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Protesting Privilege

An Autoethnographic Look at Whiteness

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In this article, the author uses autoethnographic methods to interrogate her own White privilege. She argues that it is necessary to consider both how people are positioned as dominant as well as how they are positioned as marginalized to deconstruct persisting hierarchies of oppression. Drawing on a series of conversations that took place during the passage of several years, the author interrogates her willingness to hide behind her own minority identities and privilege, and she considers the importance of this undertaking to feminist politics and praxis.

Keywords: *autoethnography; racialization; feminist theory; Whiteness; Judaism*

This article attempts to understand the ways in which individuals come simultaneously to occupy spaces of marginalization as well as spaces of privilege. I am interested in interrogating my own impulse to “race to innocence.” Sherene Razack and Mary Louise Fellows (1998) have exposed the “race to innocence” as occurring where one fails

to pursue how she is implicated in other women’s lives and retreats to the position that the system that oppresses her the most is the only one worth fighting and that the other systems (systems in which she is positioned as dominant) are not of her concern. (p. 1)

Through the investigation of a series of events in which I was forced to confront my White privilege, I came to acknowledge that claiming a minority identity and failing to acknowledge a majority identity meant failing “to

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undo [my] own subordination. Attempts to change one system while leaving the others intact leaves in place the structure of domination that is made up of interlocking hierarchies" (Razack & Fellows, 1998, p. 1).

In their *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Norman K. Denzin and Yvonne S. Lincoln (2000) described the qualitative researcher as a "bricoleur" (p. 3). Following from Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler's (1992) description of the cultural studies researcher, Denzin and Lincoln's qualitative bricoleur conducts research in a way that "is pragmatic, strategic and self-reflexive" (p. 2). In keeping with this research strategy, I am intent on weaving together a narrative that draws on many conversations during the course of several years and reveals my own position within the complex hierarchy of domination. Self-reflexivity is key to the construction of this narrative as "research is an interactive process shaped by [my] personal history, biography, gender, social class, race and ethnicity" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 4).

Race-ing to Innocence

This collage stems from an understanding of the potential of ethnography to act as a kind of "instructional theatre" (Turner & Turner, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2002, p. xiii). Describing the process of my coming to understand my own White privilege and its implication in the ease of my ascent from the closet, this article recognizes my longtime refusal to acknowledge my own contribution to systemic oppression. Following from Carol Rambo Ronai (1997a), I use a layered account to highlight the way in which "many voices contribute to the construction of my 'self'" (p. 7). Ronai defined the layered account as one that enables the researcher to "draw on as many resources as possible in the writing process including social theory and lived experience" (p. 7; see also Ronai, 1992, 1995, 1997b). Following from Ronai, rather than privileging one voice (that of the researcher) over another in exploring my ideas on racism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia/heterosexism, I use multiple voices to represent the various stages of my coming to acknowledge my position within hierarchical systems of oppression, a position "whose boundaries are unclear" (Ronai, 1997a, p. 7). Although in this text, this account takes the form of a conversation with another person, that account is also "layered." It is occupied by several different voices and makes reference to years of conversations with friends. This layered account allows the exploration of these numerous discussions, giving a "depth of field" to this work that otherwise would not be possible.

Protesting Whiteness: A Dialogue

You ask me: "When did you know you were White?"

I tell you: "I'm not White, I'm Jewish."

Truly? A cop out.

More comfortable for me to talk about my position as a victim than as a person of privilege. . . .

Easier for me to say "That's anti-Semitic" and watch that slow red flush that I have earned.

* * *

It's funny that even though I know little about Judaism, don't speak Hebrew, have few Jewish friends, and have not gone to shul in years, I still instinctively capitalize on an essentialized minority identity during this particular conversation.

* * *

When we meet, neither one of us takes to the other. The gulf between our worldviews is great. I come from a family (small) in which queerness is encouraged, God is discouraged, and radical feminist politics help me fit in. At age 11, I wear a T-shirt to school that says "Don't lose the right to choose." My teacher asks, "Choose what?"

* * *

You tell me I excel at the *précis* of a White, middle-class existence. You point out that I have given no thought to the way in which my academic parents have facilitated my life choices.

