Controlling Black and Brown Bodies: Stopping the Normative Gaze

Abstract

Europeans theologically redefined non-white humanity as “other” and proclaimed a divine right to dictate the placement and behavior of these “othered” beings. This act of racial supremacy established whites as the norm, the standard bearer against which the other is judged, is expected to emulate, but never achieves. This paper traces the development of white as normative, examines the benefits and consequences of this racial gaze, then offers a critical pedagogy to deconstruct this phenomenon in spiritual formation and praxis that is a matter of life and death in this former British colony for people of color.

Introduction

Since arriving on these shores as a colonizing force, whites theologically redefined non-white humanity as “other” and proclaimed a divine right to dictate the placement and behavior of these “othered” bodies. According to Kelly Brown Douglas, Christianity conspired with white supremacy to provide theological legitimation for the overall dehumanizing denigration of black bodies.¹ For J. Deotis Roberts, it was Christian European missionaries who carried the pride of race and culture and cooperated with colonial administrators in raping lands of their resources and of raping people of their humanity who became the Christian colonizers of the non-Western world.² Native Americans were called “savages” and placed on reservations to provide the land granted to these European invaders, whereas Africans were called “heathen” and placed on auction blocks, in the house and in the field to provide wealth in trade and in slave labor for these new nation builders. This redefinition of sun kissed humanity created the normative white gaze where people of color were viewed through the assumed “superior” white cultural lens and where whites were theologically privileged to dictate the placement and behavior of these dehumanized, othered beings.

Lawmakers further disenfranchised these newly redefined beings by denying people of color rights, privileges, access and opportunities otherwise guaranteed by law to persons of European descent whose theological anthropology remained intact as genuine reflectors of the Imago Dei. Whereas blacks by law were chattel, enslaved with no civil rights in this developing nation, whites were human beings, free from perpetual servitude with certain rights and privileges protected by the law of the land. This legislated distinction between black and white flesh created a racial divide that exists to this day between whites and othered people of color despite the passage of time and the passage of civil rights legislation to amend the overt white supremacy of the past. This racial distinction from a bygone era is evidenced today nevertheless by statistical disparities between whites and non-whites in employment, education, life expectancy, etc. and also by overt and covert acts of racism – institutional (e.g. racial profiling,

voting rights, prison sentencing) and individual (the calling of police on people of color in public spaces for doing ordinary things). In fact, the frequent news reporting and cell phone videos of whites calling police on blacks for sleeping in a university common room,\(^3\) sitting in a coffee shop,\(^4\) barbequing in a public park,\(^5\) moving into their own apartment\(^6\) and mowing a neighbor’s lawn,\(^7\) just to name a few examples, reinforce the legitimacy of the normative white gaze established at the “founding” of the nation. These incidents, moreover, demonstrate the continued white disrespect and disregard for black and brown personhood and exemplify white entitlement to once again dictate the placement and behavior of black and brown bodies. This entitled behavior, however, must be seen as an expression of white supremacy, more generously referred to as white privilege, and must be challenged and ultimately dismantled if America is to be the exceptional, Christian, colorblind and post-racial nation it professes itself to be. In fact, religious educators/practical theologians must deconstruct this troublesome gaze as a matter of spiritual formation and faith-based praxis and as a matter of life and death for people of color.

The normative white gaze is rooted in the theological dehumanization of people of color as other than human and is legitimized by a legal system that sanctions the privileging of white humanity and the disenfranchising of black and brown bodies. This paper traces the development of white normativity as a coordinated theo-political act (i.e. theological and legal) and demonstrates the economic and social benefits to white identity formation. The intent of this historical review as an educational process is twofold: to illustrate the historical impact upon contemporary beliefs and practices and to demonstrate the alleged threatening black presence is a mythical creation of the white imagination that provides financial benefits to white elites and psychological benefits to poor whites to the collective hurt of poor black, brown and white people. The paper will also offer questions for self-reflection. It is my hope that this critical discussion about race relations might yield less defensiveness or what sociologist Robin DiAngelo calls white fragility, which is little more than a morphing manifestation of white supremacy intended to maintain hegemonic dominance. It is also my hope that an honest discussion will stop the normative downward white gaze upon black and brown flesh that gets people killed and finally enable the recognition of racial/ethnic minorities as human beings who reflect the *Imago Dei* and possess a divine right simply to be.

