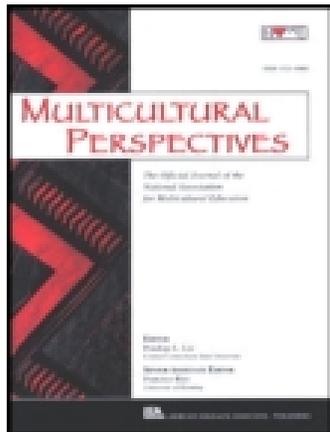


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### White Fatigue: Naming the Challenge in Moving from an Individual to a Systemic Understanding of Racism

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PART I  
Advancing the Conversation

## White Fatigue: Naming the Challenge in Moving from an Individual to a Systemic Understanding of Racism

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*This article introduces the notion White fatigue. White fatigue occurs for White students who have grown tired of learning and discussing race and racism, despite an understanding of the moral imperative of anti-racist and anti-oppressive practices. The article differentiates White fatigue from ideas like White resistance, White guilt, or White fragility, arguing that each of these phenomenon occur at different stages of White Racial Identity Development. Distinction is also drawn among White fatigue and other forms of racially based fatigue, specifically racial battle fatigue and White people fatigue syndrome. Further drawing on the notion of stereotype threat, the article considers the challenges for White students learning about race and racism while simultaneously resisting being labeled a racist. This struggle is elemental to the manifestation of White fatigue. Ultimately, the author argues that educators must be more accurate in how they define the range of responses from White students, consistently humanize all students in the process of understanding race and racism, and encourage further research for understanding a condition that is happening to a growing number of students.*

Multicultural educators (MCEs) regularly encounter students who are on a broad spectrum in their willingness or preparedness to engage in discussions about racism and other forms of oppression. We may encounter resistance that looks like provocative argumentation, or quiet discomfort. On the other hand, we may also encounter students that are excited about the exchange of ideas and may voice validation of their own experiences or a new ability to apply a term or theory to something they have “always” noticed. This range of experiences is common. As such, it can be useful for us to consider a range of concepts that can more appropriately describe student experience in learning about racism.

In this article I describe a phenomenon I call *White fatigue*. Simply, White fatigue attempts to name the dynamic of White students who intuitively understand or recognize the moral imperative of antiracism (primarily viewed as individual racism); however, they are not yet situated to fully understand the complexity of racism and how it functions as an institutional and systemic phenomenon. Due to the complexity required of critical (as compared to simplistic) studies of racism, those who are *fatigued* claim to be “tired of talking about” racism, despite the intuitive understanding that racism is morally wrong. This phenomenon is further aggravated by students’ desire to not be judged as racist.

White fatigue should not be conflated with *racial battle fatigue* (Smith, 2004; Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011; Smith, Yosso, & Solorzano, 2006) or *White people*

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*fatigue syndrome* (hooks, 1992). These are defined as fatigue experienced by racially minoritized peoples in the United States (particularly African Americans) that arise from constantly addressing or *teaching* White people how and why actions and microaggressions are racist. In contrast, White fatigue focuses on the set of White Americans who understand that certain attitudes and actions reflect certain forms of racism (i.e., individual racism). Typically, they have acquired such understandings as a result of successful promotion of racial “tolerance” discourses prevalent in liberal media, popular culture, and schooling. What these understandings lack are the underpinnings of systemic and institutional racism, and how those forms of racism directly impact the ways in which people are socialized to adopt racist worldviews (Smedley & Smedley, 2012).

*White fatigue* is related to, but distinct from other concepts such as *White resistance* (Goodman, 2011), *White guilt* (Tatum, 1994; Leonardo, 2004), or *White fragility* (DiAngelo, 2011). Unlike these concepts, White fatigue is brought about by the challenges and complexities of *learning* about racism (that is, the specific dynamic within an explicit teaching setting wherein a consistent message of structural racism is presented). The stressors arising from the conflicting stream of messages from anti-racist and multicultural educators, media and popular culture, and personal experiences is a conceptual challenge for some White students as they attempt to shift their thinking from focusing on individual racism (i.e., prejudice and discrimination) toward understanding institutional and systemic racism.

