The Power of a Comfortable White Body: Race and Habitual Emotion

Abstract: This paper explores the role of white comfort in sustaining white hegemony in institutional culture and classroom dynamics. The presumption of comfort and security in established social norms enacts an embodied commitment to white supremacy that operates concurrently with conscious, articulated desires to pursue equity, as it delimits how white people imagine what authentically equitable institutions might look and feel like. The paper draws upon theological uses of phenomenology and developmental psychology to describe how the white self develops within a hegemonic social milieu, and how an embodied sense of agency and comfort within unjust social structures facilitates white normativity.

In an introductory feminist philosophy class at UNC Charlotte, the professor discusses racist stereotypes of black men as threatening and predatory, and the familiar of a white woman tensing up and clutching her purse if she encounters a black man on a dark street. One white female student raises her hand, stands up and insists, “But I am scared of black men! If I pass one on the street at night, I can’t help it. I tense up and get knots in my stomach.” When the TA for the class speaks up and chides the student for being racist, she responds, “Oh, so only PC things can be said in the class; I can’t say how I really feel!”

In another classroom, in which white privilege and microaggressions are the topic of discussion, a black student describes her painful experiences of being consistently marginalized and categorized as ‘the black girl.’ A white student quickly speaks up, “I know exactly what she means! I lived in a neighborhood and they referred to me as ‘the white girl!’” The professor facilitating the discussion describes this interjection as a “rush to identify with the black student’s experience,” a move that functions to diminish the distinctive nature of that experience. The white student’s impulse to identify “placed under erasure the reality and gravitas of the black student’s experience of whiteness as terror by shifting the black student’s experience to her own (white) situation.”

An academic conference on sexuality held in the United Kingdom announces a meeting of a “black caucus,” making clear that the meeting is intended specifically for scholars of color. At the scheduled time, ten people arrive for the meeting, four of whom are white. The facilitator hands out a description clarifying that the time is intended for participants of color, but none of the white people excuse themselves, and the facilitator does not insist that they do. As the


conversation begins, the white people justify their curiosity and desire to attend, while the people of color present try to explain the importance of having a space free of whiteness to process their experiences. After some discussion, one white person leaves the group, with the others gradually following.

Efforts to dismantle white normativity through anti-racist education consistently encounter various forms of intractable resistance, even in the most progressive academic settings. White habitual practices, among students and also among educators and administrators committed to anti-racist pedagogy, often function to perpetuate white normativity rather than challenge it. Sara Ahmed, in her research on diversity practitioners in higher education, identifies a recurring theme: an “institution can be experienced by practitioners as resistance…. The feeling of doing diversity work is the feeling of coming up against something that does not move, something solid and tangible.” In this paper I propose that one dimension of institutional practice that accounts for such a tangible experience of resistance is the power of white comfort as a socially constructed emotion, one which generates reflexive, intuitive practices designed to preserve white normativity. The resistance of “well-meaning white people” to fundamental structural change in racially hierarchical institutions can be attributed, in part, to an accumulation of emotional habits formed through interaction with the social structures and patterns of white hegemony, habits and feelings which in turn shape white intuitions and behavioral patterns which perpetuate those same structures.

To develop my account of white comfort as an emotion that manifests social power I turn to theoretical categories drawn from phenomenology and developmental psychology, refined and redefined by scholars employing a critical, anti-oppression lens. I draw particularly from Mayra Rivera’s application of phenomenology to raced and gendered bodies and Phillis Sheppard’s self psychology centered on the experience of black women. While these theoretical frameworks utilize different disciplinary approaches, they each offer an account of how human beings are shaped in relationship with our social environments, and largely in terms of the different identity categories and power relationships inherent to those environments. Building upon these conceptual frameworks, I examine how the white body, including its physiological emotional responses, is co-constituted in relationship with the racialized world.