* * *

This is true. Although it is also true to say that my feminist upbringing has been both a blessing and a curse. I have known what it means to be hounded for being a feminist since I was 11, when my teachers ganged up with fellow students in mocking the (initially eager) questions I asked about gender. I was teased mercilessly in school for this point of difference.

However, it is my feminist mother that has led me to graduate school—both nurturing and aiding my academic ambitions.

* * *

However, until you point it out, I realize that I have never thought about the fact that I am an only child in a middle-class, academic family, where my mother is able to get lots of time off for child care.

* * *

But I'm not ready to admit this yet. Rather than thinking through my own place in the hierarchy of oppression, I'll try again to deny my middle-class privilege and instead retreat to my experience of anti-Semitism. I'll tell you that my grandparents had to change their name because it was too Jewish.

You will sigh and tell me about the importance of historical context and you'll point me to Karen Brodtkin's (1998) book *How Jews Became White Folks*. Brodtkin's work explains how racial assignments change for Jews: "Prevailing classifications at a particular time have sometimes assigned us to the white race, and at other times have created an off-white race for Jews to inhabit" (p. 1). Brodtkin highlighted the importance of recognizing that "we may experience our racial selves in multiple ways, even within our own families" (p. 2). You will tell me that rather than shield myself behind historic anti-Semitism, I should instead try and be accountable for my own racial identity—as well as my White privilege.

* * *

The irony is, although I claim an essentialized "Jewish" identity, you are the one who actually knows a lot about Judaism. When I am able to stop "racing to innocence," I will be able to learn a lot from you. You even know more Yiddish idiomatic expressions than me. This is a vivid lesson about the dangers of essentialism.

* * *

Your family taught you the importance of cultural and linguistic community. Rather than pushing you out, they held on to you. They wanted you to marry a boy from your community. They were tired of you bringing home boys who made no effort to understand the fluent, accented English they spoke.

I'm good at the précis. I know what you'll say. "My poor pathetic family—terrified of assimilation. Did you get that summary of them from a teenage coping novel or a clever independent film?"

I'll say no, but not too loudly.

* * *

Looking back, I marvel at the ease of access that I have to these blatant stereotypes and generalizations. I am certainly not sure that these statements are true. Did they teach you the importance of cultural and linguistic community? Won't we later agree that we both judge members of our own communities more harshly than others and that this stems partly from our parents? Writing this, I begin to realize that my early notions are drawn less from you and more from White supremacist stereotypes whose meaning I need to continue to unpack.

* * *

Through this process, I'll begin to realize I am White. With the legacy of hegemony that entails.¹ (You'll tell me not to worry—that hegemony always leaves room for resistance.) Where did I get this synopsis? Romanticized orientalism. I must understand Foucault after all.²

* * *

I think you are homophobic. You think I'm a racist. There are elements of truth to both. But as I'll soon discover, you're just a closeted dyke. That means you are exonerated.

What's my excuse?

* * *

Of course, you'll remind me that being closeted doesn't mean that you didn't harbor internalized homophobia. This is something I learn from you—that accountability is connected to integrity. I will begin to learn (but only with difficulty) not to map identity on to politics.

* * *

Later, resentfully stuffed into the same small group class, we talk. More radical than me, you tell me about bell hooks's transformative pedagogy and warn me that at the rate I am going, I will never come to "teach to transgress." You highlight my collection of feminist T-shirts of which I am very proud. You point out that many have "The Body Shop" written on the back. You remind me of hooks's (1992) maxim: Once the rhetoric of the women's liberation movement is appropriated for consumerism, it is stripped "of political integrity and meaning, denying the possibility that [it] can serve as a catalyst for concrete political action. As signs, [its] power to ignite critical consciousness is diffused when [it is] commodified. Communities of resistance are replaced by communities of consumption" (p. 33).

* * *

(I still wear these shirts though. Some old habits die hard.)

* * *

I know what you're going to say. You'll tell me I'm already writing your postmortem, while simultaneously indicting you for harsh sentences that you never uttered—that I only imagined.

You'll be angry. You'll remind me that you're not dead yet. You'll tell me not to tokenize you. That I've romanticized you. You'll remind me that every feminist but me had read bell hooks by that point.

This is a good question. How come I have read Andrea Dworkin and Janice Raymond but no Audre Lorde, no Himani Bannerji?

