

Contesting the “Truth”: The Reality of Institutionalized White Supremacy in the United States

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Abstract

This paper explores how institutionalized white Supremacy, as distinct from White Supremacy and institutions of white supremacy, works to maintain white power and racial hierarchies in the contemporary US. A critical examination of how tactics of governmentality, as distinct from state actors and formal laws, work to facilitate and inoculate white power evidences the myriad ways in which white Americans construct and deploy narratives and discourses that normalize white power. Specifically, institutionalized white supremacy is established via a set of socio-cultural norms and discourses that inoculate white power from critical interrogation while simultaneously creating a permanent but fluid category of Others who are oppressed via extant power arrangements. Via governmentality, white power is normalized and neutralized (as opposed to being recognized as specialized or a source of extant power) via the socially constructed norms of whiteness and colorblindness, which then work to validate white individuals’ denials of systemic racism against people of color. As a result, extant differences in wealth and power are recognized as the just distribution of benefits based on the individual merit of some in comparison to the natural and/or cultural deficiencies of Others. Yet, the processes of governmentality by which socially constructed myths become institutionalized truths elide centuries of exploitation and oppression in order to make foundational hierarchies invisible and uncontestable. In turn, these dominant mentalities enable white complicity in the maintenance of institutionalized white supremacy, and assign the responsibility for eradicating differences in wealth and power to oppressed people of color.

Introduction

While the current sociocultural and political environments have resulted in increased attention to White Supremacists in the U.S., it is important to resist the impulse to ascribe the “rise” of White Supremacy in the U.S. to the election of Donald Trump as president in fall 2016. The tendency of white individuals to attribute racism to a few aberrant individuals elides any critical interrogation of whiteness, white privilege, and white supremacy as well as our own (I identify as white) complicity in the maintenance of white power. The practice of blaming maleficent White Supremacists for racism—understood as erratic and rare incidents ranging from the White Nationalist gathering in Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017 which culminated in the death of Heather Heyer to Dylan Roof’s murder of nine Black Americans in the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015 to the lynching of James Byrd Jr., who was dragged to death by three White Supremacists in Jasper, Texas in 1998, among others—while simultaneously ignoring and/or denying the existence of systemic racism across the U.S. is a central tenet of institutionalized white supremacy as will be discussed below.

While institutionalized white supremacy is facilitated via myriad government, economic and social institutions, it is first and foremost located in the dominant socio-cultural norms that govern society and the relationships among individuals. As Foucault argues in his work on power and government, while institutions play a role in asserting power, it is a mistake to evaluate these institutions as the sources or loci of power (2000, 343). Instead, he explains “one must analyze institutions from the standpoint of power relations, rather than vice versa, and that the fundamental point of anchorage of the relationships, even if they are embodied and crystallized in an institution, is to be found outside the institution” (Foucault 2000, 343). As such, any critical interrogation of white supremacy in the contemporary U.S. requires an explicit

recognition that the institutions that work to maintain white power are a manifestation and reflection of the a priori white power that already exists and is located outside of these institutions. While much attention is focused on eradicating racism via extant institutions, these efforts are limited by their inability to reach the socio-cultural norms that simultaneously institutionalize white supremacy and inoculate it from critical interrogation.

To that end, this paper focuses on the myriad ways in which white Americans construct and deploy narratives and discourses that normalize white power, and how these dominant mentalities enable white complicity in the maintenance of institutionalized white supremacy. Specifically, institutionalized white supremacy is established via a set of socio-cultural norms and discourses that inoculate white power from critical interrogation while simultaneously creating a permanent but fluid category of Others. As Mills explains, “The terms of the Racial Contract mean that *nonwhite subpersonhood is enshrined simultaneously with white personhood*” (Mills 1997, 56). Yet, the processes of governmentality by which socially constructed myths become institutionalized truths elide centuries of oppression in order to make foundational hierarchies invisible and uncontestable. Via governmentality, white power is normalized and neutralized (as opposed to being recognized as specialized or a source of extant power), and white individuals’ denials of systemic racism are validated. As a result, extant differences in wealth and power are recognized as the just distribution of benefits based on the individual merit of some in comparison to the natural and/or cultural deficiencies of others (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 56). It is this whitewashing of history in favor of a narrative that implicitly privileges whiteness and white power that constitutes institutionalized white supremacy.

The analysis that follows begins with an introduction to the concept of institutionalized white supremacy as distinct from White Supremacy and institutions of white supremacy. Then,

attention is focused on the concept of governmentality and how extra-institutional power and socio-cultural norms act as forces of government to maintain racialized distributions of power and wealth. A critical interrogation of norms and “truths” as tactics of governmentality demonstrates how the norms of whiteness (e.g. to be “white” is to be free of race) and colorblindness (e.g. all individuals have equal access to the mythological level playing field) work to substantiate white power, and enable white Americans to argue that systemic racism no longer exists while they benefit from institutionalized white supremacy.

Institutionalized White Supremacy

White Supremacists versus Institutionalized White Supremacy

Institutionalized white supremacy is distinct from White Supremacist, or White Power, movements and organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan and Aryan Nation organizations. While these entities are one facet of institutionalized white supremacy, the myriad forces that work to maintain white power in the US in the twenty-first century include both formal legal and political institutions and socio-cultural norms and practices that go far beyond the actions of a few fringe groups to implicate the full apparatuses of government and society. It is the insidious behaviors, practices and discourses of “average” white Americans, as distinct from White Supremacists, that work to facilitate and maintain white power and privilege—institutionalized white supremacy—that are the focus of this analysis.

