Abstract:

'Understanding Critical Whiteness Studies: Harmful or Helpful in the Struggle for Racial Equity?' by Michael J. Cole

Cole offers an essential revisiting of Critical Whiteness Studies and shine a light on its current principal dilemma. Focusing on the hazards and benefits that come with a critical interrogation of whiteness, the chapter outlines its history, purpose and framework, and draws attention to the crucial need for it to be symbiotic with intersectional analysis and anti-colonial, anti-capitalist scholarship. Following the limitations of European, post-war *multiculturalism* and 21st-century approaches to *equality, diversity and inclusion* within UK education, this chapter concludes with a schematic framework that offers a way through the problems encountered by fixations with white personal shame or growth, towards an eradication of anti-Black racism in higher education that is served - not blunted - by individual grapples with *white privilege, white guilt* and *white fragility*.

In *re*-calling scholars such as W.E.B. DuBois, Stuart Hall, and A. Sivanandan, Cole proposes an anti-colonial schema of authentic engagement with Critical Whiteness Studies that centres Black radicalism for a positive way forward.

Understanding Critical Whiteness Studies: Harmful or Helpful in the Struggle for Racial Equity?

Michael Cole

With thanks to Carol Hughes for her expertise, scholarship, love, solidarity and resistance, and in acknowledgement of family, friends, colleagues, scholars and forebearers from marginalised communities that helped make this chapter possible.

"What matters is not so much the color of your skin as the power you serve and the millions you betray."

(Fanon, 2000)

Introduction

Thirty-two years since Richard Dyer's (1988) essay "*white*", which emerged ten years hence from Judy Katz's (1978) '*White Awareness: Handbook For Anti-Racism*', and a further seventy-eight years after W.E.B DuBois' (1910) '*The Souls of White Folk*', this chapter explores how *Critical Whiteness Studies* can help in the struggle for racial equity. During the course of this chapter, the fundamentals of 'whiteness' are explained, and the principal dilemmas confronting its use, reviewed. It will conclude with suggestions for how its pitfalls may be avoided, including where it requires a (re)configuration with anti-colonial scholarship. Taken in its entirety, this chapter intends to support the dismantling of white supremacist structures and the eradication of anti-Black racism in UK academia. It is hoped that teachers and researchers may be better equipped, by a Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) approach rooted in anti-colonial praxis, to take action in solidarity with the racially oppressed in the pursuit of educational equity.

In the UK there has been a small but committed movement of anti-racist scholars who, within their research, have interrogated and critiqued racism and whiteness in post-colonial Britain (e.g. Sivanandan, 1973; Gilroy, 1993; Hall, 1996; Ahmed, 2007; Garner, 2007; Kapoor, 2013; Henry, 2013; Andrews, 2016; Bhambra, 2017; Eddo-Lodge, 2018) and specifically in education (e.g. Hylton, 2012; Arday & Mirza, 2013; Bhopal, 2015; Gillborn, 2005; Preston, 2007; Rollock, 2012; Akala, 2018). Embracing their work, and specifically utilising the conceptual framework of 'critical whiteness', should strengthen anti-racist communities of praxis. In UK Higher Education however, Critical Whiteness Studies has been criticised as "*fundamentally disturbing*" (Anderson, p.21) for various reasons, most notably that it: reifies essentialised notions of 'race'; does not adequately take into account class; and diverts attention away from racism by personalizing the issue of raced power dynamics at the expense of systemic and institutional change (Sivanandam, 1984; Bonnett, 1996; Hartman, 2004; Leonardo, 2004, Doane & Bonilla-Silva, 2013). Furthermore, Jafri (2012) warns that declarations of social privilege can re-inscribe dominant subject positions, and that this over-investment in the dominant subject focuses analysis on their unlearning process, rather than destabilizing the coloniser/colonised binary through which racial power is constituted.