Why haven't I read bell hooks? What made me exclude her from the "canon"? You'll make no bones about it: White supremacy, bias, and privilege. You tell me that my education fits into what Michelle Wallace (1990) referred to as the "production of knowledge [that] is constantly employed in reinforcing intellectual racism" (p. 153).

* * *

In many ways, I will not be able to explain to you that this is difficult for me to accept because it means facing up to the fact that I have disdained many of the lessons that my mother tried to teach me. She too raised questions about my critical race politics—that is to say, the lack thereof. I believed she lacked credibility and so failed to pay attention to what she

was saying. You will point out that it was authenticity (read racialization) that I must have thought she lacked and that I would have been wise to listen to her.

* * *

I begin to listen to you . . . at least some of the time.

Later, you will remind me that most of the time you still had to convince me of more than one obvious tenet of critical race theory.

I will have conveniently forgotten this point.

Most of the time, when we meet you tell me that my knowledge of critical race feminism is shit and I realize that I agree. It is.

* * *

It's funny, but once I make this admission, I breathe easier. It turns out that you are right about accountability. It is freeing.

* * *

You are the one who points out the arbitrary distinctions I make between racialized and queer identities. Even though I'm listening, you can see on my face that I don't get it. In an attempt to ram it through my brain—you bring me back to Whiteness. You direct me to Boyarin, Itzkovitz, and Pellegrini's (2003) *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*, in which the editors explain that Jews have historically troubled gender categories—the masculinized Jewish woman; the feminized Jewish man. You'll explain to me that this process of gendering was used to prove "the racial difference of the Jew" (p. 3). Only when you bring it back to me and my identity will it finally start to click and gradually I come to understand the importance of an intersectional approach to identity.

* * *

Even though we should be long past the schisms of the second wave and its failure to theorize the intersectionality of identity given the plethora of scholarship that addresses second-wave feminism's failure to consider race, class, sexuality (Bulkin, Pratt, & Smith, 1984; hooks, 1989; Lorde, 1984; Monture, 1986), and disability (d'Aoust, 1994; Masuda & Ridington,

1990), I still have trouble abandoning the additive model. Even though its tyrannical simplicity is an indicator of its lack of utility.

* * *

But you continue to show me the importance of the interconnections, and slowly, I begin to get it. We become inseparable.

You become my place of radical pedagogy. You are so widely read that I stop going to the library to research my eager undergrad papers until I can speak to you first.

By now, we both know enough to know that the sisterhood does not exist, that there is no universal womanhood. But we still refer to one another as soul sisters without feeling the contradictions.

At this stage, there aren't.

You now refer to this as our period of utopian idealism. You justify it by reminding me that we were in our twenties.

I don't remind you that we still are.

We develop an interest in independent film together. You come out as a lesbian. We decide to make films about queerness and families. We work on our films together. We laugh and talk about my role in life as the gaymaker (people come into my life straight and go out gay) and you remind me of your old "homophobia."

This is funny to us now.

You tell me that although my critical race politics have improved, I still have much to learn. I agree, but I am comfortable with you now and I don't take it as seriously.

You refer to this as my moment of comfortable White supremacy. You tell me that I simply ceased to see you as a woman of color and saw you as White. "Real progress" you tell me—and I flinch at the bitterness in your voice.

You refer to your film as your TCT—your tender cultural text. It talks about your complicated relationship with your mother. Mine is also about my mother—although I have no such snappy acronym.

* * *

You try to caution me. I can tell you are getting nervous. Careful, you tell me. I'm not perfect. I'm not your native informant. Don't canonize me. Listen to me carefully, and that often means not agreeing with every single statement I make.

* * *

Our films are both accepted to screen at an international festival in Toronto. We are ecstatic—it seems fated. I eagerly prepare for our mothers to meet. You are quiet. When I ask you what's wrong—you tell me you have no intention of inviting your parents. At first, I am quiet, and then I am shocked and outraged. "You owe this to yourself!" I tell you angrily. I list over and over the tender moments in your film. I tell you that you're crazy. When everything else fails to move you—I tell you that you are a selfish coward—and that if I was brave enough to come out to my whole family—you at least should show this film to your mother—who for God's sake already practically knows.

You tell me that only I could be so naive.