**Establishing the Normative Gaze**

The first observation of note when the English met the African was, of course, his darker hue. In fact, according to historian Winthrop Jordan, “For Englishmen, the most arresting characteristic of the newly discovered African was his skin color.”\(^8\) From the start, Englishmen not only set themselves *apart* from the African, but also set himself *above* the African by stressing what was perceived to be radically different ways of life. By comparison to English life

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4 https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/starbucks-philadelphia-black-men-arrests_us_5ad22073e4b077c89ce91c74
7 https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/black-kid-has-police-called-on-him-for-mowing-a-lawn_us_5b37b791e4b0f3c221a15b5
and culture these Africans seemed the very picture of perverse negation. In fact, Africans simply became the polar opposites of the English – black, heathenistic, uncivilized, inhuman, animalistic, without law and without sexual restraint. Therefore, the English immediately dehumanized the Africans by comparing them to apes, claiming them to be more beast-like than human even suggesting that Africans, now renamed Negroes, “had sprung from the generation of ape-kind or that apes were themselves the offspring of Negroes.” In other words, the English gave no thought to the differing weather conditions between the two continents as a contributing factor in their different in attire for example. Nor did the English grant the African a divine right to have a cultural identity equal to just different from the English. Rather the English was presumed superior, the African inferior. The result of this English/African comparison was a downward gaze upon an “inferior” black being and the elevation of white/whiteness as normative to be admired and emulated. As a result, the African people who had a culture, human identity, religion, government, etc. in their native land were stripped of the same, renamed George, Mary or Elizabeth in the image of their English captors and treated as animals bred, bought and sold for capitalist gain of their English-American owners. Pro-slavery advocates then justified this redefining and renaming of African humanity by claiming Africans were the descendant of Ham who had been cursed by his drunken father Noah to serve to his brothers Shem and Japheth after the flood as recorded in Genesis 9:20-27. Whites were, of course, made the descendants of Shem and ordained of god to rule of the established order. Enslaved Blacks, in fact, were taught that service to whites was mandated by God and that God and the white man were the same. A biblical authority was necessary as Franz Fanon asserts, “All forms of exploitation seek the source of their necessity in some edict of a Biblical nature.” This gross misinterpretation of the biblical text not only theologically redefined black flesh from the *Imago Dei* of Genesis 1:27 granted to all humankind, but suggested also that God had ordained the white man ruler over the social order. This theological reordering was then written into the state and federal laws of this new nation over many years further solidifying the dehumanization of people of color thereby legally enslaving, denying citizenship, limiting immigration, etc.

**White by Law**

White racial identification in this country was reserved initially for rich, Christian, free Englishmen, and even then, only to Protestant Englishmen, according to Rosemary Ruether. However, in 1676 there was a unified uprising of exploited blacks and whites in Virginia known as *Bacon’s Rebellion* that threatened to usurp hegemonic authority. Elite planters were torn between needing to secure their unstable labor force and needing to appease non-land owning, non-colored men with guns upon whom they depended for military strength, tax revenues and

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9 Jordan, 7.
11 Jordan, 16.
maintenance of social order.\textsuperscript{15} Weighing the risk of a unified alliance, British elites decided to extend the white racial identification to poor, landless people of European descent.

At that time, having a white racial identification was materially and psychologically beneficial to whites. For example, being racially identified as white became the birthright of Anglos and set them apart from African bond laborers as well as enlisted Europeans across class lines as active or passive supporters of capitalist agriculture based on chattel bond labor.\textsuperscript{16} The “white” racial designation, moreover, became the attribute of freedom, a shield from the exclusion of civil liberties, and a rallying point for solidarity against anything black. Whereas having a black racial identity marked who was subject to enslavement and designated as property, white racial identity marked who was free. Whiteness then became the quintessential property of personhood.\textsuperscript{17} Of course, this new racial designation did not change the financial status of the poor, rebelling white. It did, however, provide psychological benefits via a false sense of comradery with white elites and mutual white authority with elite whites over black bodies. In other words, elite whites and poor whites now shared a manufactured concern over black and brown presence in the land and the normative downward white gaze upon these dark dehumanized othered bodies. In the absence of any other material possession the new designation “white” became a property right especially for the poor that, according to Cheryl Harris, conferred tangible and economically valuable benefits to those who met the strict standard of proof.\textsuperscript{18} This designation became especially meaningful for poor whites because it meant being able to say “at least I’m not black, or at least I’m not a slave.”

