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Critical white feminism interrogating privilege, whiteness, and antiracism in feminist theory

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CRITICAL WHITE FEMINISM: INTERROGATING PRIVILEGE,
WHITENESS, AND ANTIRACISM IN FEMINIST THEORY

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in Philosophy
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Abstract

It is vital that feminist theory and critical white studies be combined in order to form what I call *critical white feminism*. Both critical white studies and feminist studies are often limited in their ability to adequately address the complex interconnectivity of racial and gender privilege and oppression. In general, feminist scholarship produced by white feminists excludes and oppresses women of color and is therefore inadequate. I refer to this problem as white feminist racism and argue that white feminists are ignorant of the ways in which whiteness and privilege facilitate problematic theorizing. Unlike white feminist theories, the emerging field of critical white studies provides a foundation for exploring whiteness in a racist society. However, critical white theories often examine racism and whiteness without attention to gender, and are therefore inadequate, as well.

Consequently, another approach is necessary for the development of liberatory theories that sufficiently conceptualize social change. As a solution to the limitations of both feminist studies and critical white studies, I propose critical white feminism, which encourages white feminists to interrogate whiteness and privilege. The purpose of critical white feminism is to a) conceptualize an inclusive and transformative antiracist feminist framework and agenda, b) challenge white feminist racism and white feminist hegemony, c) encourage open and honest communication between feminists across differences, and d) facilitate feminist solidarity and mobilization.

Dedication

For my baby sisters

Mary Joanna Ansell, Madeline Reske,
Harley Ann Haas, and Scarlet McFadden.

You are the feminists of the future.

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Introduction

“I believe that by changing ourselves we can change the world”

-Gloria Anzaldúa, “La Prieta” (208)

Tejana Chicana feminist and poet Gloria Anzaldúa published these words in the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* in 1981.¹ Despite the fact that they were written thirty years ago, they are still noteworthy today, especially as they apply to contemporary feminism. Feminists desire a more equal society, and their agendas are dedicated to changing the world in order to achieve this goal. Revolutionary change, Anzaldúa suggests, begins with the self. It is my belief that white feminists, in particular, must take Anzaldúa’s advice by transforming themselves if they ever intend to transform the world. In general, white feminist theories are flawed because of a persistent absence of a critical and reflexive self.² Because the need for change is urgent, my intention is to explore this flaw and offer a solution. Therefore, I propose the creation of critical white feminism as a solution to problematic white feminist scholarship.

Feminist theory provides a foundation for analyzing the problem of women’s oppression with the intention of formulating viable solutions. In her essay, “Not By Degrees,” white feminist scholar Charlotte Bunch argues that “feminist theory relies on the assumption that it will

¹ The first edition of this text was published in 1981. The second edition, published in 1983, is the edition that I will refer to from this point on.

² I use the term “white feminist theory” to refer specifically to the ideas and scholarship of feminists who racially identify as white. This is opposed to “feminist theory” in general, which is not race-specific.

aid in the liberation of women” (17). Feminist theorists strive to provide a framework for understanding oppression, imagining liberation, inciting societal change, and achieving social justice. However, most feminist theory written by white middle-class women is unsuccessful in this mission of understanding the oppression of women and conceptualizing sufficient solutions. Beyond being unsuccessful, mainstream feminist theory is criticized for being problematic because of exclusive and oppressive behavior towards women of color, who especially have been at the forefront of these critiques.³ Furthermore, despite the tenacious criticisms of white feminism, the majority of white feminists continue to harm nonwhite women by failing to demonstrate concern and care for their needs. Those who challenge feminist theory argue that the dominant feminist discourse, specifically, the white feminist discourse, is overwhelmingly racially exclusive and ignorant of the oppression and liberation of women of color.

Therefore, if white feminist theory is to overcome its oppressive and exclusionary tendencies, it is vital that the discourse expand its analyses of women’s oppression to include interrogations of whiteness and privilege. I claim that the prevailing framework of white feminist theory has not focused on whiteness or white privilege in this way thus far.