I don't tell you (I don't even admit to myself yet) that I wanted your mom (with whom I have always had a good relationship) to see my film and wanted her approbation. You don't mention this although you probably know. You don't tell me I'm crazy—that your mom would think no such happy thoughts toward me. You don't mention that your mom has given up everything—her career, her family network, her friends—to move to Canada to provide you with an English education and increased opportunity in the Land of the Not So Free. You don't bother to tell me that not all things must be stated for all people. You don't tell me, because I am not listening. I am extremely hurt and walk around with a petulant expression on my face. I expect you to have the same relationship with your mother that I have with mine.

Did I truly hold such crazy expectations?

The second blow comes soon after. Being two of the few queers we know, we spend all our time together. You have a series of girlfriends who come and go. None of them share your first language. Although you often speak of your desire to meet a community of queers/feminists, and we bemoan the lack of anyone but frat boys on our campus, we are resigned. We have lived four long years in a town known to insiders as "Aryan nation."

Together, we move to Toronto to pursue graduate school. In my first class, there are three queers of color. Excited, dying to tell you, I get their phone numbers and tell them how fantastic you are. They introduce you to others. Finally, you have met community.

I begin to resent these women—brilliant artists and filmmakers who know everyone we have always wanted to meet. They understand your film dilemma—many of them have made the same decisions. I hate that I can't go to many of the events you attend. With them. I hate that you add them to your film credits while I remain absent.

I am used to being your whole community and to you being mine—to being inseparable. Although I intellectually process that I do not meet all of your needs and never have, I go home and cry and carry on about abandonment. I whine to our common friends. They are unsympathetic. But I don't get the hint.

I don't get it.

I refuse to.

You tell me that I'm both pathetic and antifeminist to try to turn the community we have made together against you.

What can I say when I know you are right?

We begin to see less of each other. Our conversations become guarded. I don't tell you what I'm thinking and sometimes I don't even let myself believe it. I put the tapes of our films in the back of my closet. I begin to hate to watch them.

When we meet, I speak instead at large about outdated feminist principles and betrayal. I condemn the second wave. I stop speaking about my White privilege because I am having a selfish moment (read: year) and I feel left out. I make occasional disparaging (pointed) remarks about families (read: people) who refuse to understand.

Later I come to realize that I resent your happiness, that I am no longer a good friend to you. That I was prepared to speak with you about the presence of White privilege but that I was not prepared to give it up. I wanted to be part of every world—I still secretly longed for the pretence of a sisterhood that I could join.

I don't say this to you, not yet. I write you many letters but I don't send them. You don't call, and I justify not calling you because you haven't

called, even though I know it's my turn. I refer to this as my Raymond Carver period: because he is the person who seems sufficiently bleak.

I don't apologize—not yet. But I feel sad. And then I feel sorry. And I continue to miss you. And still we don't speak.

Discussion

This continuing discussion has been the catalyst for me to imagine a radically different racialized space. A utopian space in which White privilege and its ramifications are not only acknowledged—indeed, essential to this process is an acknowledging of “whiteness as a social construct” and the position of “white folks . . . as privileged individuals” (Weems, 2003, p. xx)—but where this acknowledgment is additionally a call to action to fight racism—both that which exists outside us and the racism within us. I wish this piece to stimulate people to speak out, not only to point the finger at the racism of others but also to speak to our own internalized (and subsequently externalized) racism. It is not enough to continue to acknowledge White privilege while happily marching along to the beat of our university's racist mascot or while attending yet another rally of all White women who speak in vague terms about “our sisters in the struggle.”

In describing my own racism in this piece, I wish to follow in Norman Denzin's footsteps. He demands that writers “strip away the veneer of self-protection that comes with a professional title and position” and instead, write in a way that makes us both “accountable and vulnerable to the public” (Denzin, 2003, p. 137). As such, I have written a layered account, in which my narrative shifts “forward, backward, and sideways through time, space” (Ronai, 1992, p. 103) to make clear the multiple positions I have occupied in which both cognitive and emotional understandings become intertwined (Denzin, 1984). I have tried to write this piece for those who are still feeling good about their place “bone deep” in the hierarchy of White supremacy. In accordance with a call to action, from the personal to the political, I intend my writing to be a “form that moves from interpretation and emotional evocation to praxis, empowerment, and social change” (Denzin, 2003, p. 133). I would like to think of the refusal to “race to innocence” as a methodology for change. In attempting to shield ourselves behind minority identities and in failing to interrogate how our privilege is implicated in the subordination of others, we succeed only in relegating the possibility of working across difference to an impossibility.