Because I am interested primarily in the more nuanced, pervasive ways that institutions avowedly committed to anti-racist work perpetuate systemic racism, I focus intentionally on the role of more subtle, satisfying emotions such as comfort, felt agency, and security in one’s social space. I examine how emotions of comfort are operative where more visceral, ‘negative’ emotions are not apparent. The three scenarios with which I opened the essay each involve white

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4 Korie Edwards describes white normativity as “the normalization of whites’ cultural practices, ideologies, and location within the racial hierarchy such that how whites do things; their understandings about life, society, and the world; and their dominant social location over other racial groups are accepted as “just how things are.” The Elusive Dream: The Power of Race in Interracial Churches (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 10.

5 Ahmed, 26.
emotional dynamics—although it is only the first (the student declaring a visceral fear of black men) that might immediately be recognized as such. To be sure, intense emotions such as fear and anger, associated with stereotypes and ideologies of hatred, also play a large role in shaping institutional dynamics and racist social policies. Critical psychologist Derek Hook maintains that for a comprehensive analysis of racism, “we need to apprehend those habituated symptoms of avoidance, aversion, disgust or discomfort—bodily reactions, bodily symptoms of racism—exactly those evasive structures of oppression that lie beneath discursive consciousness.”

However, I emphasize that less obvious, more pervasive ‘positive’ emotions also contribute to maintaining patterns of racial hierarchy precisely because they reinforce the normativity of experiences of relative power and efficacy to which white people are accustomed. These emotions incentivize the reproduction of the white hegemonic social world in which they are generated.

Analyzing the Role of Emotion in Structural Racism

In addressing systemic racism, it is fair to ask why focus on “white emotion” at all? The choice to focus on emotion when addressing racism or any systemic injustice lies open to charges of overemphasizing the personal over the structural and political—perhaps buttressing the widespread assumption that racism simply means conscious intentional animosity toward people of color rather than a wider hierarchical social system. But analysis of emotion when speaking about racism is not limited to individual animus. A multivalent perspective of the relationship between emotion and social structures takes into account how emotions imbue habitual actions and attitudes that enact structural injustice whether animus is consciously perceived or not.

A nuanced conception of the role of emotion in political systems helps account for how the personal and the political are always intertwined. Paula Ioanide describes how she came to focus on the central role of emotion in politics as a result of her activism in New York state to prevent the expansion of a county jail. Organizers amassed copious research on the disproportionately harmful effects of the criminal justice system upon people of color and presented them before legislators, only to be met with “embodied indifference and emotional intransigence.” Ioanide reflects, “We were battling emotionally entrenched structures that held intact ideologies, beliefs, and worldviews, not empirical evidence.” The ability of emotion to sediment ideologies and beliefs then results in repeated patterns of social action, or what Imani Perry calls “practices of inequality,” which are “influenced by visceral responses to assumptions that operate within the process of reason and analysis and that insidiously lead to inequitable and illegitimate discrimination.” Social structures operate through specific policies and power relations, but also through emotional commitments—often experienced as a resigned assumption


of the inevitability of the current system—that incentivize the maintenance of those structures alongside articulated commitments to dismantle them.

The field of education is increasingly addressing the role of emotional dynamics where power and privilege in the classroom are concerned. Writing from a perspective very critical of the entire concept of racial microaggressions, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt contends that experiences of marginalization reported by students of color on college campuses are attributable to “negative emotionality and the tendency to perceive oneself as a victim,” and that microaggression training serves only to “make the most fragile and anxious students quicker to take offense.” Conversely, Robin DiAngelo’s experience facilitating anti-racist trainings and discussions has led her to coin the term white fragility as a central concept, which she defines as “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves.” DiAngelo’s research delineates a variety of visceral emotional responses exhibited by white people involved in anti-racist group dialogue. Because white people frequently grow up and live in largely segregated social environments, exposure to discourse about white hegemony, white privilege, and systemic racism can engender “anger, withdrawal, emotional incapacitation, guilt, argumentation, and cognitive dissonance (all of which reinforce the pressure on facilitators to avoid directly addressing racism).”

