and not white-skinned Americans. But many poets and readers think that.”

“I am not trying to sidestep—of course I am racist.

[...] Just as you find the posture of ‘angry black person’ simplistic, I find the posture of ‘apologetic liberal white person’ not just boring, but useless.

[...] I don’t believe in explaining my poems to other poets; they are part of my tribe, and I expect them to be resilient readers.”

Mongrel Coalition against Gringpo declare war, and make manifest the “targets”

“Conceptual poetry, like conceptual art, privileges a reader’s thoughts about the text over the author’s rhetorical devices within the text. One of the most successful writers in the movement, Kenneth Goldsmith, said it best: ‘My books are better thought about than read.’”
“Kenneth Goldsmith read Michael Brown’s St. Louis County autopsy report as a poem. Goldsmith is known for his conceptual, ‘uncreative writing’ practices [...] — altering [texts], remixing them, appropriating and repurposing them without credit to the original sources.”

Goldsmith revised the autopsy so that the text he read concludes: “The remaining male genitalia system is unremarkable.”

Goldsmith later explained: “I always massage dry texts to transform them into literature[...]. That said, I didn’t add or alter a single word or sentiment that did not preexist in the original text[...].”

Kenneth Goldsmith appropriates Michael Brown's murdered body, reframed as his poetry, & retweets the angry reactions. A troll with tenure.

You know... It's WILD how many poets get a pass on the blatant racism / misogyny in their work because of poetry's relative obscurity.
The audacity of reading an autopsy report and calling it poetry! I can't even get frothy about this Kenneth Goldsmith thing. It's tacky.
“[Conceptualist] writers imagine the text not as a thing that should absorb you, but as a reflecting pool into which you can look and see and think whatever you want to see. Conceptualists claim this dissolves the imperialist and patriarchal hierarchy implied by the traditional relationship between author and reader.”

In 2009, conceptualist Vanessa Place began tweeting the full text of Margaret Mitchell’s novel *Gone with the Wind*, repeating the “ventriloquism” and “blackface” of the book’s affected diction.

Place explains her project: “I invited Mitchell to sue to recover the ‘darkies’ she claimed ownership of; by reproducing the entire book, I invited suit for wholesale theft of intellectual property. The question was whether the State would uphold Mitchell’s right to profit from her appropriation against my appropriation of her.”

Place, Vanessa. “Artist’s Statement: Gone with the Wind @VanessaPlace.” Notes. Facebook. 19 May 2015. Web. 6 Nov. 2015.
A petition demanded removing Vanessa Place from AWP committee: “We find it inappropriate that Vanessa Place is among those who will decide which panels will take place at AWP Los Angeles. We acknowledge Place’s right to exercise her creativity, but we find her work to be, at best, startlingly racially insensitive, and, at worst, racist.”

“Not long ago I was in a room where someone asked the philosopher Judith Butler what made language hurtful. I could feel everyone lean forward. Our very being exposes us to the address of another, she said. We suffer from the condition of being addressable, by which she meant, I believe, there is no avoiding the word-filled sticks and stones of others.”

Concluding questions:

- do you see white supremacy in your field of study or personal life?
- what does “circulation of colonial ideology” mean to you?
- what is the effect on non-black, non-white peoples and traditions?
- can we prevent, stop, or avoid “word-filled sticks and stones of others”?
- what do you make of Hoagland and Goldsmith’s texts and explanations?
WORKS CITED (& SUGGESTED)


Place, Vanessa. “Artist’s Statement: Gone with the Wind @VanessaPlace.” Notes. Facebook. 19 May 2015. Web. 6 Nov. 2015.