Chela Sandoval (2000) has called the “apparatus of love” one way of working together as it is a strategy of resistance that allows us to develop an oppositional consciousness in which we understand love “as a technology for social transformation” (p. 2). Sandoval advocated for a radical Third World feminism—what Ella Shohat (1998) has referred to as “multicultural feminism”—as a strategy or “science of oppositional ideology” (Sandoval, 2000, p. 144). All of these tactics of resistance necessitate building coalitions to work together (McIntyre, 2006). To participate in this struggle with integrity and the ability to listen, we must think about our place within it. We have to not only move beyond “white ignorance, white denial, white fear, white apathy, white lies, white power” (Brand, 1994, p. 119) but also think through the ways in which we are privileged to do the hard work of casting aside our own internalized “isms.” How can we develop Sandoval’s oppositional consciousness if we are concerned by only our own subordination? It is too easy, therefore, to forget the ways in which we participate in the selfsame structural inequalities that we are fighting. In that moment, struggle is undone. Resistance work is possible only when we consider our own impulse to “race to innocence” and acknowledge our contested places within these hierarchies. Without this acknowledgment, it is difficult to move from theory to practice. All of these strategies for resistance break down as they assert that there is only one ideology that is liberating—the one in which *I* am positioned as marginalized. Any movement that refers to itself as *the one* “becomes destined to repeat the oppressive authoritarianism from which it is attempting to free itself” (Sandoval, 2000, p. 59). If we attempt to recognize the systems of oppression in which we are implicated, it becomes possible to think through our resistance in terms that allow for multiple standpoints and multiple approaches. Refusing to “race to innocence” also allows this work to move beyond domestic boundaries. Realizing our own implication in systems of privilege “entails a profound reconceptualization and restructuring of intercommunal relations within and beyond the nation state” (Shohat, 1998, p. 2). This reflexivity allows us to work across difference in a way that is not an “easy Muzak-harmony but rather a polyrhythmic staging of a full-throated counterpoint where tensions are left unresolved” (Shohat, 1998, p. 2).

I have found myself located, like Denzin (2002) himself, “in between landscapes.” At the nexus of the women’s liberation movement, the queer liberation movement, and the Jewish community, it is easy for me to “race to innocence.” I have described how I am continually overcome by this urge to seek legitimacy: “I’m not White, I’m Jewish.” This “race-ing to innocence” must be let go. My utopian space necessarily incorporates consideration of

our positions both as oppressed and as oppressors. I have attempted to articulate a methodology by which this process might occur.

Notes

1. I understand hegemony here in Gramscian terms—realizing that it has three components: intellectual, moral, and political. Following from Gramsci and Buttigieg (1992), I wish to highlight that hegemony always produces counterhegemonic movements and as best encapsulated by McIntyre and O'Brien (1986), that “false consciousness [is] a socially generated praxis” (p. 74) that must be produced and reproduced to be sustained. It is the production/reproduction of hegemonic knowledge that this piece is attempting to interrupt.

2. Following from Richard Fung (1993), this passage is meant to comment on the “romanticism and orientalism” (p. 360) found in Volume 1 of Foucault's (1978) *The History of Sexuality*. Here, Foucault referred to the *ars erotica* that developed in Rome, Arab and Muslim societies, and Asia as erotic art in which

truth is drawn from pleasure itself, understood as practice and accumulated as experience; pleasure is not considered in relation to an absolute law of the permitted and forbidden, nor by reference to a criterion of utility, but first and foremost in relation to itself; it is experienced as pleasure, evaluated in terms of its intensity, its specific quality, its duration, its reverberations in the body and soul. (p. 57)

Fung highlighted Foucault's failure to note that first, the absence of particular taboos does not necessarily mean that Othered societies lack taboos about sexuality but instead, may point to “different regulations and taboos” and that second, colonialism means that to understand the erotic arts of the East and West as “mutually exclusive systems is no longer plausible” (p. 360).

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