In agreement with scholars of the sociology of race, such as Garner (2006) and Leonardo (2004), this chapter affirms that a critical reflection on whiteness is vital but must be complemented by a rigorous examination of white supremacy; moreover, Critical Whiteness Studies can only be successful in bringing about fundamental changes in the training, development, and practice of educators if it is conceptualised in a way that sets it within a communal praxis of intersectional, anti-capitalist, anti-colonial activism.

"To be effective, anti-racist solidarities should conjoin as wide a range of historical relationships as colonialism itself created"

(Wolfe, 2016)

Is There Value in 'Whiteness' Theory?

Critical Whiteness Studies is a transdisciplinary project that concentrates attention upon the socio-politically constructed nature of white identity, norms and ideology. Its aim is to expose and deconstruct the racialised power dynamics within intergroup relations, and in doing so problematize, interrogate and challenge the identity and practices of the dominant white group. It does this by understanding whiteness as a colonial-capitalist construct of embodied racialised power that serves as a foundational function of white supremacy (Bonilla-Silva, 2013). Whiteness is racialised power that is produced by, and perpetuates, an oppressive set of tools that operate on a personal and systemic basis to bestow advantages and benefits for white people at the expense of the racialised subaltern (Gramsci, in Louai, 2012). Given the complexity of this phenomenon, it is clear that to work with and through Critical Whiteness Studies - in order to dismantle white supremacy - one must understand how and why it was manufactured, and its enduring effects.

Understanding whiteness

Academics new to or unfamiliar with Critical Whiteness Studies must from the outset carefully develop their *Racial Literacy* and understanding of *Anti-Racism*.

- *Racial literacy is understanding:*
    - The racial character of capitalism i.e. the European colonial processes and forces that subsumed the existing racialisms of Western feudal society and mutated it into a system of anti-Blackness based on the economic exploitation

of indigenous and enslaved peoples, their land and their resources (Robinson, 2000).

o The subsequent illusionary, pseudo-biological essentialisations of human sub-categories, by way of post-hoc (i.e. after the capitalist othering that was essential to imperial conquest and colonial enslavement) spatial-ethno-cultural and physical observation by and through the European elite's 'white gaze' (Morrison, 1987, cited by Mao & Zhang, 2009) to denigrate (from the Latin 'nigare' i.e. "*to blacken, make dark*" [O'Neill, 2014]) the racialised other by skin tone, phenotype, ethnicity, and religiosity and which bequeathed the non-sciences of racial anthropometry, phrenology, physiognomics and eugenics. For a brief summary of the origins of contemporary racism, see ***Box 1***.

o The shifting phenomena of colonial whiteness as predicated on the subaltern (Hesse, 2006), noting that it is a fluid concept that includes and omits dependent on its needs at any particular time. Contingent on the historical and geopolitical context, and the specific access to a particular resource (or proximity to disenfranchisement), the following ethnic groups, for example, have been considered both 'white' and 'non-white': Slavs, Irish, Jewish, Latinx, and Greek.

o Current discourse and terminology may reify racialisation and be counter-productive to social justice movements (Gilroy, 2010), as it may silence sub-groups, dilute resistance, and manufacture conflict within inter-community activism. For example, the terms 'Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic'/'BAME' and 'People of Colour' suggests that the struggles of, say, a British Muslim teenager of East Asian heritage, are the same as that of, say, a Black British pensioner. Furthermore, 'Black' itself gives no recognition of the differences in

lived experiences between a Black-Caribbean British woman and a Black British man of Senegalese heritage.   In addition, the state-sanctioned ethnicization of 'Black' has been considered a tool that de-links and blunts Black political struggle, and that a 'return to a radical kinship of solidarity politics is needed' (Sivanandan, 1984; Aouragh, 2019).

- o The consequences of white supremacist racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2001), including the specific colonial nature of anti-Blackness and the intersecting oppressions of gender, sexuality, class, disability, age, ethnicity, religion and citizenship.

- o The vocabulary and self-efficacy required to discuss, identify and challenge the racisms and racist structures, including whiteness and coloniality.