While there is little doubt that the election of Donald Trump as president has emboldened White Supremacists, the reality is that Trump was elected with a large majority of the white vote; he won fifty-eight percent of white voters in comparison to Hillary Clinton’s thirty-seven percent (Tyson and Maniam 2016). Yet, the fact that Trump received almost the exact same portion of the white vote as Republican Mitt Romney in 2012 in spite of his divisive xenophobic, racist and

sexist language and behavior is barely discussed in the dominant public. In fact, rather than calling out white voters for supporting a racist and sexist candidate, a cottage industry has developed in order to understand and contextualize these white voters (see, e.g., Hochschild 2016; Vance 2016). In this way, a dividing line is drawn between “average” white Trump supporters and those White Nationalists and White Power activists who rallied in support of his candidacy. While the latter are pariahs, the former are the subject of various articles and books that seek to ameliorate their motives and go to great lengths to make the case that these frustrated and alienated white Americans are misunderstood “strangers in their own land” (Hochschild 2016).

The tendency to blame Trump for the “rise” in White Supremacy suggests that racism in the U.S. is the result of Trump’s ability to suss out and appeal to an insular group of racist individuals as opposed to recognizing that Trump’s success is at least partially attributed to his ability to articulate the sentiments shared by many “average” Americans. To assign responsibility for racism to the thoughts and behaviors of a few White Supremacists and a minority of individual racists while simultaneously ignoring the role that broader sociocultural and/or institutional norms and structures play in the maintenance of white supremacy in the U.S. is a central tenet of institutionalized white supremacy (Applebaum 2016, 5). This is exemplified by Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton’s reference to many of then-Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump’s supporters as a “basket of deplorables:”

you could put half of Trump's supporters into what I call the basket of deplorables. Right? The racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamaphobic—you name it. And unfortunately there are people like that. And he has lifted them up. He has given voice to their websites that used to only have 11,000 people—now 11 million. He tweets and retweets their offensive hateful mean-spirited rhetoric. Now, some of those folks—they are irredeemable, but thankfully they are not America. (Holan 2016)

In this narrative, an irredeemable group of deplorable individuals are to blame for the “racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic” rhetoric and discrimination that pervades the U.S., but “America”—the public masses, the institutions of government, and/or neo-institutional structures and norms—is absolved of any responsibility or complicity. Clinton’s discursive maneuver is but one example of many instances in which White Supremacists and/or “racists” are singled out and blamed for racism in the U.S. while institutionalized white supremacy is ignored. This is significant because “[i]f one does not acknowledge racism as a system of privilege composed of an interlocking web of institutional, cultural, and individual practices, racism can be reduced to just the bad behavior on the part of particular individuals who need to be removed or rehabilitated, while the system within which these individuals are embedded can remain unchallenged...This diverts attention from the systemic problem, which can remain substantially intact” (Applebaum 2016, 5).

Institutions of White Supremacy versus Institutionalized White Supremacy

At the same time that it is essential to interrogate the “interlocking web of institutional, cultural, and individual practices” that work to sustain white privilege and power in the U.S., it is important to distinguish between the institutions of white supremacy—to include government and economic institutions—and institutionalized white supremacy (Applebaum 2016, 5). While the former plays an important role in the maintenance of the latter and the relationships between institutions and socio-cultural norms are mutually constitutive, institutionalized white supremacy is the set of power arrangements that exists prior to the creation of contemporary political and economic institutions. White people have utilized their power to create a series of mentalities and socially-constructed norms, discourses and practices that then shape institutions as they are being developed. These social constructions include the norm of whiteness as neutral (e.g. to be

“white” is to be free of race), discourses that articulate a colorblind America and privilege equality of opportunity over equality of result, and a widely shared belief that systemic racism does not exist. As such, the fact that our institutions privilege equality of opportunity instead of social justice via legal decisions, laws and policies reflects the a priori privileging of colorblindness as a value.

For example, when U.S. Supreme Court Justices interpret the Fourteenth Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause which states that “No state shall...deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws” they do so within a specific time and space that is shaped by governing norms and values to include institutionalized white supremacy. While “separate but equal” and the *de jure* privileging of whiteness was an acceptable interpretation for many decades, that narrative was no longer viable beginning in the mid-twentieth century because power structures external to the court started to shift. As Derrick Bell (1980) explains in “*Brown v. Board of Education* and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma,” the NAACP’s litigation challenging segregation in elementary and secondary schools may have been successful in 1954 because elite white interests temporarily converged with Black interests. As Bell explains, “the fourteenth amendment, standing alone, will not authorize a judicial remedy providing effective racial equality for blacks where the remedy sought threatens the superior social status of middle and upper class whites” (Bell 1980, 523). Thus, it is only because powerful white interests external to the institutions of white supremacy sanctioned the Court, the institutional beacon of light for many civil rights and social movements, that the Justices were willing to reevaluate equal protection and rule that separate could no longer be equal (Bell 1980).

Yet, as we know, the Court’s rejection of *de jure* discrimination did not lead white Americans to abandon their investment in whiteness and their prejudice against Others. Instead,

institutional change via the Court prompted whites to adopt new norms and discourses designed to facilitate white power as will be discussed below. As such, it is important to distinguish between institutional declarations of equality and rights and socio-cultural norms and practices because the former all too often are utilized as a shield for protecting the latter; institutional pronouncements of equality become a mechanism for cloaking ongoing institutionalized white supremacy. To that end, this paper makes the case that a key facet of institutionalized white supremacy is the normalization of whiteness and white privilege within the U.S. which empower white people to simultaneously benefit from and be complicit in the maintenance of institutionalized white supremacy while arguing that institutional and systemic racism are dead. In this way, institutions of white supremacy and institutionalized white supremacy are linked but distinct.