## What these understandings lack are the underpinnings of systemic and institutional racism, and how those forms of racism directly impact the ways in which people are socialized to adopt racist worldviews

The common response is to label these students as *resistant*. However, simply labeling this group of students as resistant disregards their basic (albeit incomplete) understanding of antiracism and, perhaps, the reality of multiculturalism within their own lives. For example, oftentimes students will promote the notion of colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011; Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Wise, 2010) as the best approach for dealing with racism, especially now in the Obama era. Although for us multicultural and antiracist educators the claim of

colorblindness is indicative of not understanding racism, the ideology of colorblindness for some is well intentioned, especially considering the messages of tolerance and respect that consistently circulate throughout society. It seems appropriate to ask, to what extent could it be useful to think about this as a signpost in their continuum of understanding racism? Is it constructive to expect that students will simply “jump” from being racist to anti-racist? Or can there be value in thinking about the stages of their developing understandings of race and racism?

Flatly labeling those students as resistant draws a conceptual line in the sand that challenges their sense of morality and forces them into a conceptual and rhetorical corner. Rather than being an empowering discourse, antiracism and multiculturalism can become a marginalizing discourse for these students. That conceptual dissonance can foster frustration and resignation, making antiracist work that much more complicated—and uninviting.

By no means am I advocating for a “free pass” to exempt White students from continuing the difficult work of excavating how racism functions. Rather, I am presenting a way of recognizing both the intellectual challenges of learning about racism in the face of the popular focus on individual behaviors and the human desire to not be singularly or flatly defined in negative terms.

In what follows, I will begin with a short vignette that frames White fatigue. Then, I will explore the phenomenon and explicate its differences from White resistance, White guilt, and White fragility. Next, I will situate White Fatigue within the White Racial Identity Development framework and further comment on how stereotype threat, embedded in the idea of “Whites equal oppressors,” further complicates and hinders positive White racial identity development, resulting in fatigue.

### A Slap to the Face? Or a Sentiment of Frustration? A Vignette of White Fatigue

For no person I've ever known has ever done more to make me feel more sure, more insecure, more important, and less significant.—*Summer of '42* (Kranze, & Roth, & Mulligan, 1971)

I began my career as a teacher educator at Michigan State University in the fall of 2000. The first class I taught, *Human Diversity, Power, and Opportunity in Social Institutions*, was dubbed the “diversity course.” The course focused on social and cultural foundations of education and curriculum with an eye toward critical issues related to social justice and diversity. The first time I taught the class I was introduced to a persistent phenomenon many of my colleagues and I have seen across contexts over the 14 years since that inaugural class.

During a session in which we explored White privilege, centering the discussion around Lisa Delpit's “The

Silenced Dialogue” (Delpit, 1988) and Peggy McIntosh’s “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” (McIntosh, 1988), I noticed a young White female student who seemed rather despondent and displaying a detached gaze. I asked her what was the matter and she replied, “You don’t want to know.” I delicately pressed, voicing that my classroom was an open and safe space and that all ideas were welcomed. She retorted, “Well, race wouldn’t be a problem if it weren’t for people like you and the NAACP. I am so sick of talking about this stuff!”

After class, the student and I spoke at length. She apologized for the sharp recrimination and went on to explain how life was back at home and her struggles with developing a new racial consciousness. She was raised in a small town that had little racial diversity and many folks in her world displayed negative dispositions toward non-White folks in which she quietly resisted participation. Both of her parents routinely used racial epithets, even at the dinner table, which always made her uncomfortable. She did not use racial epithets herself and believed that racism was “wrong.” She was at a point in her life where she routinely encountered a wide spectrum of non-White peers in substantive ways. Now attending a large university with a diverse student community, she was making interracial friendships and learning a great deal socially. She grew to feel more comfortable around non-White folks and recognized commonalities over differences. In her words, she “got it.” But, she also felt that since she “got it” there was no need to keep “hammering away” at how *bad* White people are. Despite her growth in tolerance and self-described appreciation for racial differences (i.e., her intuitive understanding of individual racism), she had yet to grasp the full nature of racism, specifically the critical and more intractable forms of systemic and institutional racism. Had she understood the complexity of racism as institutional and systemic phenomena beyond simple prejudice and discrimination, she could have seen the conceptual flaw of her pointed recrimination.