- *Anti-racism is understanding:*
  - o the difference between 'non-racist' and 'anti-racist' action (Kendi, 2018). For example, non-racism is claiming the post-racial positon that racism does not exist (or that it once did but is now of negligible significance), or that one 'does not see colour', or that because one does not think racist thoughts or use racist language, that one is not culpable or complicit in maintaining a system of white supremacy by virtue of their inaction. Non-racism is also claiming that an anti-white people position is equal to reverse racism and therefore a real phenomenon, rather than it being a prejudice against racialised-as-white people that is not influenced by or implicated in structural power dynamics and systemic oppression.

  - o the term 'racist' refers to systems and actions (Lentin, 2015), not an identity, nor is conscious or subconscious intention (necessarily) required for it.

- that the circumstances of the struggle against racism are primarily shaped by economic and imperial interests (Aouragh, 2019) and can only be successful with personal and collective action (Sivanandan, 1984).
- that Britain possessed (and possesses) its own Black Power movement, rooted in an anti-colonial politics that connected domestic racism with issues of imperialism and global inequality (Narayan, 2019).

Despite the incontrovertible facts of racist inequities, and its entwined genesis with and sustenance from the colonial-capitalist project, there is, in contemporary Britain, a tendency on the Left to consider colonial history as irrelevant to present progressive, liberal culture. Whereas, on the Centre-Right there is a tendency to celebrate the post-colonial British Empire with nostalgic solemnity, viewing it not as a racist endeavour but as a predominantly righteous and progressive, enriching project of whiteness that one should be proud of, and would be keen to see return. Furthermore, discourses of whiteness often acknowledge white privilege only as a function of whites' actions toward minoritized subjects, and not as accumulations of unearned advantages in an unfair system. Dove-tailing with these white-liberal and white-Right ontologies, is a renewed and vigorous populism that attacks those who attempt to name and interrogate whiteness, denouncing them as the 'real racists', or as playing the 'race card' of identity politics, and in doing so positioning them as the problem, rather the racism itself. On the limited occasions when critical interrogations of whiteness are welcome, the concept of whiteness often makes for an individualised, compartmentalised and personal 'MacGuffin' of virtue; that is to say, that white people anticipating a solution to the (un)mystery of racism often follow a limited narrative of personal growth, despite the initial provocation/motivation of 'personal growth' being of inadequate significance.

Borrowing from post-colonial theory is part of the solution as it offers a useful framework with which we can identify, understand, and articulate the historical and socio-political construct of whiteness. Here we use the metaphor of toxic white *fruits* to symbolise whiteness, with the entire crop, field and seasons denoting the racist structure of our white supremacist system. Post-colonial theory helps us see that "*despite the fact that white racial domination precedes us, whites daily recreate it on both the individual and institutional level*" (Leonardo, 2004, p.139). It also represents a vital set of tools with which we can, and must, interrogate and act in order to change the system by uprooting and destroying the crops, and tending to the earth in a different manner.

"Privilege is the daily cognate of structural domination"

(Leonardo, 2006)

Working through whiteness: Personal growth and community solidarity

Once racial literacy and anti-racist understanding begin to develop, white people must conjoin this with efforts towards accepting their *whiteness** and their *whiteliness**. Full acceptance may never arrive, given the power, dexterity and cunning of the phenomena, however for the journey to continue, they must proceed through the vertiginous awakening and sickening realisation of *white guilt** in order to overcome any internal struggles of *white fragility** and *resistance** when confronted with the realities of *white privilege**.

*See Figure 2 for explanation of terms.

If this exposure of a disavowed complicity (Willet, 2007) and shift in identity cannot be processed, white privilege becomes the central axis, taking on an image of domination without agents, such that 'instead of emphasizing the process of appropriation, the discourse of privilege centers the discussion on the advantages that whites receive; it mistakes the symptoms for causes' (Leonardo, 2004). However, if white people can move to a position that eschews guilt or conflict for an intellectual and emotional openness, they have a vulnerability that is a condition for anti-racist potential (Bailey, 2014) i.e. by decolonizing 'white fragility' and 'self-forgiveness' (Tate & Page, 2018) a critical hope emerges (Applebaum, 2017). This critical hope must then be harnessed in a way that ensures any good intentions do not become lost in a personal growth mindset that manifests in internalised action or outward 'white saviourism'.