Governmentality

While dominant white populations may be able to craft norms and discourses that privilege white identities and power, their ability to actually maintain power requires the enforcement of these norms and the policing of Others who seek to deviate from and/or challenge these mentalities and principles. While formal institutions may play one role in these processes, government institutions are not sufficient for maintaining institutionalized white supremacy and, as described above, institutional pronouncements of formal equality often work to provide cover for institutionalized white supremacy. As such, in order to understand how institutionalized white supremacy works requires a broader understanding of government and governing than institutional analyses allow.

As Foucault (2000) explains, government does

not refer only to political structures or to the management of states; rather, it designated the way in which conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed...It covered not

only the legitimately constituted forms of political or economic subjection but also modes of action, more or less considered and calculated, that we destined to act upon the possibilities of action of others. To govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action of others. The relationship proper to power would therefore be sought not on the side of violence or of struggle, nor on that of voluntary contracts (all of which can, at best, only be the instruments of power) but, rather, in the area of that singular mode of action, neither warlike nor juridical, which is government. (341)

To understand government as “modes of action” that “act upon the possibilities of actions of others” is to recognize the role that socio-cultural constructions, norms and discourses play in conditioning power relationships (Ibid.). As such, a critical interrogation of institutionalized white supremacy requires that political scientists shift our attention away from the state and institutions of government to look at “the way in which conduct of individuals or groups might be directed” via processes of governmentality defined as “an art of managing things and persons, concerned with tactics, not laws, or as that which uses laws as part of a broader scheme of tactics to achieve certain policy aims” (Butler 2004, 94). Governmentality utilizes a variety of tactics to facilitate and maintain institutionalized white supremacy, but this paper will focus on the construction of norms and policing of discourse because these are powerful tactics for defining and managing populations, and they expose the limitations of traditional rights-based movements and institution-focused strategies for eradicating the forces of governmentality that sustain institutionalized white supremacy. Thus, it is essential to focus on how dominant epistemologies and constructions of thought and knowledge work as tactics of governmentality via the establishment of governing norms.

Dean explains that one of the dimensions of

practice of government concerns the forms of knowledge that arise from and inform the activity of governing...Here the literature on governmentality asks: what forms of thought, knowledge, expertise, strategies, means of calculation, or rationality are employed in practices of governing? How does thought seek to transform these practices? How does these practices of governing give rise to specific forms of truth? How does thought seek to render particular issues, domains, and problems governable? ...It is this

connection of government and thought that is emphasized in the hybrid term “governmentality.” (Dean 2010, 42)

Furthermore, to understand how governmentality works via the construction and enforcement of norms to facilitate institutionalized white supremacy requires the recognition that one can “be complicit even if one has good intentions” (Applebaum 2016, 4-5). As Applebaum explains, “It is important to distinguish white supremacy from racism understood as primarily about prejudice and mean-spirited acts of discrimination. Racism is often considered exclusively about having a set of prejudiced beliefs or stereotypes or negative attitudes towards racial groups. One problem with understanding racism as only about prejudice involves the fact that one can be complicit in the perpetuation of racism even if one does not believe one is prejudiced” (Applebaum 2016, 4-5).

As such, in this paper, I argue that white complicity *is* an essential component of the processes of governmentality that enable and maintain institutionalized white supremacy in the U.S. The extent to which white supremacy is institutionalized and normalized enables white Americans to understand and/or defend the status quo as not raced, and it is this failure among dominant populations to recognize the relationships among extant discourses, institutions and norms and racial and intersectional hierarchies in the US that makes institutionalized white supremacy difficult to eradicate. As Charles Mills explains: “Ironically, the most important political system of recent global history—the system of domination by which white people—have historically ruled over and, in certain important ways, continue to rule over nonwhite people—is not seen as a political system at all. It is just taken for granted; it is the background against which other systems, which we *are* to see as political are highlighted” (Mills 1997, 1-2).

At the same time, however, it is important to acknowledge that white ignorance of white power and/or the failure to identify oneself as prejudiced does not mean that white complicity is

inadvertent or the result of benign oblivion. A key facet of government as the “conduct of conduct” is understanding “not only how we exercise authority over others...but also how we govern ourselves” (Dean 1999, 19). It is essential “to open up the examination of self-government or cases in which governor and governed are two aspects of one actor...Thus the notion of government extends to cover the way in which an individual questions his or her own conduct (or *problematizes* it) so that he or she may be better able to govern it. In other words government encompasses not only how we exercise authority over others, but how we govern abstract entities such as states and populations, but also how we govern ourselves” (Dean 1999, 19). Yet, white people are disinclined to question or problematize our own conduct. Instead of critically interrogating our individual roles as governors and examining how we govern ourselves and others, white people prefer to focus on our role as governed. This belief that power is located in the institutions of government or capitalism enables white individuals to both elide our own power relative to others and inoculate it from critique thereby preserving institutionalized white supremacy. This complicity is at best the result of woeful ignorance and at worst is a strategic calculation.

