

The White Closet

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Abstract: Whiteness theorists argue that whiteness has two essential features. First, whiteness colonizes, appropriates and controls the Other. Whiteness is, then, *racist*. Second, whiteness is constructed unwittingly. Whites are, it is claimed, unaware of the harms they inflict on a genocidal scale because whiteness, like the air we breathe, is “invisible” to those who construct it and are constructed by it. Whiteness is, then, *innocent*. I think defining whiteness as *innocent racism* is troubling for two reasons. First, it leaves whites unaccountable for the acts of racism they perpetuate. Second, I think that the claim that whiteness is invisible “like the air we breathe,” while a powerful and fascinating metaphor, is mistaken. I will argue that whiteness is *closeted*; and while the closet makes the acknowledgement of whiteness difficult, it does not make it impossible. Thus, though closeted, whites are morally accountable for the acts of racism they commit.

There are two separate areas of debate in race theory. The first focuses on analyzing the concept *race*. Those concerned with this issue attempt to answer such questions as: What is a race? Is it a biological notion? Is it a socially constructed notion? What is the relationship between race and ethnicity? Is whiteness a race? Is race an immutable feature of a person, or can a person’s race change, as can a person’s religion, political commitments, and nationality? The second area of debate in race theory focuses on the concept of *racism*. Those concerned with this issue attempt to answer such questions as: What is racism? Can institutions be racist, or is racism a property of an individual’s actions only? Are all racist acts intentional, or can they be unintentional? Are they motivated by negative emotions only, such as hatred or fear, or can racism be the result of good intentions as well? Although in the abstract these two sets of questions address different concerns, discussions of race often merge with discussions of racism.¹

Nowhere are the theoretical connections between race and racism more apparent than in the currently accepted analyses of whiteness. Although the details of particular accounts of whiteness differ to some degree, the similarities in the various accounts are striking.² Put briefly, whiteness theorists

argue that whiteness has two essential features. The first is that whiteness colonizes, appropriates and controls The Other. Whiteness is, they argue, essentially *racist*. The second is that whiteness is a social construction both created and perpetuated by whites unwittingly. Whites are, it is claimed, blind to the harms they inflict on a genocidal scale because whiteness, like the air we breathe, is “invisible” to those who construct it and are constructed by it. Whiteness is, then, *innocent*.

Accounts of whiteness that conceive of whiteness as innocent racism have *prima facie* appeal. First, a social constructionist account of whiteness is necessarily incompatible with a biological essentialist account of whiteness. Since whiteness is not a biological fact but a social fact it can be deconstructed (in theory at least) and, therefore, this significant source of social ills is entirely eliminable. Second, the social constructionist provides a powerful theoretical explanation of social facts such as the perpetuation of social privileges enjoyed by whites, the seemingly intractable racism that exists in this society and the racial segregation that continues to permeate this society (apparent when one considers for example the astonishingly low number of inter-racial marriages that occur each year in this society³). Third, social construction can explain the dramatically different perceptions of racism that exist in this society. Numerous studies have supported the claim that whites believe there is far less racism than do non-whites, moreover, whites believe the racism that does exist is of a less serious nature than members of other races believe it is. Whites typically claim that racist acts are isolated events, unconnected to the social reality as a whole—and certainly unconnected to themselves.⁴ The fact that whiteness and the racism it inflicts are invisible to whites (but not to The Others victimized by whiteness) goes a long way to explain these disparities in perceptions of racism.

Despite its initial appeal, I think defining whiteness as *innocent racism* is troubling for two reasons. First, it leaves whites unaccountable for the acts of racism they perpetuate. Although advocates of whiteness as innocent racism can argue that, as a form of racism, it is unjust and ought to be stopped, it is difficult to see how one can hold innocent racists morally blameworthy. If whites can honestly say, as whiteness theorists claim, that they had *no idea* that they were inflicting injustices on others—because whiteness keeps them blind to and unaware of the real nature of the social relations that exist between whites and non-whites—then they cannot be morally criticized. (Ironically, they really *are* morally innocent.) Second, I think that the claim that whiteness is invisible “like the air we breathe,” while a powerful and fascinating metaphor, is mistaken. I will argue that not only is it *not* invisible, but that it is *highly* visible and that the ordinary actions of whites betray their full awareness of the privileges of whiteness. However, because

whites have so much invested in not acknowledging whiteness to themselves or others, they are well adept at keeping such awareness hidden—especially from themselves. Given the real costs—both social and personal—of acknowledging one's whiteness, whites deny whiteness: they deny they are privileged by whiteness and they deny there is whiteness.

Rather than argue that whiteness is invisible, I will argue that it is *closeted*. Making use of discussions of the closet found in gay studies literature, I will argue that the whiteness is not innocent racism, but instead is closeted racism. Further, I will argue that whiteness is not sincerely innocent racism, but is a pretense of innocent racism. While the white closet makes it difficult for whites to acknowledge their whiteness, it does not make it impossible. Thus, though closeted, whites can and should be held morally accountable for the acts of racism they commit. Before defending these claims, I want to analyze the accounts of whiteness as innocent racism more fully.

I. Whiteness as Innocent Racism

What is whiteness? Consider the following claims made by Martha Mahoney:

Whites have difficulty perceiving whiteness, both because of its cultural prevalence and because of its cultural dominance...What we ourselves do and think does not appear to us to be "culture," but rather appears to be the definition of what is normal and neutral, like the air we breathe, transparent from our perspective. Like culture, race is something whites notice in themselves only in relation to others. Privileged identity requires reinforcement and maintenance, but protection against seeing the mechanisms that socially reproduce and maintain privilege is an important component of the privilege itself.⁵

According to Mahoney, whiteness gives whites the privilege to define themselves and to define others in terms of themselves. Whites are "normal," non-whites are the abnormal (the "exotics"). Richard Fung claims that, while blacks are burdened with the racist stereotype of being *oversexual*, Asians must deal with the racist stereotype of being *undersexual*. Only whites have a normal, "healthy" sexuality.⁶ But sexuality is not the only area in which whites get it "just right." Blacks are intellectual inferiors—they are overly emotional, lazy, thieving welfare cheats who are always looking for a handout. Asians are cunning, bookish, unemotional liars who are solely out to cut whites out of the market. (American Indians have the strange privilege of being defined as both highly spiritual and deceitful, lazy drunks. So they occupy both ends of the abnormality spectrum.) Why do whites see themselves as normal? Because, according to