These emotional responses, and emotional performances, impact anti-racist pedagogy. In one example, DiAngelo and Sensoy describe a classroom scenario in which they proposed that racism be defined as racial prejudice + social power = racism. They note that the white students all joined in to protest and question this definition in a very emotionally charged manner, “the only time over the four sessions in which every White student voluntarily participates.” For DiAngelo and Sensoy, it is important to understand such emotionally charged behaviors not simply as individual expressions, but also in terms of how such emotion performs: “In their questioning, the White participants hold the discussion at the intellectual level, control the intellectual space, enact their positions as legitimizers of knowledge, and avoid the self-reflection the facilitators want to guide them in.”

These examples illustrate how emotions permeate the interactions between white people and a social world shaped by increasing racial diversity and renegotiations of power dynamics between racial groups. Whether it involves white people presuming to adjudicate whether experiences of racism among students of color are legitimate, or simply encountering difficult direct conversations about racism and power, these interactions exhibit “emotionally entrenched structures,” as Ioanide puts it. Hence, I argue there is value in theorizing the mechanisms by which white emotions are formed by, and in turn form, structures of white normativity. As Cheryl

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11 DiAngelo, 2011, 54.


13 DiAngelo and Sensoy, 14.
Matias and colleagues state, “If emotions are not simply innate (Boler, 1999), and are, in fact, embedded within the power relations within which emotion is expressed, then entertaining how emotional expressions of Whiteness recycle White supremacist power relations becomes gravely important.” The nature of the relationship between emotion and power is crucial, as Michalinos Zembylas explains: because “the emotionality of whiteness should not be simply limited to the unconscious or innate feelings of white discomfort; rather, white emotionality needs to be also understood as socially and politically produced within the material, affective and discursive assemblages of whiteness and white supremacy.”

In what follows, then, I propose an account of how white emotions—particularly those of comfort and confidence within a white supremacist social order—are generated through experiencing the positionality of whiteness from the earliest years of development. A focus on the individual experience of embodied, subtle white emotions is not meant to refute or replace social structural analysis, but adds an additional dimension of how social structures operate and remain entrenched even in light of concentrated efforts to change them. To address these questions I first turn to the analyses of Rivera and Sheppard, and their intricate accounts of how societies and selves constitute each other in a racialized world.

Our Bodies, Our Societies, Our Emotions: Phenomenological and Psychoanalytic Reflections

One primary commitment of critical perspectives such as postcolonial theory and womanist theology is to expose how Western philosophical and scientific discourses theorize from a particular location of social power—that of the white, European, cisgendered, straight man—while reflexively presenting themselves as objective, universal accounts of the human. By rendering invisible the lived experiences of those who do not fit the description of this “universal subject,” these intellectual practices reinforce social hierarchies by relegating those who are “othered” to the periphery. This state of affairs requires interventions of the kind Mayra Rivera performs in Poetics of the Flesh, in which she revises and extends the phenomenological work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and his concept of the corporeal schema. Merleau-Ponty’s account of the body as co-constituted in interaction with the world has great explanatory power, but takes for granted a body unencumbered by an oppressive discriminatory gaze—a limitation Rivera undertakes to correct.

As Rivera explains, Merleau-Ponty draws from psychology, psychoanalysis and neurology to develop his account of a body that is “tied to the things it perceives, the objects it uses, and to other human bodies.” Expressing this interrelation requires thinking about the body as something other than only a material object—so he develops his concept of the corporeal schema: “a functional model of the body—not necessarily the body seen by others, but that


through which I act in the world.”17 The experience of one’s body in the world is differentiated from body as object. The most quotidian demonstration of how this functions is how labor shapes our bodies through the repetition of particular tasks, or through the development of skills and art forms like playing the piano. “A pianist moves his fingers, his whole body toward the piano to produce heartfelt music, without ever needing to picture the location of the keys in his mind. He expresses himself through the piano.”18