To that end, in this paper, particular attention is focused on governmentality via normalizing tactics, as distinct from state actors and formal laws, in order to demonstrate how “[t]he exercise of power is a ‘conduct of conducts’ and a management of possibilities” that regularly works to oppress people of color and the intersectionally-subjected while simultaneously privileging whites (Foucault 2000, 341). Understanding governmentality as “a mode of power concerned with the maintenance and control of bodies and persons, the production and regulation of persons and populations, and the circulation of goods insofar as they maintain and restrict the life of the population,” the analyses to follow examine how

governmentality facilitates institutionalized white supremacy (Butler 2004, 52). First, a critical analysis of norms of whiteness and the antithetical Others demonstrates how “the production and regulation of persons and populations” work to maintain white power. Second, an examination of the privileging of colorblind discourses and practices in the contemporary U.S. illustrates how the myth of a level playing field constricts opportunities for people of color in order to maintain differences in material wealth consistent with Butler’s statement that power is facilitated via “the circulation of goods insofar as they maintain and restrict the life of the population.” Finally, attention is focused on how the norms of whiteness and colorblindness interact to undermine allegations of systemic racism and institutionalized white supremacy thereby enabling the ongoing “maintenance of control of bodies and persons” of color.

Whiteness and the Production of Populations

While I am cognizant that studies of whiteness run the risk of further centering white individuals in the discourse, research and politics, the failure to name and define whiteness is a key facet of institutionalized white supremacy. As such, it is essential to make whiteness legible to *white* people as a socially-constructed category of identity that is utilized to consolidate power and maintain institutionalized white supremacy. While people of color are well aware of whiteness, and critical race scholars have labored to expose the mythology that to be white is somehow to be free of race (e.g. Ahmed 2007; Delgado and Stefancic 2012; Leonardo 2004; Lopez 2006), the overwhelming majority of white people have failed to recognize these facts.

One obstacle in getting white people to see whiteness as a socially constructed norm embedded with power is the fact that while whiteness used to be openly acknowledged as a privileging category and source of power as time has changed “the Racial Contract *has written itself out of formal existence*. The scope of the terms in the social contract has been formally

extended to apply to everyone, so that ‘persons’ is no longer coextensive with ‘whites’” (Mills 1997, 73). Yet, the discursive maneuver that replaced “whites” with “persons” in laws and policies did not attend to the expansive differences in power that exist between white individuals and people of color as a result of centuries of *de jure* discrimination. Eliminating *de jure* racism does not alleviate *de facto* racism, which is institutionalized and systemic and not simply the by-product of individuals’ racism. Because no work was ever done to bring Others into the category of “persons,” the latter is still almost exclusively white and policed to maintain the status quo, but white people are able to argue that the expansion of the “people” is akin to the end of whiteness as a differentiating and privileging mechanism (Mills 1997, 75). It is as if the end of *de jure* discrimination signaled the end of race in the public. In this way, “whiteness works through its invisibility. Whiteness often goes unnoticed for those who benefit from it, but, for those who don’t, whiteness is often blatantly and painfully ubiquitous” (Applebaum 2016, 3).

At the same time, however, it would be a mistake to understand whiteness only as an “invisible” benefit that accrues to white individuals. Institutionalized white supremacy requires not just that white people benefit from being white resulting in two Americas—one white and one Black (demonstrated by Eddie Murphy’s 1984 Saturday Night Live skit where he impersonated a white man and found that white loan officers freely gave loans to white people, newspapers were free for white people, and dance parties broke out on public transportation with free drinks and snacks for white people)—but that these benefits are conditioned on and/or related to the subjection of those designated as Others. It is not just that white people benefit, but that they are only able to do so precisely *because* people of color are deprived of the same benefits.

As such, the designation and maintenance of a socially constructed Other is an essential precondition and component of institutionalized white supremacy. Throughout U.S. history, new migrant groups have sought to assimilate into whiteness by defining themselves in opposition to Blackness: “Whiteness is defined in part in respect to an oppositional darkness, so that white self-conceptions of identity, personhood, and self-respect are then intimately tied up with the repudiation of the black Other. No matter how poor one was, one was still able to affirm whiteness that distinguished one from the subpersons on the other side of the color line” (Mills 1997, 58-9). Ironically, the fact that many immigrant populations now recognized as white were able to meet with success in the US as a result of these processes of assimilation whereby they were recognized as and admitted into whiteness by juxtaposing themselves to the Black Other is now used to critique the inability of Black Americans to meet with success and/or assimilate in the U.S. Bonilla-Silva (2018) calls this the “If (ethnic groups such as Japanese, Chinese, Jews and Irish) have made it, how come blacks have not?” storyline (102). In this way, whiteness works as a disciplinary mechanism that produces populations and assigns value and power to these social constructs.

While it may be difficult to imagine that white people are not aware of their complicity in institutionalized white supremacy, the reality is that “White norms permeate white dominated society, yet these norms appear to be common and value-neutral to the social groups that benefit from them. These norms create the standards by which ‘difference’ is constructed” (Applebaum 2016, page 3). Thus, a key facet of governmentality is the production of knowledge and understanding as mechanisms of population control and management, and the effects are the same whether or not individuals are cognizant of them are not. For example, explaining mentalities of government, Dean (1999) states, “It emphasizes the way in which the thinking

involved in practices of government is explicit and embedded in language and other technical instruments but is also *relatively taken for granted*, i.e. *it is not usually open for questioning by its practitioners*” (25, emphasis added). Thus, one of the ways that these mentalities of government work is because people do not seek to challenge dominant narratives and governing truths, and this is probably even more likely to be true if you benefit directly from the status quo.