The emerging field of critical white studies, on the other hand, has begun to address conceptions and implications of whiteness. Critical white scholars define whiteness in a variety of ways and continue to contest its meaning. I will explore these definitions and their implications more thoroughly, but whiteness should be understood here as an invisible and influential racial category, with implications of power, dominance, and normativity. Because the

³ My use of the word *mainstream* here is meant to denote those theories that are the most well-know, widely accepted, popular, and dominant both within academia and in popular culture.

causes and effects of whiteness are rarely explored, the work of critical white theorists is necessary for understanding the hidden mechanisms and dynamics of our racialized society. However, while critical white studies is extremely important, many of the examinations of whiteness made by critical white scholars are unsatisfactory because many of them fail to include gender in their analyses and have problematically theorized race without using a feminist lens. Thus, I argue that because of the failure to consider gender differences and women's experiences, critical white studies does not, overall, provide an adequate framework to thoroughly understand the complexity of whiteness.⁴

In order to more fully address intersecting axes of oppression and privilege and to overcome the problematic nature of white feminist theory, I propose the development of *critical white feminism*. Critical white feminism is a theoretical framework that combines critical white studies and feminist theory. This framework, as I will argue, enables white feminists to develop more inclusive and liberatory theories that successfully address women's oppression. In the following pages, I will more thoroughly describe my proposal of critical white feminism as a much-needed solution to the problem of racism in white feminist theory.

In Chapter 1, I begin by identifying the problem of white feminist racism, which I define as white feminists' disregard for nonwhite feminist issues. I explain how white feminist racism results in the exclusion of women of color in feminist thought, how it contributes to the oppression of nonwhite women, and how it negatively impacts feminist theory and action.⁵ In

⁴ Although several scholars do critically explore whiteness with a feminist lens, their infrequency signifies a trend to discount gendered experiences within the field. See chapter four for further analysis.

⁵ I use "people of color" and "nonwhite" synonymously. This is, in part, to emphasize the dominance of whites and the marginalization of people of color in relation to them. For a more extensive discussion of the term, see *The Racial Contract* by Charles W. Mills.

Chapter 2, I argue that the suggested solution to rectify this problem, which is the addition of women of color to the dialogue, is unsuccessful and problematic because it does not result in a transformation of white feminist thought. In Chapter 3, I assert that an interrogation of whiteness can facilitate an understanding of white feminist racism, and explore the manifestations of whiteness in society. In Chapter 4, I suggest that the emerging field of critical white studies can inform white feminists, but argue that critical white studies does not sufficiently address feminist issues. Finally, in Chapter 5, I propose and explore critical white feminism as a viable and necessary solution to white feminist racism.

My proposal for critical white feminist is not exhaustive. By no means do I cover all of the complexities and intricacies that deserve to be explored throughout this work. I am attempting to squeeze very broad concepts into a very narrow space. The reason that I cannot produce a comprehensive and thorough development of critical white feminism is due to limitations of time, space, and my own understanding.

Undoubtedly, there are issues that I either ignore entirely or mention briefly without elaboration. I do not, for example, analyze the many divergent views within feminist theory, such as feminist psychoanalysis and post-modern feminism, but instead give a general overview of feminist theory as a whole, while citing a few schools of thought. Furthermore, I do not address all of feminist thought's inadequacies. I am exploring one specific problem within feminist theory: white women's racism. And while this racism surely manifests itself in many different ways, depending on the context and the schools of feminist thought, I am not able to explore the particularities here. For instance, it would be impossible for me, here, to give a detailed interrogation of white feminist racism in transnational contexts. I focus on American feminism

without expanding on its global implications. Similarly, I do not explore all of the insufficiencies of critical white studies, but instead focus, in particular, on the lack of considerations of gender. Even the ‘specific’ and ‘particular’ topics that I do attempt to address are much too complex for comprehensive investigations.

Ultimately, my lack of comprehensiveness could be construed as problematic, especially because I critique others for exclusion and generalization. However, what I intend to do is open up a dialogue about these specificities. I am not attempting to fully develop critical white feminism here. Instead, I am arguing that critical white feminism must be developed. I perceive white feminist racism as an urgent flaw and I believe that it deserves consideration by white feminists. In this work, I do not expect to produce an inclusive and antiracist feminist theory, but I do hope to create a space where such a thing can flourish.