The corporeal schema is shaped not only in relationship with objects but through its more complex interrelationships with other human beings. Here Merleau-Ponty draws from child psychology and the infant-caregiver relationship, and maintains that we enter into intercorporeal relationships from our earliest formative years, as when a baby responds in kind to her father’s smile. “Because at this stage the child lacks a clear sense of the boundaries between her body and those of others—thus not having a sense of the body as hers—the response to the parent’s smile cannot be interpreted as an imitation of a visual image. Instead, the child adopts or appropriates another’s conduct in her own body.”19 Merleau-Ponty calls this process being “dilated-to-the-world,” and it continues throughout our lives, in and through our multiple relationships with other human beings and the rest of the physical world. “As it acts, the body is transplanted into things and incorporates them; it is impregnated by the gestures of other human beings; it borrows its images from others.”20 Indeed, central to the corporeal schema is the importance of sight and perception, which Merleau-Ponty conceptualizes as a particular form of touch. “Seeing is enmeshed and affected by what it sees…. Seeing is situated, perspectival, in obscurity as much as in light.”21 Who we are is determined in part by what we see and touch, which in turn is determined by where we are located, what we have seen, and who we have been seen by.

For Merleau-Ponty, the corporeal schema represents a relationship between the body and world which is generally expansive, exploratory, and unencumbered. In response, Rivera emphasizes that the co-constitution of body and world is experienced quite differently depending on how the bodies in question are placed within hierarchical, discriminatory social orders, such as racism. While “race” is not an essential, biological category, it has nevertheless functioned powerfully as a social category to stratify power and wealth, and to target people for violence and oppression based upon appearance. Race therefore affects how people see the world and how we experience being seen. “Perceptual practices become habitual, shaping knowledge about self and the world in ways that appear neutral, self-evident. It is precisely the habitual character of these practices that makes them seemingly immune to intellectual challenges.”22 The “historical-

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17 Rivera, 67.
18 Ibid., 68.
19 Ibid., 70.
20 Ibid., 74.
21 Ibid., 77-78.
22 Ibid., 138.
racial schema” through which knowledge is formed also shapes and forms socially racialized bodies through practices of perception and response.

The corporeal schema influences both how people perceive the world and how they behave within it, to very different effect depending upon one’s position within the social hierarchy. “Social norms limit the possibilities I can imagine and embody,” Rivera explains—“constraining the ways I engage the world, enticing me to act some ways and deterring me from others.” Merleau-Ponty understood the role of social norms, but he envisioned them as generally interacting with the body in an encouraging and possibility-expanding mode relative to the social world. “But he did not comment,” Rivera reminds us, “on how social hierarchies operate through such conventions—eliciting words, attitudes, and gestures marked by social discrimination.” We interact with hierarchical norms through images, architecture, or geography, but most often the “lures and prohibitions of society reach me through others—through the ways they see me or ignore me, welcome or are threatened by my presence… the demeaning gaze, interrogation, or violent strike shapes my own habits and reactions—the acts I undertake, the spaces I avoid, the possibilities I can envision.”

At this point, the reader may note that I have not spoken specifically about emotion. While Rivera does refer to feelings of empathy and threat, she generally focuses on the role of habitual actions and perceptions in response to social norms, and how they constitute the body. I believe, however, that it is not stretching Rivera’s account too far to emphasize the physiological nature of emotion as a important way in which our bodies interact with and are changed by the messages we receive from the social and physical world. In the opening example of the white student who expressed fear of black men, the historical-racial schema—which includes destructive stereotypes and imagery intended to evoke fear—shaped the student’s physiology and her felt experience just as it shaped her behavior. Shannon Sullivan points out that “nothing is more real or irrefutable than felt physiological responses—unchosen and unwilled, after all.” She further explains that “white racism is bodily constitutive of more than just white people’s physical comportment, gestures, and styles of interactions with others. White racism can also help shape white people’s biochemical make-up and activities.”