Yet, as long as Blackness or the Other is antithetical to whiteness and these socially constructed categories are imbued with meaning then categories not only have power but have disciplinary power. When white people fail to recognize that traditional epistemologies are actually locations of social control and governing they are complicit in normalizing their privilege and power at the expense of others. Knowledge is essential for self-government and informs both formal and informal institutions and discourses, but knowledge is not value-free. “By unquestioningly ‘going along with things,’ by accepting all the privileges of whiteness with concomitant complicity in the system of white supremacy, one can be said to have consented to Whiteness” (Mills 1997, 107). Thus, even though all white individuals may not have signed “the racial contract,” we benefit from “the differential privileging of the whites as a group with respect to the nonwhites as a group, the exploitation of their bodies, land, and resources, and the denial of equal socioeconomic opportunities to them. All whites are *beneficiaries* of the Contract, though some white are not *signatories* to it” (Mills 1997, 11).

Colorblindness and the Perpetuation of Material Inequality

As mentioned above, a key facet of institutionalized white supremacy is the construction of a category of “deplorables” or a minority of racists who are to blame for any racist episodes or events. For example, the events in Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017 have been accurately portrayed as a White Nationalist rally, but the violent actions of White Supremacists at this event

received more press coverage than the myriad issues associated with monuments to confederate heroes and leaders that have been around for decades in communities across the U.S. and serve as an endorsement of racism, slavery and violence against people of color. Furthermore, the ongoing litigation surrounding the removal of the statue of Robert E. Lee from Emancipation Park in Charlottesville has received next to no press coverage, and as of this time the monument still stands (as does one to Stonewall Jackson) and it was recently uncovered after being shrouded since August 2017. Yet, if the media coverage is any indication, the problem in Charlottesville is the racism of Richard Spencer and his acolytes and not the broad masses' historical and contemporary rationalization and acceptance of these monuments as innocuous historical markers. These distinctions between the racist few and the benevolent many work in tandem with norms of colorblindness and equality of opportunity to substantiate institutionalized white supremacy. Specifically, many current instances of and ongoing racial antagonisms are rendered as examples of "the past is the past" framing that simultaneously elides extant racism and substantiates the myth of a contemporary colorblind America (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 98).

While the privileging of colorblind discourses and practices in the contemporary U.S. results in the distribution of numerous material costs and benefits, the norm of colorblindness facilitates governmentality by limiting any critical interrogations of contemporary wealth distribution in order to maintain white power and restrict opportunities for Others to acquire wealth. As will be discussed below, colorblindness is substantiated by the myth of a level playing field that works to maintain differences in material wealth that can be directly traced to the history and current practices of racism. Yet, any attempts to draw attention to the relationships among these massive material inequities and "[a] history of racism institutionalized through slavery, sharecropping, Jim Crow, white affirmative action, redlining, job

discrimination, and white flight [which] created self-reinforcing cycles of segregation and poverty” is rendered out of bounds in today’s colorblind America (Baradaran 2017, 278). These recognitions would run counter to “the past is the past” story line which advances the notion that the events of the past either have no bearing on current distributions of wealth and resources and/or cannot be remedied in the present via affirmative action, reparations, etc. because it is not the responsibility of today’s white Americans to attend to the mistakes of the past (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 98). In this way, norms of colorblindness and the associated mythology of the level playing field are tactics of governmentality that work to consolidate and maintain white wealth and power and undermine attempts by people of color to challenge these hierarchies.

Colorblind Mythology and the Maintenance of White Power

While there is no question that American wealth and capital were literally built on the backs of Black slaves and the stolen land of indigenous populations, white Americans have been resistant to any attempts to compensate for these crimes. In the twenty-first century, institutionalized white supremacy depends on various norms, discourses and practices to maintain white power and wealth. Central to this is white denial of responsibility for both slavery and compensation for slavery, which is often captured in the sentiment that “I didn’t own any slaves” (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 98). This statement implies that white people today should not be required to atone for slavery, and in doing so works to disrupt the connections between the contemporary wealth gap and centuries of economic exploitation and *de jure* discrimination. As such, “I didn’t own slaves” becomes another way of saying that *de jure* and *de facto* racisms are a thing of the past, and in order to move forward as a country we must leave the past in the past. As Chief Justice John Roberts famously stated in his majority opinion in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District, No. 1* (551 U.S. 701 (2007)) in which the Court

was asked to evaluate the legality of elementary and secondary education school of choice programs that took diversity into account when assigning students to schools, “The way to stop discriminating on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race.” This articulation of colorblindness as the antidote to racism is a key facet of institutionalized white supremacy because it substantiates the idea that a blank slate, or *tabula rasa*, exists with regard to race today. Yet, “despite the fact that white racial domination precedes us, whites daily recreate it on both the individual and institutional level” (Leonardo 2004, 139). The norm of colorblindness, however, allows these recreations to continue while simultaneously removing them from critique.

By shifting blame to a few malevolent racists as opposed to interrogating systemic racism, institutionalized white supremacy is able to maintain the myth of a colorblind America whereby everyone is judged on the basis of one’s individual merit, and equality is operationalized as equality of opportunity. The latter requires faith in a colorblind America whereby all individuals are similarly-situated on a mythological level playing field. Bonilla-Silva defines this as “abstract liberalism” which utilizes frames from both political liberalism such as equality of opportunity and economic liberalism and its emphasis on individualism (2018, 56). These norms of abstract liberalism, however, do not account for the vast history and ongoing practices of racial discrimination that disadvantage people of color today. Instead, colorblindness works in tandem with the mythological level playing field to perpetuate the fiction that all individuals have access to the same opportunities for education, employment, success, wealth, and so on which accrue to individuals based on merit. Thus, by removing the armed perimeter and allowing people of color to access the playing field after centuries of exclusion, formal equality is achieved and the wrongs of the past are left in the past.