For decades, many brilliant feminists, both white and nonwhite, have been contemplating this problem, and nonetheless, racist tendencies within feminist theory persist. I therefore understand the implausibility of theorizing this issue perfectly and comprehensively here. However, I wish to build upon the existing ideas of my feminist foremothers in order to work towards a more inclusive and effective feminist framework, despite the imperfections that may be apparent. This is merely a starting point for critical white feminism.

I am urging white feminists to reconsider the framework in which they have been theorizing, because it is clear that this paradigm is not satisfactory. Specifically, I am hoping to expand the scope of feminist thought to critically consider whiteness and its privileges. Because this is my main goal, and because I am a white feminist myself, I am attempting to fully understand the implications of my own whiteness and my own privilege. Staying faithful to a

critical white feminist framework that I hope to initiate, I recognize that there is a great degree of privilege in my own theorizing that I am not aware of, which may cause me to be oblivious to my own shortcomings. Recognizing personal limitations and weaknesses is a fundamental requirement of critical white feminism, as is genuine introspection and self-analysis. Even when they intend to eradicate oppression, white feminists easily and unknowingly reproduce and perpetuate it. I am cognizant of my potential to succumb to this error; therefore, I encourage criticisms, corrections, and elaborations on this work from those who are able to see my insufficiencies more clearly than I. I hope that critical white feminism inspires others to do so, as well. Without an honest and open dialogue, there is no hope for a collaborative and successful feminist movement.

Finally, I find it necessary to give credit to those feminists from whom I have developed a critical white feminist consciousness. While the term “critical white feminism” is my own, the ideas that I present in this work are neither new nor original. In reality, feminists of color have been making these arguments for decades without recognition from white feminists. I hope to use the power and authority that I hold as a white person to reiterate their claims in hopes that white feminists will finally listen. It is with infinite debt and gratitude to those who I reference throughout this work that I formulate the following ideas.

Chapter I: The Problematics of White Feminist Theory

“From coast to coast, the feminist movement is racist

but that news is old and stale by now”

-doris davenport, “The Pathology of Racism” (85)

White feminist theorists are mostly unsuccessful in their mission of understanding the oppression of women and conceptualizing sufficient solutions. I attribute this problem, in part, to white feminist racism. Racism in the feminist movement was overwhelmingly prevalent in the past, as davenport described in 1983; however, it still exists today. In this chapter, I argue that both historically and contemporarily white feminist theorists exhibit racism in their scholarship by universalizing womanhood, ignoring differences between women, and employing a reductionist analysis of female oppression, all of which are problematic because they prevent feminist solidarity and community, and thus thwart social change.

As the main problem that I wish to address, white feminist racism can be defined as the disregard for women of color by white feminists. In this way, white feminists embody black philosopher Paul Taylor’s definition of racism as an “unethical disregard for people who belong to a particular race” (*Race* 33). Taylor defines “disregard” as the “withholding of respect, concern, goodwill, or care” (33). Using this definition, I assert that white feminists are racist in their theoretical discourse. In particular, white feminists are racist when they fail to notice the existence of women of color, fail to consider differences between women, fail to respect the contributions of women of color, fail to notice their suffering, fail to acknowledge the institutions

and social systems that make them suffer, fail to hear the suggestions of women of color, fail to listen to the critiques by women of color about white racism, fail to concern themselves with the liberation of women of color, fail to respect their boundaries, and fail to prioritize racism as a feminist issue. According to Taylor, all of these actions are racist if they are directed towards someone simply because of their racial or ethnic identity, despite whether or not they are intentional (34). Therefore, white feminist theorists exhibit racism in their scholarship by their failure to show respect, concern, goodwill, or care for women of color, and by their complacency in the omission of nonwhite women's voices in feminist thought.