As I have reflected upon this event over the years I focused less on the recrimination and more on the aftermath. She stayed in the course. She continued to engage, question, and challenge. I am fully aware of the idea that she could have just been “putting on a show” for the instructor, but as the semester went on she displayed what I believe to be greater understanding of systemic and institutional racism. This is not to imply that her work on these issues was complete by the semester’s end, but to point out that she *chose* to stay the course.

For me an essential conclusion emerged: although she began the class with the recognition that prejudice and discrimination are “wrong,” the introduction of more complex realities and theories of institutional and systemic racism posed a new set of challenges. Simple edicts like “you don’t choose your friends like you choose your

socks” or “we are all human” were wholly insufficient for facilitating a fuller understanding of how racism functions. Furthermore, the presentation of the idea of *privilege*, as a personal phenomenon, served as a pothole for her and other students, as the totality of the ideas left her questioning “what can I do about any of this?”

### A Struggle of the Mind and Spirit: Defining White Fatigue

“In spite of everything, I still believe people are good at heart.”—Anne Frank (1952, p. 237)

As introduced above, I define White fatigue as a temporary state in which individuals that are understanding of the moral imperative of antiracism disengage from or assume they no longer need to continue learning about how racism and/or White privilege function due to a simplistic understanding of racism as primarily individual (i.e., prejudice and discrimination). Characterized by responses like impatience, flippancy, sarcasm, frustration, or resignation, White fatigue arises from the suspension of critical thinking about the complex nature of systemic and institutional racism. However, White fatigue is the antithesis of White guilt because it occurs with individuals who do not necessarily feel guilty about their Whiteness or the role White people have played in shaping historic, institutionally, and systemically racist policies and practices.

To differentiate *fatigue* from guilt, resistance, and fragility it must be pointed out that White guilt is associated with the negative or uncomfortable feelings that arise from White folks’ initial exposure to the ill actions of previous generations and the unearned assets accumulated through racial privilege (Hitchcock, 2002). White guilt emerges from the feelings that arise when trying to come to grips with the weight and repercussions of historic events, and the crippling feeling that one has no idea of what to do to *make it all better*.

On the other hand, White resistance is a flat-out rejection of the principles of anti-racism altogether. Goodman (2011) wrote that:

When people are *resistant*, they are unable to seriously engage with the material. They *refuse* to consider alternative perspectives that challenge the dominant ideology that maintains the status quo. They resist information or experiences that may cause them to question their worldview. *They may dismiss the idea that oppression or systemic inequalities are real. . . . It is irrational, an automatic reaction rather than a considered choice* [emphasis added]. (p. 51)

What is essential to understand about White resistance, as Goodman showed, is that there is a lack of critical engagement with the ideas en masse. The resistant do

not yet see the reality of systemic and institutional racism and the default response wholly disallows critically engaging with a set of ideas that expose how racism functions and how White privilege is all but guaranteed through daily systemic and institutional practices. Moreover, the resistant do not see their own complicity in perpetuating systems of oppression. At least with White guilt, as debilitating as it can be, the guilty are in an active state of struggle.

Robin DiAngelo's (2011) idea of White fragility is more closely related to White fatigue than the concepts of White guilt and White resistance. DiAngelo defined White fragility as:

A state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium. (p. 54)

Throughout her article, DiAngelo offered examples of moments in which she has witnessed White fragility. What is most resonant is that it seems to occur in conversations or workshops designed to engage White participants in conversations about race. DiAngelo situated fragility as a direct result of the racial insulation of White folks that functions to support their own privilege. The negative reactions about even broaching the subject of race or being made to sit through a workshop on race in the workplace can incite a range of negative and extreme reactions. In effect, White Fragility also may be seen as an automatic, uncritical response to the introduction of critical conversations about race and racism. To a certain degree it is a manifestation of resistance.

