

Diversifying Syllabi 2017 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

SECTION ONE: to be completed by presenter (1-2 pages max.)

Article/Essay Title: White Ignorance

Author: Charles W. Mills

Readability: Easy/Moderate/Difficult

Thesis: White ignorance is a form of non-knowing that stems directly from white racism and/or white racial domination and affects/is effected by many key components of cognition: perception, conception, memory, testimony, motivational interest.

Key Definitions:

Standpoint theory – one’s social position is often inversely related to one’s epistemic position

Brief Summary:

I. **Origins and Shortfalls of Standpoint Theory**

Classical epistemology has focused on the individual. Marx emphasized the importance of a cognizer’s class membership; however, this insight was largely coopted by a relativistic sociology of knowledge (and ignored in philosophical epistemology). Quine’s naturalized epistemology rekindled interest in the social aspect of epistemology. The true potential of social epistemology has been hampered by a mainstream conception of society that presupposes an inaccurately high “degree of consent and inclusion” (15). The role of power and oppression in shaping society is ignored, so the role these forces play in social epistemology remains underdeveloped.

II. **White Ignorance in Fiction and Non-Fiction**

Although the phenomena of white ignorance has not been taken seriously in academic philosophy, it is commonly addressed in “lay treatments.” For reasons of survival, Black people must often pay close attention to the general perspective of the dominant white group while concealing their own minds. (“Got one mind for white folks to see/Another for what I know is me.”) White ignorance is furthered by a kind of confirmation bias as seen in Melville’s *Benito Cereno*: “So unthinkable is the idea that the inferior blacks could have accomplished [the take-over of the slave ship] that Delano searches for every possible alternative explanation for the seemingly strange behavior of the imprisoned whites, no matter how far-fetched.”(19)

III. **The Goal and Ten Caveats**

Mills’s goal is to pin down “the idea of an ignorance, a non-knowing, that is not contingent, but in which race—white racism and/or white racial domination and their ramifications—plays a crucial causal role.”

Ten Caveats: 1) White ignorance is taken to be a social not biological shortcoming. 2) There is a distinction between *white ignorance* and general ignorance that occurs in a white person or population but that is not the result of race, white racism, or white racial domination. 3) Race can influence ignorance both directly and indirectly. Although this can complicate the identification of certain marginal cases of white ignorance, it “does

not undermine the import of more central cases” (21). 4) The cause of white ignorance can be either explicit racist beliefs (the narrator in *Benito Cereno*) or implicit due to the social suppression of the pertinent information. 5) Non-white people can also participate in white ignorance. 6) White ignorance can support some forms of Black ignorance. 7) White ignorance includes moral ignorance—“not merely ignorance of facts *with* moral implications but moral non-knowings, incorrect judgments about the rights and wrongs of moral situations themselves. 8) There are other forms of group-based ignorance (e.g. gender based forms) 9) White ignorance is not uniformly distributed across a white population. Class, gender, nationality, religion can influence the development of white ignorance in a group or individual. 10) The point of this project is normative; the goal is to reduce this particular form of ignorance and minimize the factors that give rise to group based ignorance more generally.

IV. How White Ignorance Works

White ignorance affects/is effected by several key components of cognition:

- perception – Perception is always also conceptual. The concepts drawn on are inherited and social in nature. Concepts that develop in a hierarchical and racist society will reflect the biases of the dominant group. All data will be interpreted through these racist concepts, so that even disconfirming data is filtered out or marginalized. **Example:** *Mercator projection world map (26)*
- conception – Concepts have a distinct role in sense-making, and are “linked by interlocking assumptions and background belief sets into certain complexes of ideation that by their very nature tend to put a certain interpretation on the world” (24). Inherited concepts that equate whiteness with full humanity and non-whiteness with some lesser status will affect the interpretation of all kinds of historical and contemporary situations. **Example:** *The categories of the “savage” and the “civilized” (26-27)*
- memory – The curation of social memory to exclude embarrassing or inconvenient events and social facts of the past obviously effect how we interpret the current situation. Memory is manage via state-sponsored forgetting (destruction of state archives), education (sanitized textbooks), community monuments and statuaries. **Examples:** *the move from racialized difference to color blindness (27-28); the holocaust of the Belgian Congo (29); downplaying American atrocities in the Indian wars and during slavery (30); Civil war monuments (30)*. Memory curation occurs at the individual level—“I worked to get where I am!” says every rich kid ever.
- testimony – white supremacy has suppressed the testimony of members of others groups through a) systematic dismissal **Example:** *German South-West Africa court testimony practices (32)* b) intimidation **Example:** *Suppression of the Tulsa race riot (32)* c) limited dissemination **Examples:** *reliance on only oral reports, small print runs, academic ghettoization (32)*.
- motivational group interest – white groups are invested in the racial status quo due to beneficial socioeconomic relations. There is a vested interest in perpetuated certain cognitive distortions that keep this system in place.

Note: These components all interact with each other, so this is merely an artificial conceptual isolation for the purposes of theoretical clarity.

SECTION TWO: to be completed by note taker during discussion

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Possible Applications:

Philosophy of Race

Epistemology- specifically conversations about ignorance

Intro Phil – sections are clearly demarcated

Philosophy of Mind

Complementary Texts/Resources:

Rebecca Kukla’s “Contingent Natures and Virtuous Knowers- Could Epistemology be Gendered?”

Sandra Harding’s Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader

Agnotology collection by Sullivan and Tuana

Quayshawn Spencer on race realism

Franz Fanon Wretched of the Earth, Black Skin White Masks

MLK Jr. Letter from Birmingham Jail

Fiction: Invisible Man, Melville, Ghost of King Leopold,

Historical revisionism- further examples, Texas textbooks, Naomi Wadler ignorance of police violence against children

DiAngelo’s White fragility, Eddo-Lodge “Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race” blog and book

Film: Let the Fire Burn about Philadelphia’s MOVE and police violence

Possible Class Activities:

Eliciting examples of white ignorance

Individual memory curation exercise- how have you been helped by your background to get where you are or know what you do?

Museum exercise- comparing narratives US History Museum, African American History Museum

Collective memory and memorialization- looking at popular memorials