First, many white feminists are racist because they theorize in ways that universalize womanhood.⁶ That is, white feminists frequently postulate that all women everywhere are invariably similar. When white feminists theorize about women's lives, experiences, and needs, they often generalize about all women by claiming to address the lives, experiences, and needs of all women; however, in reality, they often assume that their perspectives as white women are the same for all women. As a result, white feminists theorize only about white women, even while asserting that they are talking about all women. The universal woman that many white women refer to is, in fact, a white woman. Therefore, white feminists exclude women of color in their analyses. By universalizing white womanhood and failing to account for the needs of nonwhite feminist issues, white feminists fail to respect the concerns of women of color, thereby intentionally or unintentionally perpetuating racism. Evidence of such white feminist racism is

⁶ Some of the most popular historical examples include Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*.

found in nonwhite feminist critiques, the exclusion of women of color in foundational feminist texts, and the methodological roots of feminist research and practice.

To a substantial degree, women of color reject white feminism and critique the exclusionary white universalization of women, thus demonstrating its insufficiency. This schism is illustrated by the fact that other forms of feminism, such as Chicana, Asian, Indigenous, and Black feminism, emerged to account for the needs of women of color. These ethnically-specific schools of feminist thought address the exclusionary nature of white feminist theory. For example, Chicana feminists disconnected and distanced themselves from white feminists because their theories did not include the needs of Chicana women. Chicana feminist Marta Cotera argued in “Among the Feminists: Racist Classist Issues - 1976” that white women consistently displayed racist practices by, for example, presenting women’s history as an all-white history (215). As a result of white women’s disregard of Chicana women, especially white feminist historians in their historical publications, Chicana feminists could not align with white women. Cotera states, “Unfortunately, this has forced us to separatism in documenting history out of self-protection and need” (215). Chicana feminism had to separate itself from white feminism in order to avoid the harmful lack of care and concern that they experienced in white women’s universalized feminist histories, and in order to theorize about the realities of Chicana women.⁷ Other varieties of feminism, too, evolved partly because of the exclusion of women of color

⁷ See also “Chicana Feminism” by Anna NietoGomez.

within white feminist theory and the insistence of white feminists to universalize their experience as women.⁸

White feminist racism is also indicated by nonwhite women's critiques of white feminist theory, which demonstrate white feminists' tendency to universalize white womanhood within specific feminist texts. One such example is black feminist bell hooks' review of *The Feminine Mystique* by white feminist Betty Friedan. A critique of *The Feminist Mystique* is significant because it is considered a seminal feminist text in mainstream feminist thought, and thus is extremely influential for subsequent feminist theorizing. According to hooks in "Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory," Friedan's work is "still heralded as having paved the way for contemporary feminist movement" [sic] (33). Despite its instrumental contributions to today's feminism, this book was, in fact, only referring to a select group of women (33). As hooks argues, Friedan claims to describe the condition of *all* women in America, but in reality she only describes "the plight of a select group of college-educated, middle- and upper-class, married white women" (33). According to hooks, Friedan's decision to equate all women with this small privileged group of women exposes the racism, classism, and sexism in her scholarship because she disregards the realities of women who are not in this small group of women. Friedan, as shown by hooks' critique, by attempting to theorize about all women using the experiences of only a select few, fail to account for the needs of women of color.

Like many mainstream feminist texts, white feminist universalization can also be found in one of the primary means of feminist research and practice, called feminist standpoint, which

⁸ For Black feminism, see Patricia Hill Collin's *Black Feminist Thought* and Hull et al's *But Some Of Us Are Brave*. For Indigenous feminism, see Joyce Green's *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*

operates from the belief that women's lived experiences are a fundamental site of knowledge.⁹ While many feminists are informed by feminist standpoint theories, I refer to one in particular to represent how the widespread usage of this major theoretical framework results in problematic implications. Nancy Hartsock's argument in her 1997 publication "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism" provides an example of a white feminist who universalizes womanhood, specifically in her claims about women's experience. In her overall argument, Hartsock asserts that a feminist standpoint is necessary to provide "an important epistemological tool for understanding and opposing all forms of domination" (152). A theoretical viewpoint grounded in women's experience, according to Hartsock and others who use standpoint theory, is the starting point to conceptualize women's oppression.