In contrast to those constructs, White fatigue is a response to the intricacies of a social phenomenon that has many constituent parts. Again, the issue is not that a White person does not see the value in understanding racism, but that learning about systemic and institutional racism (which is essential for ameliorating racism) is very complicated and oftentimes learning is truncated at the level of individual racism. This is a sensible problem, as there remains a large gap between the theory and practice of multicultural education in U.S. schools at all levels of education (Banks, 2004; Gay, 2010). Similarly, schools at all levels have a tendency to privilege less critical forms of multicultural education and curriculum (Flynn, Kemp, & Page, 2013; Gorski, 2009; Sleeter & Grant, 2007; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Illustrating this point, Gorski (2009) conducted a study of syllabi from multicultural teacher education courses across the United States. Through his analysis of what is taught in these courses, he concluded that

multicultural education courses largely focus on pragmatic, hands-on approaches and personal awareness. He stated: "Most of these syllabi appeared crafted to prepare teachers with cultural sensitivity, tolerance, and multicultural competence. Most of the courses were not designed to prepare teachers to identify or eliminate educational inequities or to create equitable learning environments" (p. 316). In effect, learning about diversity, race, privilege, and social justice is often reduced to an examination of one's soul, and embracing these ideas is not necessarily sound pedagogy and practice but is often experienced as an indictment of students' moral inferiority.

### **White Fatigue, Racial Battle Fatigue, White People Fatigue Syndrome**

It is key that White fatigue not be confused with concepts like racial battle fatigue or White People Fatigue Syndrome. Racial battle fatigue (Smith, 2004; Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011; Smith, Yosso, & Solorzano, 2006) is defined as:

An interdisciplinary theoretical framework that considers the increased levels of psychosocial stressors and subsequent psychological (e.g., frustration, shock, anger, disappointment, resentment, hopelessness), physiological (e.g., headache, backache, "butterflies," teeth grinding, high blood pressure, insomnia), and behavioral responses (e.g., stereotype threat, John Henryism, social withdrawal, self-doubt, and a dramatic change in diet) of fighting racial microaggressions in MEEES (mundane, extreme, environmental stress). (Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011, p. 67)

*Racial battle fatigue* is a concept used to define the manifestation of stress African Americans exhibit in the face of dealing with daily microaggressions enacted by White people. According to Smith, Hung, and Franklin's (2011) research these challenges and their effects are tangible. They further commented that "African American men, as well as all People of Color, must have competent theoretical understanding of racism, racial microaggressions, and racial battle fatigue in order to dilute their crippling effects on the individual, family, and in the work place" (p. 78). Thus, racial battle fatigue is defined as a phenomenon experienced by all Peoples of Color and is a response to White racism.

Similarly, bell hooks (1992) intoned the notion of White People Fatigue Syndrome, which predating Smith, encapsulates a likeminded ethic. hooks never actually defined or applied White people fatigue syndrome as a theoretical construct. Rather, she reported the use of the term by a colleague at a conference. hooks stated:

At this same conference, I bonded with a progressive black woman and her companion, a white man. Like me, they were troubled by the extent to which folks chose to ignore the way white supremacy was informing the structure of the conference. Talking with the black woman, I asked her: “What do you do, when you are tired of confronting white racism, tired of the day-to-day incidental acts of racial terrorism? I mean, how do you deal with coming home to a white person?” Laughing she said, “Oh, you mean when I am suffering from White People Fatigue Syndrome? He gets that more than I do.” (p. 177)

Simply stated, racially minoritized people get tired of explaining to White people (including self-defined White allies) the challenges of racism. In *The Feminist Griote* (2013), the blogger personalizes the nature of White People Fatigue Syndrome by stating “I am tired of always having to prove to whites that racism exists . . . I am tired of whites trying to prove to me that they aren’t racist, but as soon as it is time for them to interrupt oppression on my behalf, I am on my own” (para 1).

The frustrations of minoritized groups dealing with racism in its covert and overt forms is a long, storied history, and the ideas of White people fatigue syndrome and racial battle fatigue are important concepts for further understanding the social, psychological, spiritual, and physical effects of dealing with that burden. Simultaneously, as White students are engaged in discourses and discussions about the intricacies of racism and the role of White people in this particular system of oppression, they too begin to feel the weight of the challenge, oftentimes in spite of their own personal attempts to cross borders and boundaries in their personal and professional lives.