This shift in socio-political identification for poor whites also provided a buffer group that continues to protect the socio-political and economic interests of the wealthy white elites even today. In fact, poor whites often sacrifice their own best interests, and certainly sacrifice the best interest of poor black and brown people as legal scholar Derrick Bell has noted. Conservative politicians have long been able to hold even the highest office in the land by relying on the time-test formula of getting needy whites to identify on the basis of their shared skin color by suggesting that white people must stand together against the Willie Hortons, or against racial quotas, or against affirmative action.\textsuperscript{19}

Yet by every social indicator, racism continues to blight the lives of people of color, including holders of high-echelon jobs.\textsuperscript{20} Racism, in fact, continues to pervade both society and religion including Christian churches.\textsuperscript{21} However, according to sociologist Robin DiAngelo, some white people see themselves as the new oppressed group\textsuperscript{22} even though whites fair better than people of color across a range of access and opportunities in this country. In fact, Charles Gallagher reported that a majority of his white students felt that contemporary affirmative action

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\textsuperscript{18} Harris, 280.
\textsuperscript{19} Derrick Bell, \textit{Faces at the Bottom of the Well The Permanence of Racism} (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 9
\textsuperscript{22} Robin DiAngelo, \textit{White Fragility. Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism}. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 3
\end{flushleft}
measures were unfair because issues of overt racism, discrimination, and equal opportunity had been addressed by their parents’ generation in the 1960s.\textsuperscript{23} The 2018 median income for whites was $907, for blacks $683 and for Latinos $674.\textsuperscript{24} Therefore, any self-perception as oppressed by virtue of white racial identity and/or belief in the legislative correction of anti-discrimination policies reflect a lack of critical consciousness or willful ignorance about race/power dynamics operative in church and in society and about the role theology and the law has played in dehumanizing and disenfranchising people of color. This lack of historical awareness and the implications of racist U.S. history upon contemporary relationships are to our collective hurt as a nation and as a people of faith, and must be corrected via comprehensive education.

**Color Struck**

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire is credited with introducing critical pedagogy as a teaching methodology with his landmark text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed themselves.\textsuperscript{25} The outcome of that reflection encourages and empowers the oppressed to struggle for liberation for themselves and for their oppressors. According to Freire hegemonic dehumanization requires a revolution that only the dehumanized themselves can and must lead for the sake of both the oppressed and of the oppressor. Dehumanized and disenfranchised black and brown people have attempted to lead such a revolution, but racial attitudes toward people of color have hindered these movements. Ricky Lee Allen, Assistant Professor of Educational Thought and Sociocultural Studies highlights barriers to the humanizing efforts led by oppressed people:

- whites defend the myth that they are the model humans;
- whites blame people-of-color for their own victimization under white supremacy;
- whites project all sorts of negative attributes onto people-of-color and all sorts of unfounded positive attributes onto themselves as a way of diverting attention from white culpability and white terrorism;
- whites depict people-of-color as non-human, savage, child-like, dangerous, genetically inferior, ugly, stupid, lazy, depraved, deprived, merely different, angry, outsiders, violators of the social contract, inept; and
- Whites reject people-of-color who openly question white privilege.\textsuperscript{26}

A cursory glance of the white response to advances in civil rights for people of color buttress Allen’s claims of the unwillingness of whites to listen to people of color. Rather, whites enact policies and/or manipulate the discourse in order to maintain hegemonic interest and domination. For example, white hegemonic elites instituted Jim/Jane Crow segregation in response to the civil war, the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, the Bracero Program after the Mexican American war, the Chinese Exclusion Act and other anti-Asian immigration policies merely to reduce the number of immigrants from the continent, the colorblind rhetoric after the passage of civil rights legislation, the post-racial rhetoric after the


\textsuperscript{24} https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/wkyeng.pdf


election of the first black president, all lives matter in response to black lives matter, and stand for the flag in response to NFL players kneeling in protest against police brutality. All of these legislative, rhetorical and political moves serve to counter the narratives and perceived advances of people of color and also to ensure the continued socio-political and economic dominance of whites as normative, right, standard, normative, not to be usurped, surpassed or equaled.