Yet, these attempts to move beyond or forward are embedded with power moves and raced hierarchies. As Eric Ishiwata and I explain in “From the Myth of Formal Equality to the Politics of Social Justice: Race and the Legal Attacks on Native Entitlements:”

While they are perhaps more palatable than the prior regimes of overt subordination, these seemingly inclusive forms of racism continue to produce harm. Their privileging of formal over substantive equality locates the blame and burden of America’s problems on those historically marginalized groups who are unwilling to “move beyond” the injuries incurred by conquest and discrimination. In this regard, [formal equality]...can be read as an effort to conceal asymmetric power relations with an ahistorical, antiracial flatness. The efficacy of this strategy relies wholly on the presumed actualization of a level playing field, whereby long-standing claims of injustice have already, somehow, been settled and forgotten. When cast in this light, ...it works to preserve the status quo through a minimization of public responsibility. (Daum and Ishiwata 2010, 853)

In these ways, colorblindness works as a normalizing tactic of governmentality because it empowers white people to reject any articulation of people of color’s grievances in the contemporary context, and subsequently guarantees that remedial actions are not seriously considered. This strategy is effective because it elides the myriad ways that people of color were and are denied access to educational and employment opportunities; robbed of their labor, material wealth, lands and resources; and excluded from opportunities to acquire wealth and property while simultaneously making it impossible for people of color to articulate these exploitations and injustices because drawing attention to racism in the past or the present requires a recognition of racial difference which violates the norm of colorblindness.

Thus, while research clearly demonstrates that the vast material inequities that exist today are the result of the theft of labor, land and resources followed by systematic discrimination against people of color, colorblindness and the mythological level playing field are utilized to erase the past (Alexander 2012, Baradaran 2017, Coates 2014, Rothstein 2017). By claiming that they “do not see race” in the here and now, white Americans are able to argue that racism is dead because if you cannot see race you cannot be assigning costs and benefits based on it. Thus,

discussions of reparations as a mechanism for attending to extant material inequities are rejected because they violate norms of colorblindness and assign costs and benefits based solely on race. Similarly, debates about affirmative action programs in institutions of higher education or school assignments that take race into account in elementary and secondary schools increasingly are under scrutiny because these programs “see race” in ways that are not acceptable in a colorblind society. Yet, it is important to recognize that “[m]embers of the dominant group...have *a vested interest in not knowing*” (Applebaum page 15), and the result of these practices is to assign the responsibility for overcoming these vast material inequities to people of color.

Colorblindness and Locations of Responsibility: Individual Merit will Close the Gaps

A key facet of institutionalized white supremacy that is facilitated via the norm of colorblindness is to make Black Americans and other racial, ethnic and intersectionally-subjected minorities responsible for overcoming the forces of institutionalized white supremacy to include closing the wealth gap (Baradaran 2017, 278). Yet, forces of governmentality work on the discourses and bodies of people of color to prohibit any attempts to call attention to the fact that the wealth gap is the result of racial exploitation and discrimination. For example, liberal democratic norms governing public discourse act as forces of governmentality that restrict the ability of racial and ethnic minorities to draw attention to extant racial hierarchies and systems of oppression.

While the First Amendment guarantees of free speech and expression are universally recognized as essential to self-governance and key facets of any democratic system, dominant populations regularly police public discourse and space in order to undermine at best and exclude at worst critical viewpoints and speech that they do not want to see widely disseminated (Daum 2017). In “Counterpublics and Intersectional Radical Resistance: Agitation as a Mechanism for

Transforming the Dominant Discourse,” I argue that dominant interests wield their power and privilege to constitute both the public interest and public space, and then utilize a variety of strategies to undermine any speech that is deemed to run counter to their interests (Daum 2017). One way that they do this is to challenge speech that runs counter to colorblind discourse. Thus, when Black Lives Matter activists state that *Black* lives matter, many white Americans often counter that *all* lives matter. This discursive maneuver decenters the interests and concerns of Black Americans in the discourse in favor of a colorblind “all” that privileges White interests, and in doing so works to undermine the goals of Black Lives Matter activists one of which is to attract attention to police brutality against *Black* individuals (Daum 2017, 530). As this example illustrates, when racial and ethnic minorities attempt to challenge the existing distributions of power, policies and norms that perpetuate the ongoing and systemic marginalization of people of color, they often find that the dominant public utilizes expectations about appropriate discursive strategies to include the norm of colorblindness to mitigate against any challenges to their power. In this way, the discourse of marginalized populations is managed by dominant populations in order to undermine its potency or potential for challenging institutionalized white supremacy. Norms of colorblindness act as tactics of governmentality that maintain the status quo and institutionalized white supremacy by entrapping people of color and intersectionally-subjected individuals in an impossible situation whereby they are the only people willing to shine the light on racial injustices, and then are marginalized, attacked and vilified for doing so.