**. . . White fatigue is a framing of the struggle *White folks* have in both coming to grips with and fully understanding the depth and complexity of systemic and institutional racism.**

In short, White fatigue is a framing of the struggle *White folks* have in both coming to grips with and fully understanding the depth and complexity of systemic and institutional racism. If the experience of race is different for White folks and non-White folks, then we must be willing to recognize the conceptual and spiritual struggle each group uniquely experiences. White fatigue is an attempt to consider the humanity and struggle of White folks that are in the process of gaining a more nuanced

understanding of how racism functions, which is not an easy process by any means.

In the United States we have made significant advances in encouraging more egalitarian social practices that reduce prejudice and discrimination, but that does not necessarily translate into a societal understanding of institutional and systemic racism. Hence, many White students who recognize individual racism feel as though they *get it*. Because they believe they ‘get it’ they try to encourage, at best, anti-bias and intercultural communication, or, at worst, colorblindness and post-racialism. After all, there is a stream of television shows, movies, magazine articles, and public service announcements that encourage understanding, intercultural communication, and tolerance. However, when the question turns to issues that are reflective of ongoing institutional or systemic racism (i.e., police brutality, voter suppression, un-/under-employment, housing segregation, the achievement gap, the school-to-prison pipeline, mass incarceration, etc.) the debates in media and popular culture obfuscate the issues and foster confusion and frustration. The fatigued are understanding of individual racial bias—which essentially reduces to behaviors of prejudice and discrimination—but have yet to fully grasp the more nuanced and critical ideas of systemic and institutional racism. Although the fatigued may show support for ameliorating systemic and institutional racism, they also struggle with the complexity of the ideas. This is a sharp contrast to White resistance (a rejection of these ideas), and both can be identified at different stages in the process of White racial identity development (Helms, 1993).

### **Mapping the Location of White Fatigue: Revisiting White Racial Identity Development and Stereotype Threat**

The framework of White Racial Identity Development (WRID) (Helms, 1993) is an important schema for understanding race and racism, but it must be approached cautiously. The central complicating factor of WRID is that the process of identity development is often presented as a process in which an individual progresses linearly. The reality is that WRID is not always linear and can be messy. Howard (2006) pointed out that “Helm’s [sic] description of stages in the development of White racial identity, like any theoretical construct, is merely an approximation of actual experience” (p. 98). An individual’s unique experiences and circumstances can throw progression to the final stage, *autonomy*, into a tailspin, and the individual can find herself back into the *disintegration* or *reintegration* stages. Or, it is equally plausible that a stage could be skipped. Regardless, the framework can help us consider the struggles of a person

(s) because WRID allows us to locate, and thus differentiate, resistance and fatigue. As Leonardo (2013) posited:

[Helms]... builds in the dimension of nonlinearity through stages, wherein Whites do not simply travel from point A to B of Whiteness and may revert to previous stages. ... The model ends with a White subject who accepts his or her racial difference as part of a constellation of differences rather than assuming a superior place among them. (p. 104)

Understanding that acceptance of “his or her racial difference as part of a constellation of differences rather than assuming a superior place among them” is the best example of a positive racial identity.

There are six stages of WRID as explicated by Helms. Since WRID has been extensively explored previously (Helms, 1993; McIntyre, 1997; Tatum, 2003; Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2012), here I will list the stages, offer a brief definition of each stage, and provide a typical statement reflective of the stage:

- (1) **Contact:** unexamined racial identity (“We are all the same”).
- (2) **Disintegration:** acknowledges racial differences but does not fully understand racial hierarchies and their implications (“It’s too bad that bad stuff happened to them but that was hundreds of years ago, why don’t they just get over it already”)?
- (3) **Reintegration:** sustained subconscious or dysconscious (King, 1991) beliefs of White superiority (“I am fine with any race as long as they act right [i.e., act White]”).
- (4) **Pseudo-independence:** recognizes racial oppression and privilege but not fully understanding of systemic and institutional manifestations of racism (“I am not racist, I have friends of all racial backgrounds”).
- (5) **Immersion–Emersion:** understands White complicity in racial oppression and privilege and begins to seek allies (“Oppression is a problem we all can be a part of dealing with”).
- (6) **Autonomy:** fully embraces humanistic ideals of equity and social justice individually, institutionally, and systemically (“Racism persists, here’s why, and this is how *we* can work together to eradicate it”).