My central point here is that Rivera’s reading of Merleau-Ponty, particularly her concept of the racial-historical schema, can serve as a framework for thinking about the racialization process in a comprehensive way, as a process that shapes intuitions and reflexive responses as surely as it shapes ideological beliefs or political structures. Moreover, I hold that a thorough

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23 Ibid., 140.
24 Ibid., 142.
25 Ibid., 141.
26 Ibid., 144.
27 Ibid.
28 Sullivan, 592.
29 Ibid., 597.
understanding of embodiment includes neurotransmitter levels and other automatic nervous system patterns which we experience under the category of “emotion.” The racialized social order shapes intuitions, perceptions, habits, spontaneous reactions, and emotions—all of which constitute our bodies. And as Rivera’s detailed analysis demonstrates, corporeal schemas develop differently depending on where one’s body is located within our complex social hierarchies produced by centuries of racial oppression. As a white man, the “acts I undertake, the spaces I avoid [or access], the possibilities I can envision” develop quite differently for me than for people of color—they are shaped by the same historical racial context, but the schema develops in a markedly different direction.30

While a phenomenological account of racialization emphasizes habitual behaviors and physiological responses to theorize how the body develops in relation with the world, another way to conceptualize that relation is through the categories of developmental psychology. One advantage of using this lens is that it enables us to talk about a felt sense of self, more subtle and pervasive than visceral physiological responses such as fear and rage. The possibilities and limitations afforded by the historical racial schema have the power to shape an internalized sense of value, agency, and capacity to navigate the social world—all of which, I believe, thoroughly imbue our ideologies and decision-making processes with regard to creating systems and structures.

Within the field of developmental psychology, Phillis Sheppard performs an intervention analogous to Rivera’s as she reframes Heinz Kohut’s self psychology of through the lens of black women’s experience in Self, Culture, and Others in Womanist Practical Theology. As a psychoanalyst, Sheppard speaks more in terms of the psyche than of habitual behaviors. But she is also interested fundamentally in “the way in which social contexts are deeply embedded in the psyche and the experiences of the body.”31 Sheppard’s theoretical framework for the role of culture and social context in the psychological development and healing of black women is developed in conversation with Kohut’s understanding of “innate developmental needs that we turn to others to meet…. where self-ness emerged out of the experience of satisfaction of crucial needs throughout life.”32

Two concepts that Kohut uses to elaborate on his theory, which are integral to Sheppard’s interest, are mirroring and selfobjects. Here she explains how these two concepts interrelate:

Self psychology proposes a model of development for a cohesive self that depends on an appropriately mirroring environment where ‘throughout his life a person will experience himself as a cohesive harmonious firm unit in time … as long as at each stage of his life, he experiences certain representatives of human surrounds responding to him.’ These

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30 My choice to use the generalization “people of color” admittedly erases and collapses many different responses and co-constitutions based on specific race, ethnicity, and gender expression. My focus in this paper is the contrast between white embodiment and that of racially marginalized people under white hegemony, which regrettably lends itself to some oversimplification.


32 Ibid., 111.
experiences of those who provided ‘mirroring’ and other needed functions were conceptualized by Kohut as selfobjects.33

Kohut envisioned selfobject experiences as related first and foremost to caregivers (in a way that echoes Merleau-Ponty’s account of the infant’s “appropriating” of her parent’s smile), but he extended the idea to the influence of culture—primarily in terms of prominent creative individuals who connect empathetically with the culture as a whole with their work and help point a way forward during times of “cultural malaise.”34 As Sheppard points out, this conception of cultural selfobjects highlights the role of cultural production to “facilitate group cohesion by expressing the deepest longings, sufferings, and celebrations of the group.”35 Therefore, receiving positive engagement and feedback from both individual caretakers and cultural figures is essential for the “formation of a cohesive, positive sense of self.”36