Similarly, the wealth gap itself intersects with the norm of colorblindness to undermine people of color and intersectionally-subjected individuals’ abilities to challenge the status quo. Colorblind norms manifest in institutional constraints including the fact that all citizens are legally entitled to bring their grievances to the courts, but the ability to actually do so is

undermined for many individuals by the exorbitant resources that are required to initiate, sustain and win litigation in the courts. As a result, it is the “haves”—those intersectionally-privileged individuals and institutions to include wealthy whites and corporations—that are better positioned to engage as “repeat players” and manifest as winners in the courts (Galanter 1974). While extant research has demonstrated how the development of civil rights organizations such as the NAACP and ACLU are able to offset these limitations and expenses by providing individuals with expert support and resources, these groups are still constrained by the limitations of liberal democratic institutions themselves (e.g. Barclay and Fisher 2006; Sarat and Scheingold 2006; Tushnet 1987). As stated previously, institutionalized white supremacy and institutions of white supremacy are distinct but mutually constitutive. As such, the sociocultural norm of colorblindness has increasingly informed legal decisions and government policies and vice versa. Recognizing that alleged civil rights and/or liberty violations must be located in existing constitutional principles or laws, and that these textual guarantees are quite ambiguous and require interpretation by elite, predominantly white, judges, we should not be surprised to see the federal courts reflecting these norms in their decisions (Stubbs 2016).

Colorblind norms are used to police discourse and foreclose sociocultural and legal opportunities for change in order to maintain the wealth gap and reify white power. Consistent with tactics of governmentality, one can see how the tactics of colorblindness, level playing fields, equality of opportunity, and individual merit work to manage people of color and maintain white power (Butler 2004, 94). As a strategy of governing, people of color must operate within the confines of a colorblind society where all individuals are granted equal opportunities and success is contingent on one’s individual merit and worth. Absent a recognition that communities of color are unable to close the wealth gap because of institutionalized and institutional white

supremacy, there can be no substantive reform. As Baradaran (2017) explains in *The Color of Money: Black Banks and the Racial Wealth Gap*, “A 2016 study glibly predicted that, based on the current racial wealth gap, it would take 228 years for blacks to have as much wealth as whites do today. This prediction is inaccurate on two dimensions. If nothing changes, no amount of time will close the wealth gap because of self-perpetuating cycles of poverty and wealth” (279-80). Nothing changes, however, because white Americans are literally and figuratively invested in institutionalized white supremacy, and will continue to use tactics of governmentality to maintain their power. Thus, it is essential to understand that these governing norms and practices not only disadvantage racial and ethnic minorities and assign benefits to white individuals, but that the latter’s profit comes at the expense of the former.

For example, Leonardo (2004) evaluates the description of white privilege as being “akin to walking down the street with money being put into your pant pocket without your knowledge. At the end of the day, we can imagine that whites have a generous purse without having worked for it” (138). He, however, argues that:

Describing white privilege as the process of having money put in your pocket comes with certain discursive consequences. First, it begs the question: if money is being placed in white pockets, who places it there? If we insert the subject of actions, we would conclude that racial minorities put the money in white pockets. It does not take long to realize that this maneuver has the unfortunate consequence of inverting the real process of racial accumulation, whereby whites take resources from people of color; often they also build a case for having earned such resources. Second, we can invoke the opposite case...It might sound something like this. The experience of people of color is akin to walking down the street having your money taken from your pocket. Historically, if ‘money’ represents material, and even cultural, possessions of people of color then the agent of such taking is the white race, real and imagined. (2004, 138)

Thus, even the discourse surrounding white privilege is constructed in such a way as to remove white responsibility and complicity in the maintenance of white power. Yet, the reality is that

institutionalized white supremacy requires not only the privileging of whiteness but the exploitation and degradation of Others.

Institutionalized White Supremacy, Governmentality and White Denial of Systemic Racism

The tactics of governmentality that normalize whiteness work in tandem with colorblind discourses and practices to make whiteness unimpeachable and to inoculate white power from critical interrogation. These tactics of governmentality culminate in the “maintenance of control of bodies and persons” of color (Butler 2004, 52). In the contemporary U.S., this manifests in an insidious system of governing and population management whereby white Americans are able to argue that systemic racism no longer exists while white individuals thrive and people of color are systematically marginalized and oppressed via the tactics of governmentality. Thus, at the same time that white people argue that they are colorblind and “do not see race”—an altruistic attitude that they embrace precisely because it works to their advantage—they utilize alternative strategies to continue to mark and locate Others in order to justify the vast differentials in power and wealth that continue to distinguish white Americans from Black, Latinx, indigenous and intersectionally-subjected Americans. One of the most powerful frames for justifying and explaining away these differences is the naturalization frame.

Bonilla-Silva explains that the frame of “naturalization”—“a frame that allows whites to explain away racial phenomena by suggesting that they are natural occurrences”—works with “cultural racism” which “relies on culturally based arguments such as ‘Mexicans do not put much emphasis on education’ or ‘blacks have too many babies’ to explain the standing of minorities in society” (2018, 56). The naturalization and cultural racism frames are particularly nefarious tactics of governmentality because they exempt white individuals from any responsibility for or complicity in the maintenance of institutionalized white supremacy while

simultaneously locating the responsibility for extant differences in power and wealth on people and communities of color. This empowers white Americans to deny that systemic racism exists in favor of just blaming Black, Latinx, and indigenous communities for their inability to close the social, material and power gaps that exist in the twenty-first century. For example, white individuals are able to draw on multiple frames to blame Blacks for their own subjugated position: “When cultural racism is used in combination with the ‘minimization of racism’ frame, the results are ideologically deadly. If people of color say they experience discrimination, whites...do not believe them and claim they use discrimination as an ‘excuse’ to hide the central reason why they are behind whites in society: their presumed ‘laziness’” (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 68).

Thus, stereotypes of racial and ethnic minorities ranging from laziness, criminality, lasciviousness, and so on are utilized to explain away systemic racism while simultaneously maintaining white power. Recognizing that whiteness is constructed in opposition to Blackness, if Black individuals are typecast as lazy and this stereotype is utilized to explain why they are unable to capitalize on the equal opportunities they are afforded, then white individuals must possess exemplary individual merit which accounts for their accumulation of wealth and power and ongoing successes. In this circular reasoning, whites are able to explain away current differences and racism as well as the rape and pillage of two continents that laid the foundation for contemporary white power.