What is most germane about WRID for understanding White fatigue is that as an individual moves through these stages the individual first begins to see oneself as a racialized being, just like the *others*. As one continues to learn about how racism functions one can begin to locate Whiteness as part of a system and the ways in which racial hierarchies have a history and persistence that shapes reality differently for all racial groups and

individuals. I posit that White resistance is highly evident in the *contact*, *disintegration*, and *reintegration* stages, the stages in which there is little to no recognition of race or criticality about racism. White fatigue on the other hand settles in during the *psuedo-independence* stage or the *immersion–emersion* stage. It is during these stages when an individual makes the shift from a focus on individual manifestations of racism—the individual has become understanding of the idea that actions reflect dispositions—toward the critical examination of how systems and institutions function to shape the contexts in which individuals operate. As WRID displays, the first three stages are characterized by an immersion into one’s own identity, while the latter stages reflect the individual’s reengagement as a more socially conscious person. As alluded to earlier, many students begin this process long before entering a “diversity course” through media, popular culture, personal interactions, and K–12 education. Unfortunately, the focus on individual manifestations of race and racism is wholly insufficient in understanding and ameliorating racism.

During the latter stages, students may begin to consider their own location in the racial hierarchy. They may begin to seriously grapple with the ways in which curricula in U.S. schools privilege White, Eurocentric canons and marginalize or minoritize others. During these stages, students may be fascinated with the idea of microaggressions in social spaces. They may begin to understand the White racial framing of our social contexts (Feagin, 2010). However, oftentimes this is where students also begin to think they *got it*. They have learned and begun to appreciate important perspectives and theories about racism, but their learning has only just begun. Again, they recognize the reality of racism and acknowledge racism as a complex, societal problem, but they have not come to fully understand the depth of the problem, the complicated theories that explain the problem, and the need for sustained interracial healing and cooperation in order to one day eradicate the problem. These shifts beg the question of why is their learning truncated?

Understanding racism and White privilege is a transdisciplinary endeavor. In any given course addressing race, diversity, or multiculturalism, educators bring to bear a wide array of terminology, frameworks, and theories from across the academic spectrum: anthropology (Geertz, 1977; Baker, 2010); cultural studies (Bourdieu, 1993; Hall, 1997, San Juan, 2002; Johnson, 2003); psychology (Helms, 1993; Tatum, 2003; Steele, 2003); history (Zinn, 2005; Loewen, 2007; Ignatiev, 2008; Blackmon, 2009); law (Crenshaw, 1991, 1995; Kennedy, 1998; Alexander, 2012); economics (Massey & Denton, 1998; Shapiro, 2005; Wilson, 2012); philosophy (Cesaire, 2000; West, 2000; Fanon, 2005); public health (Farmer, 2004; Barr, 2008); and sociology (MacLeod,

2008; Allen, 2012). Additionally, particularly in the case of higher education, students are exposed to these ideas in the confines of classes that are typically 10 or 16 weeks in duration. It is rare that these discussions are engaged throughout their academic studies, and students are engaged in these issues only when they have an educator who actively encourages the interrogation of racism (and White privilege) as essential subject matter.

The problem though is that college classrooms are not the only spaces where conversations about race occur. They occur on television, in film, in letters to the editors, in books, on Internet message boards, in popular music, on talk shows, in residence hall rooms, on billboards, in comedy clubs, in churches, in bars, around dinner tables. We often spend a great deal of time engaged in teaching our students, particularly White students, what to unlearn. The conversation about race and racism has been ongoing and many students have ideas about race already formed—some of which are well-informed, ill-informed, critical, or resistant. Drawing a distinction between one who is fatigued and one who is resistant allows for the possibility of a more complex representation of students' experiences and self-identification that does not immediately cast them in the negative light of resistant.