If whites want to deconstruct this harmful normative gaze, they will have to abandon self-protective habits and learn to listen to those non-white persons they have long considered non-humans. For example, they would have to drop the defensiveness of white fragility and pretense of colorblind, which are but morphing manifestations of the white supremacy that dehumanized and disenfranchised people of color at the founding of the nation. According to Allen, for whites to be truly in solidarity with race-radical people of color it is essential that whites unlearn the marks of their origins, which include a belief in the myths of colorblindness, racial meritocracy and white supremacy. Abandoning a long-held politically correct and protective stance as “colorblindness” is to betray the implied Social Contract that Charles Mills says is by/between/for/about whites only. To be racially colorblind is to pretend to ignore what one has already observed and also to pretend to make no socio-political associations/connections with that skin-color observation. To be colorblind, moreover, is to pretend that the color of one’s skin does not carry the marks of U.S. racial history, the legacy of which still manifests today as either white as human, non-white is non-human, white has right, non-white does not have rights, white is normative, non-white is disposable or any number of other positive associations to whiteness and pejorative associations to people of color created by mythical media representation. According to black feminist scholar and cultural critic, bell hooks, there is a direct and abiding connection between the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy in this society and the institutionalization via mass media of specific images. In fact, she says that white supremacists, from slavery on, have recognized that control over images is central to the maintenance of any system of racial domination. Deconstructing the normative white gaze demands a closer examinations of the imaging of whiteness as normative, as all things great and wonderful and by comparison the imaging of blacks as criminals, welfare queens, thugs, n-word and the imaging of brown people as rapists, terrorists, and drug dealers. It also requires employing a pedagogy that foregrounds race such as Critical Race Theory (CRT) and/or Critical White Studies (CRT) as explanatory for the persistence of racial inequities. Both methodologies acknowledge the racism embedded within U.S. society that favors whites and disfavors people of color. Employing methodologies that specifically foreground race enables a more direct, honest discussion on the subject of whiteness, white normative and the deleterious effect upon all people rather than talking gingerly around the subject so as not offend and/or repeatedly generating words and phrasing that preserve white hegemonic domination over people of color and changing nothing in the real world.

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27 Allen, 62.
Conclusion

Educators, particularly educators-of-color and white educators committed to the cause of liberation from oppressive ideology, must unlearn and un-do the mis-education that mis-informs peers, parishioners, and students about race and other -isms plaguing the nation. In particular, religious educators must be more direct in deconstructing the normative gaze. For example, educators must stop soft-peddling white supremacy and racism by using what is believed to be less offensive terms to describe the behavior of the hegemonic elite. White fragility, like colorblind, post-racial or even Jim Crow segregation, is but another morphing manifestation of white supremacy that serves to preserve the white hegemonic status quo and that continues the white-over-all-others social ordering that empowers whites to see themselves as the normative standard bearer entitled to dictate the placement and behavior of black and brown bodies. This attitude has proven to be dangerous, even deadly to people of color.

In fact, too many people of color lay dead and/or find themselves in handcuffs, placed at risk to be shot or to have a criminal record and thereby future employability and housing jeopardized because some white person saw him/herself as the standard bearer, preserver of the normative, right way. Derald Wing Sue, Robin DiAngelo and others offer whites several tips for overcoming racism. Let me suggest several questions whites might paused to ask themselves before calling the police on a black or brown person doing absolutely nothing: what is the perceived threat, why do I believe it to be so, what informs said belief, what divine or American right am I exercising, who am I protecting, what rights does this person of color have, do I see this person as human or as a threatening presence who does not belong in this space, do I see this person as human who is not doing what I would do or doing it the what I would do it, what do I actually see, why am I upset by this sight and/or this person’s presence in this space, would I feel the same way if the person looked like me?

The normative white gaze can be deadly – both physically and spiritually – it kills the body and the soul. Police and stand your ground encounters with people of color have resulted in countless black and brown bodies lying dead for merely being in their own home, driving, walking, running and breathing/not breathing while black. By comparison white males who have actually killed people (i.e. George Zimmerman, Parkland, FL high school and S.C. Mother Emmanuel AME church shooters) have been taken into custody without incident. In addition the seasoning process and politics of respectability that expected even demanded that people of color embrace white culture as their own in order to assimilate in to the wider American culture and/or at the very least to appear less threatening in public spaces is an emotional and spiritual drain upon the soul of black and brown people. Why must African and/or Latin American cultural identity be denied in favor of the colonizing Euro-American people? Moreover, these many and varied scenarios beg the question what about faith, faith-based practices and the spiritual formation process enable anyone to see people of color not reflecting the Imago Dei of the God they claim for themselves, except the racism and white supremacy that is embedded in the very fabric of this nation that changed black and brown people from humans to savages, heathens, slaves, rapists, terrorists, drug dealers, welfare queens, and n-words and elevated white colonizers to the standard bearer, judge, and official cultural critic gazing downward through a lens of normativity upon people of color. Religious educators must bring the historical racial formation to bear upon contemporary race relations to dismantle this normative, but unhealthy gaze.
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