But while Sheppard affirms the theoretical value in some of Kohut’s core concepts, she also critiques certain limitations of his theory that owe at least in part to his social locatedness. In the first place, Sheppard argues that cultural selfobjects “are not solely individuals. They are also the symbols, language, institutions, and cultural productions that meet those needs for individuals and groups that are sometimes embodied by individuals.”37 Kohut himself, according to Sheppard, was limited in his ability to adequately understand the importance of broader social context in development, precisely because of the nature of the social context in which he was formed, one in which “the cultural myth of individualism, as the desired outcome of development, permeates the theoretical air.”38 She therefore provides a corrective, arguing that “from a womanist perspective … to theorize the self involves theorizing the relational and contextual.”39

Sheppard also challenges Kohut’s evaluation of the generally positive role of cultural selfobjects in development, asking, “So what happens to this development of self when culture—a source for mirroring—offers a distorted and exploited reflection of the self?”40 Here the erasure of experiences that are not white and male in the construction of psychoanalytic theory becomes particularly salient. The distinct experience of black women in the United States—characterized by devaluation and distorted mirroring—challenges the utility of the theory for black women as well as the generalizability of the theory itself. “The need to foster resistance because of negative

33 Ibid., 117.
34 Ibid., 114.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 11.
37 Ibid., 115
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid., 11.
views of black femaleness was not on Kohut’s mind,” Sheppard points out, and proceeds to explain the necessity of forming communities that provide “a sense of belonging that regards black women’s individual and communal ways of being as normative.” Sheppard’s move, while essential for addressing the health of black women, also constitutes a challenge to psychoanalytic theory itself—she offers “a model of self psychology that takes seriously black women’s experiences—embodied, cultural, gendered, and sexual experiences—and, in so doing, make a claim to redefine the most foundational of self psychological concepts, the selfobject.” In so doing, her theory has potential ramifications for people of many different social locations, including, I would suggest, those in more privileged, oppressor positions.

White Bodies Constructed in Comfort

The work of Rivera and Sheppard illustrates the vital importance of taking social context and social location into account when developing theories about the nature of human interactions with the world, and the development of the embodied self. The extended time I have spent on their descriptions of the experience of people constrained by racism—in an essay purportedly about white emotion—is, in a way, an effort to try in some small way to reverse the traditional hegemonic script. If those who have been othered by the historical racial schema have consistently been required to experience themselves through the gaze of the oppressor, what would it mean for white people to view themselves through the lens of the experience of people of color? Certainly centuries of sedimented white supremacy makes this extraordinarily difficult, but it is a direction toward which we need to push. For my part, the efforts of Rivera and Sheppard to trouble and expand the theories of Merleau-Ponty and Kohut lead me to return to those theories with a more critical eye—not only to doubt their universality, but to ask whether the processes they describe actually work too well in the case of white people—creating white people ill-equipped to share power and space with those whom we have oppressed and othered.

At one point in Poetics of the Flesh, Rivera directs attention to the positive, generative ways in which raced and gendered bodies can be constituted in the context of affirming communities. “The accumulating effects of meeting eyes that react with love and respect to my presence, hearing words of approval, being surrounded by images that represent my body as beautiful are also part of the materializations of flesh.” For marginalized communities, these “[a]ffirmative practices do not necessarily transform the operating norms of the broader society,” but they can offer sustenance for struggle against such dehumanizing norms. For those in socially dominant positionalities, however, such accumulating effects of affirmation plausibly function to reinforce those very operating norms, through shaping white bodies that presume the acceptability of their appearance and a baseline capacity to access resources and social power. This does not mean, of course, that every white person is equally loved and appreciated, or has

41 Ibid., 119.
42 Ibid., 123.
43 Ibid., 122-23
44 Rivera, 147.
equal access to power. Nor is it to argue that love and affirmation are in themselves a toxic influence for those at the top of social hierarchies. What analyses of inter-corporeal processes and cultural selfobjects do suggest, each in their own distinct ways, is that a myriad of interactive experiences with the world teach white bodies to expect a certain level of affirmation, social capacity, and social comfort relative to bodies which society considers “not white.” As Sullivan says, “just as white racism often courses through the bodies of people of color, damaging their health, white privilege courses through the bodies of white people, furnishing a baseline of security and comfort that subtends their good health.”