White students are often constructed negatively when discussing racism: as oppressors; unconscious receivers of privilege; ignorant to how the world works; and a host of other negative labels. They are told by "experts" to step up and own their privilege and oppressor status. To wit, there is a growing body of literature that challenges the wisdom of the primacy of the White privilege pedagogy (Jupp & Slattery, 2010; Leonardo, 2004; Lensmire et al., 2013). For example, Lensmire et al. (2013), in a recent study that critiques the challenges of using Peggy McIntosh's seminal essay on White and male privilege (1988), pointed out that:

McIntosh's characterization of White privilege tends to simplify and flatten how we think of the racial identities of our White students and ourselves. That is, within White privilege pedagogy, White people are "addressed" as little more than the smooth embodiment of privilege, leaving little room for exploring what is meant that Jessie (one of the study's participants), for example, both feared the Black man approaching her car and rejected that fear in herself and wanted to overcome it. (p. 429)

Although the concept of White privilege is important to our work it can nonetheless produce stifling results for students, even though some students have the understanding that racism is wrong.

This barrage of negative signifiers coalesces into stereotypes for White students that are hard to escape and result in an obvious question: If I am a beneficiary of White privilege and by extension an oppressor or racist,

then what is the point? Howard (2006) cautioned against talking about the connection between White people and racism in flatly negative terms, lest it becomes much more difficult for White students to develop a positive racial identity. The consistent construction of White students as oppressors reduces to a stereotype that White students must confront in their learning, and this confrontation develops a host of problems for both students and educators.

Stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Aronson et al., 1999; Steele, 2011) has become an indispensable construct for explaining why individuals who may otherwise perform a particular task well can perform poorly. Briefly, stereotype threat is a contextual phenomenon in which a person feels as though her actions may confirm an existing stereotype about a group to which she belongs. Ultimately, this threat hampers performance (Steele & Aronson, 1995). There is a tangible effect for negotiating stereotypes. Explaining stereotype threat, Claude Steele (2003) wrote:

This term stressed that the cause of (negative) effects was contextual, the situationally aroused predicament of having a negative stereotype about one's group be relevant to an important performance or behavior. No particular susceptibility of the person seemed necessary to experience this pressure. It could be felt by anyone who cared about a performance and yet knew that any faltering at it could cause them to be reduced to a negative group stereotype. (p. 316)

Stereotype threat is popularly discussed in relation to the performance of minoritized groups, primarily People of Color and women (Davis, Aronson, & Salinas, 2006; Fischer, 2010; Beasley & Fischer, 2012; Mello, Mallett, Andretta, & Worrell, 2012; Tomasetto & Apploni, 2013; Deemer, Thoman, & Chase, 2014). However, as Steele pointed out, stereotype threat appears in *any* context in which one must deal with a stereotype. I argue that this phenomenon can also happen to those who are White and/or male—who are typically situated at the zenith of racial and gender privilege. Aronson and colleagues (1999) supported this assertion as evidenced through their study in which White males were told Asian students performed better on a math tests. In this case, the stereotyped White males did in fact perform less well on the math test than did the nonstereotype-threatened control group of White males. Aronson and colleagues summarized the study's findings by stating:

It is sufficient to be identified enough with a domain to be threatened by the possibility of limited prospects there and unlucky enough to be on the wrong end of a stereotype about an intellectual ability. And, clearly, if stereotype threat can be aroused in highly able, nonstereotyped students merely by making them aware of a stereotype that predicts lower performance for their

group relative to another, then it is not some exotic phenomenon felt only by the members of historically stigmatized groups. (pp. 43–44)

In effect, this research on stereotype threat shows that the threat is not a phenomenon unique to racial or gender minoritized groups. Rather, it is a phenomenon that can occur to any groups (or individuals) who feel that their performance is vulnerable to a stereotype widely associated with their particular group. In my experience, very few want to be associated with the term racist, and the public pillories of Cliven Bundy, Paula Deen, Mel Gibson, Michael Richards, Don Imus, George Zimmerman, and many others is testament to that notion. This is essential to understand when considering anti-racist education because, as pointed out above, when the label of *racist* hangs over the head of a student trying to understand racism he can become hobbled by the association. A range of negative responses—including resistance, guilt, and fatigue likely will follow. This is not necessarily meant to give White people and White students a “free pass,” but to acknowledge *their* struggle in the process of anti-racism and racial identity development.