The ability to simultaneously deny that systemic racism exists and to justify differences that map directly onto race and ethnicity as the responsibility of the oppressed is the ultimate tactic of governmentality as a tool of population management and control. By absolving the dominant majority and the institutions of government and capital of any responsibility for

attending to the disruptive and oppressive legacies of racism in the U.S., white Americans are able to justify and accept racialized poverty and segregated schools and communities, law enforcement abuse of and mass incarceration of people of color, and so on. Thus, to understand institutionalized white supremacy it is essential to examine both sides of the coin: if systemic racism is dead and Black poverty is “natural” then white privilege is “natural” as well. In this way, white Americans are able to recognize and make peace with white privilege as an inadvertent bonus that comes to whites—the invisible hand depositing a few extra dollars in one’s pocket—as opposed to a set of benefits that accrues to whites by virtue of their oppression of Others. As Leonardo (2004) explains, “the theme of privilege obscures the subject of domination, or the agent of actions, because the situation is described as happening almost without the knowledge of whites. It conjures up images of domination happening behind the backs of whites, rather than on the backs of people of color. The study of white privilege begins to take on an image of domination without agents” (138). This framing of “domination happening behind the backs of whites” captures the white complicity that is a key facet of institutionalized white supremacy.

To recognize institutionalized white supremacy is not to suggest that all white individuals are bigoted racists, but rather that all white people to varying degrees are complicit in the maintenance of norms that allow them to benefit from their whiteness; benefits that they accept and do not deny. In fact, in Bonilla-Silva’s research he finds that “whites with differing levels of sympathy toward minorities resort to the *same* frames when constructing their accounts of racial matters” (2018, 58). This finding is similar to my argument that norms as tactics of governmentality are embraced and maintained by white people regardless of one’s ideological orientation or attitudes towards racial and ethnic minorities and intersectionally-subjected

individuals. Institutionalized white supremacy is powerful precisely because it is facilitated via tactics of governmentality wielded by the masses as a way to justify and explain ongoing differences between privileged whites and Othered people of color not “as the outcome of a history of political oppression but rather as just ‘the way things are’” (Mills 1997, 30).

This recognition requires liberal and progressive whites and/or anti-racist whites to acknowledge that one’s good intentions or activism on behalf of civil rights or social justice cannot mitigate their failure to see and challenge the tactics of governmentality that normalize whiteness and substantiate colorblindness. These norms enable white people to cast themselves as “without race” and then utilize norms of colorblindness to prevent people of color from calling attention to racism in the U.S. and/or agitating for policies and practices that acknowledge race as a way to attend to the legacies of oppression. These tactics of governmentality then empower white people to support sociocultural, legal and political institutions and practices that favor white people while arguing that systemic racism is dead. This slight of hand whereby white people benefit but considerations of race no longer exist because “the past is in the past” is facilitated by the norms of whiteness and colorblindness: if white people are without race and racism is dead then our power and wealth accrues to us on the basis of our superior individual merit. Thus, white people’s denial that systemic racism against people of color exists combines with our complicit maintenance of a system of governing that privileges whiteness as a categorization that comes with myriad benefits at the expense of racial and ethnic minorities to create a political system of institutionalized white supremacy.

Conclusion

It is essential to draw attention to the myriad ways in which white complicity and governmentality work to sustain institutionalized white supremacy in the U.S. As Mills reminds

us in *The Racial Contract* : “racism...is *itself* a political system, a particular power structure of formal and informal rule, socioeconomic privilege, and norms for the differential distribution of material wealth and opportunities, benefits and burdens, rights and duties” (1997, 3). Because *de jure* discrimination is prohibited does not mean that racism ceased to exist. Instead, racism as a political system morphed and adapted and continues to operate via tactics of governmentality, to include the norms discussed in this paper, to maintain institutionalized white supremacy. While white individuals in the contemporary U.S. may deny the existence of systemic racism, they are the complicit enforcers and beneficiaries of institutionalized white supremacy. This is a form of governing, but because the location and exercise of power often occur outside of traditional institutional capacities it is too easy to ignore this type of government and it escapes critical inquiry. To be clear, many individuals and scholars are acutely aware that institutionalized white supremacy exists, but it is incumbent upon *white* scholars, activists, and individuals to explicitly acknowledge these realities and challenge these governing norms.

This analysis is intended to demonstrate that the maintenance of institutionalized white supremacy is a result of the complicity of white Americans, and consequently its eradication will be our responsibility as well. Not only is it not the burden or responsibility of Black Americans and other people of color to rectify the moral and ethical failures of white individuals, but it is impossible for them to do so under the existing constraints of institutionalized white supremacy which work to mitigate against any attempts at transformative change. Real change requires an explicit recognition by white individuals that we are both the beneficiaries of and complicit in the maintenance of systems of institutionalized white supremacy. Recognizing that socio-cultural change is an essential precursor to institutional change, it is time for white communities and individuals to interrogate their roles in the maintenance of systems of institutionalized white

supremacy which then work in tandem with institutions of white supremacy. This paper is part of a larger project that examines in detail the different tactics of governmentality that sustain institutionalized white supremacy ranging from a more in-depth discussion of neoliberal norms and the regulation of wealth, democratic liberal democratic norms and the policing of public space and discourse, and norms of nationalism and the regulation of critical speech and protest.

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