If white people can move away from individualism - despite the necessary personal reckoning with whiteness - and toward community, they not only see the toxic white fruits, but are able to use the tools necessary to destroy it at the root in collaboration with the oppressed. In other

words, they may grasp the connectiveness and kinship required to fulfil their anti-racist potential i.e. by "*joining the fight for institutional reform within their places of work and from the outside by making contact with Black organisations in order to co-ordinate activities and learn from one another*" (Galliers, 1987, p.70). **Figure 2** illustrates this schema of anti-racist potential.

"…white supremacy is their construct, a construct they have benefited from, and

deconstructing white supremacy is their duty"

(Oluo, 2019)

Critical Whiteness Studies is useful for helping to identify internalised, often invisible or covert forms of oppression - including the advantages those constructed as white have at the expense of those constructed as Black - that contribute to white supremacist institutional and systemic racism (Aouragh, 2019). However, it is insufficient as anti-racist praxis without complicity with anti-Black activism and the critical understating of colonialism and capitalism required to process white positionality, agency and complicity.

Only by taking a decolonial political philosophy can we entertain the concept of white people helping to dismantle whiteness. Without this, one may be preoccupied with:

- individual agency, rather than structural change

- personal reflection and/or performative wokeness, rather than critically reflexive praxis

- owning/leading the anti-racist struggle, rather than in solidarity with the racially oppressed

- inadvertently reifying, essentializing and/or centering 'white'/whiteness, rather than dismantling it

Critical Whiteness studies has the potential to be a vital tool of scholarly activism, provided those who utilise it stay true to its transdisciplinary origins within, and overlapping epistemologies of global social theories including Critical Race Theory, Critical Black feminism, and post-colonial theory.

It is clear that the struggle for racial equity is the responsibility of all educators, but it is also clear that fragility, resistance, and rage, particularly from white people with low racial literacy, and personal growth and white saviourism from white people with higher levels of racial literacy but low understanding of anti-racism, are obstacles.

The whole purpose of knowing who we are is not to interpret the world, but to change it"

<div align="right">(Sivanandan, 1984)</div>

Conclusion

Critical Whiteness Studies is a vital part of social justice activism, particularly for racialised-as-white people. Renouncing one's whiteness - or becoming a 'race traitor' (Igantiev & Gravey, 2004) - is definitely a choice for many whites (Leonardo, 2004) but without the accompanying activism for structural change, it does not adequately disrupt the institutional racism of white supremacy. One must be mindful of the potential routes that engaging with critical analyses of whiteness presents, and the strategies to facilitate positive outcomes.

In summary, as a tool for change, Critical Whiteness Studies can make a major contribution to racial social justice in education, but only if white scholars continue to re-configure it with colonial history and capitalism, respect its genesis from and debt to Critical Race Theory and Black and Black Feminist scholarship and activism, and use these to routinely and deeply re-interrogate their own profit from and complicity in white supremacy. Additionally, white people must reflect on and interrogate their awareness and agency in the counter-hegemonic, goal-oriented redirection of their own whiteliness, in solidarity of *action* - not just in mind or pen – with the Black struggle; in short, to choose treason to whiteness (Ignatiev & Garvey, 2004) in efforts to dismantle it.

This chapter closes with the wisdom of Sivanandan (1984, p.5), who reminds us that - though being operators within and of the education machine - changing our actions can change the larger system; we must not "*merely tinker with educational methods and techniques and leave unaltered the whole racist structure of the educational system…not [conduct] just an*

examination of curricula and syllabuses but of the whole fabric of education: organization and administration, methods and materials, attitudes and practices"; rather we must ensure that education is the *"force for changing the values that make that society racist"*. This chapter suggests that Critical Whiteness Studies, when inseparable from anti-colonial praxis, is a necessary element in this struggle, particularly for white academics who wish to act in solidarity, or, to paraphrase Sivanandan: *find unity in action*.

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