Expanding on Steele’s notion of stereotype threat, Cohen and Garcia (2005) proposed the idea of “collective threat.” They operationalize collective threats in circumstances wherein:

Individuals are concerned about the potentially stereotyping confirming acts of other members of their group. We call this concern *collective threat*, as it issues from the collectively shared nature of social identities. We further suggest that in situations where one’s group is negatively stereotyped, an “I am us” mindset may arise out of the awareness that the way one is viewed and defined depends, in part, on the way that other group members are viewed and defined. (p. 566)

For White students in the process of transitioning through latter stages of identity development, the notion of collective threat can wedge them into a proverbial conceptual corner and leave them fatigued from the attempt to differentiate themselves from their less thoughtful White counterparts.

The notion of stereotype threat, and by extension collective threat, is not necessarily about *race*, it is about any stereotype and how the realities of stereotypes have tangible effects. This holds true for African Americans, women, and yes, White folks too. Just because White students may be constructed as benefiting from White racism via White privilege, that does not make them any less human than minoritized others. Recognizing the primacy of humanity that resides in all is a necessary step in dismantling oppressive systemic and institutional practices that ultimately frame all our lives.

## Systems, Humanity, and Love: Choosing a Different Path

Recently at a conference on race, a colleague asked a group of us a question that undergirds this article. He asked, “I wonder how it feels to be White? I mean how would it feel to go through your life believing a bunch of myths and misrepresentations that make you think there is something special about you?” We all looked around at each other and one colleague replied, “It doesn’t matter who you are; it always sucks to find out you’ve been lied too.”

And there it is. The discourse around race has been framed as an “us versus them” binary for so long, it has become useless and even distracting. Racism, as a *system* of advantage based on race (Wellman, 1993; Tatum, 2003; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012), has been used to perpetrate physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual violence on each and every one of us for over 400 years, albeit in drastically different ways. I say racism has perpetrated violence upon *each* of us because as a system we all occupy roles, dictated by the nature of the system. Have White folks been privileged in this particular system of oppression? Absolutely. Along with that position of privilege, however, White people also have to carry a history of genocide, manipulation, force, theft, lying, and dehumanization they are systematically encouraged to disregard. Again, it always “sucks” to be lied too. Racism is and has been painful for all of us; just because one does not necessarily recognize that history and reality does not necessarily mean it is not functioning and not causing further damage.

The White racial framing of the United States literally robbed the group that became known as White people of a host of *other* possibilities that could have led to a more inclusive and beloved society. And for every crack of the whip on the back of an African, for every Indigenous forced to abandon her culture in a boarding school, for every Asian killed under a railroad tie, or every Latin American denigrated for speaking his first language, a piece of humanity is removed from the oppressor. Freire (1970/1997) reminded us that under regimes of oppression both the oppressed *and* the oppressor are dehumanized. In turn, through the process of liberation both the oppressed *and* the oppressor must be humanized, and if the oppressed continues to perpetuate the practices of the oppressor, no one is truly liberated.

Now, some may misconstrue these ideas and suggest that I am appeasing White folks, but I reject that view. As expressed above, the notion of White fatigue is not meant to absolve White folks from any responsibility they have, as a group and as individuals, in understanding the realities and complexities of racism in order to help ameliorate racism. We anti-racist and multicultural educators must be on the vanguard of helping our

communities consider new ways of engaging students while honoring the significant changes over the past 50 years in social relations across borders and boundaries.

As we move forward with further reconceptualizing and honing our pedagogies, practices, and research-around antiracist education, White fatigue is a way of acknowledging the reality that many White students that come into our classes are bringing to bear interracial experiences, relationships, and understanding. They are bringing into our classes a level of savvy culled from growing up in diverse schools, organizations, and workplaces. They embrace a broad spectrum of media and popular culture, including hip hop, electronic dance music, and other burgeoning genres and subcultures. And, some students are in our classes *knowing* that they need to know more and enroll for that purpose. Yet, in order to honor that, it is essential to inject more nuance about students that is beyond resistance or guilt to include those who understand the moral imperative of anti-racism yet are also wrestling with the challenges of facing that complexity—the fatigued.

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