This level of comfort is experienced in the body in ways that are not necessarily conscious, so that even as white people learn more about the evils of structural racism and resolve to dismantle it, our social instincts and habits operate to preserve the security and capacity experienced in the body’s felt sense within a particular social milieu. This results in a matrix of white habits which are more challenging to self-interrogate because they are not quite the same thing as biases (even implicit biases) against racialized groups, but biases toward a comfort that is taken for granted. One example of this is what Shannon Sullivan describes as white ontological expansiveness, in which “white people tend to act and think as if all spaces—whether geographical, psychical, linguistic, economic, spiritual, bodily, or otherwise—are or should be available for them to move in and out of as they wish.” Such habits can be exposed and interrogated by observing their cumulative effects and taking political and institutional action toward more equitable outcomes. I also believe, however, that greater attention to how such habitual emotions result from structural inequities may assist in recognizing and changing behavioral patterns themselves.

I suggest two possible ways in which an understanding of white comfort and assumed social affirmation might inform our analysis of white behavioral patterns in institutional settings. First, the degree of comfort which the co-constituted white self takes for granted is so pervasive that it is easily threatened by any challenge. This can happen through even small increases of racial or cultural diversity into a geographic space, or through the introduction of perspectives that challenge white intuitions about the appropriate distribution of power. Ioanide shows how ideologies of “self-reliance” function to obscure the role that violence and inheritance play in securing white wealth, and create a sense of identity for white people that is nevertheless perceived as “color-blind.” When such ideologies are challenged, those “testimonies that threaten the stability of the configuration have the potential to create embodied responses that feel akin to dying.” The patterns of white fragility documented by DiAngelo, or increasingly popular political claim that efforts to restrict immigration to preserve a more homogenous white U.S. society are “not racist,” can be attributed to the effects of such “threats” to white comfort. It is demonstrative of just how pervasive and thoroughly infused white comfort is in the social milieu that these reactions often coexist in white people who articulate anti-racist values. The corporeal

45 Sullivan, 606.


47 Ioanide, 217.
schema that presumes white normativity exerts as much or more influence on behavior than purported values, so as to preserve a racialized status quo.

Second, it would be interesting to see more research on how white people imaginatively project their intuitive sense of comfort navigating institutional space onto people of color, so that testimonies of the psychic toll of structural racism are either dismissed or met with confusion in the absence of “obvious” cases of racial hatred or discrimination. Recent reactions against microaggression discourse such as Haidt’s are often characterized by evaluating the testimonies of students of color against white intuitions about how positive or harmful the social climate “really is” for them. Reports of the cumulative effects of structural racism and white habits of exclusion are evaluated against white comfort with the status quo, in which the simple presence of a small minority of nonwhite bodies feels “diverse” relative to the more homogeneous contexts in which white emotions and habits are co-constituted. The action of the white academics entering the black caucus space described at the beginning of this paper exemplifies both of the tendencies named here: First, an assumption on the part of white people that they ought to have access to all spaces and that their presence would be welcome as long as their intentions were noble, and second, a lack of perceptivity concerning the legitimate needs of people of color to rejuvenate and recuperate through shared time in social spaces not dominated by whiteness.

It is worth reiterating that such habits and practices are shaped through institutional policies and structures as well as implicit and overt ideologies that devalue people of color. Emotion is not the secret key to fighting racism that reduces the salience of these other factors. But white comfort, as it is constructed and layered through millions of everyday interactions with a racially structured world, is a distinct force that pushes forward of its own accord, even in tension with changing attitudes and efforts toward changing policies. Perhaps a better understanding of how social forces constrain the bodies of people of color might further explain how those same forces unleash the power embedded in comfortable white bodies. It is crucial for white people to interrogate not only what we cognitively assent to, but also how we perceive and feel our very relationship to the social world.