However, Hartsock's argument is problematic because she lists several woman-specific experiences that, in her opinion, generate a feminist standpoint, such as childbirth and motherhood, which she calls "women's material life activity" (159). She states, "That this is indeed woman's experience is documented in both the theory and practice of the contemporary women's movement and needs no further development here" (158). With this statement, Hartsock generalizes women's experiences and, thus, exposes several inaccurate assumptions: a) that all women experience the same material activities; b) that all women experience these activities in the same way; and c) that the documentation of women's experiences has included all women, not just white women. Thus, she universalizes womanhood by asserting that there are common experiences that are shared identically by all women. Additionally, she fails to

⁹ See Abigail Brooks' "Feminist Standpoint Epistemology."

recognize that, because of a history of racist exclusion of nonwhite women within feminism, the experiences of women that have been documented in feminist theory and practice are mainly those of white middle-class women. Hence, her claim that “this is indeed woman’s experience” actually refers to a singular experience (read: white) that excludes a plurality of experiences (read: nonwhite) (158). Therefore, Hartsock is one example of a white feminist who promotes a universal conception of woman in her theorization and thereby disregards women of color. And, further, because this feminist standpoint is one of the primary methods of feminist research and theory, the universalization of white women’s experience in Hartsock’s work represents a larger methodological disregard for women of color in feminist theory.

What is more, Hartsock’s universalization of white womanhood ignores differences between women. By asserting the existence of a singular women’s experience, she ignores the diversity of women’s lives by denying the possibility that women of various races, classes, nationalities, and sexualities have divergent experiences and thus different world views. For instance, Hartsock notes motherhood as a woman-specific experience, but fails acknowledge that motherhood is, in fact, a racialized experience, meaning that women of different races and ethnicities embody motherhood in dissimilar ways (if at all).¹⁰ Due to white and nonwhite women’s divergent roles throughout history and currently, women become mothers, fill the role of mother, perceive their motherly responsibilities, and are perceived as mothers in a variety of ways.¹¹ Therefore, Hartsock’s application of feminist standpoint theory disregards this diversity by homogenizing experiences such as motherhood. Hartsock, too, by claiming that there is one

¹⁰ See Hazel V. Carby’s “White Woman Listen!” and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s “African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race.”

¹¹ See Angela Davis’ *Women, Race, and Class* for a discussion on white and black women’s divergent histories.

common women's experience, fails to recognize the diverse experiences across differences. Consequently, Hartsock displays white feminist racism by not recognizing the realities of nonwhite women's lives.

In sum, as demonstrated by Cotera, hooks, and Hartsock, the schools of thought that emerged in response to white feminist disregard, along with the universalization of white womanhood in influential feminist texts and the generalization of women's lived experiences in feminist methodology, overall, reveal the presence of white feminist racism in feminist theory. Furthermore, the universal approach which is deployed by many white feminists results in other problematic theoretical trends, such as a general disregard for differences between women, as demonstrated by Hartsock's work. This tendency, too, illustrates white feminist racism, bringing me to my next reason why white feminist theory is insufficient.

Second, as a result of universalized conceptions of white womanhood, white feminist theorists disregard differences between women. When white feminists theorize as if all women share the same experiences identically, they ignore the differences between white women and women of color. The refusal to acknowledge differences illustrates a lack of care and respect for the realities of diverse women's lives. To illustrate the connection between universal definitions of womanhood and the disregard for difference, as previously revealed by Hartsock's argument, I provide several additional examples from the scholarship of feminists of color.

White feminism's universal definition of woman and the resulting frequent failure to recognize difference is criticized widely by women of color. For example, Asian American feminist Esther Ngan-Ling Chow notes white feminists' failure to regard the differences between themselves and Asian American women. In "The Feminist Movement: Where Are All the Asian

American Women?” she argues that Asian American women are excluded in white feminism because the realities of Asian American lives are not included. Chow states that “Asian American women who are committed to fighting both sexism and racism feel that white feminists are not aware of or sympathetic to the differences in concerns and priorities of Asian American women” (371). In other words, white feminist theorists do not regard Asian American women, and do not facilitate an understanding of their specific experiences. Furthermore, they exhibit white feminist racism in their failure to respect the concerns, needs, and important issues in Asian American women’s lives.

Additionally, Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar, British feminist scholars of color, also describe the inadequacies of universalized white womanhood as a failure to recognize difference. In “Challenging Imperial Feminism,” published in 2001, Amos and Parmar state that, “white, mainstream feminist theory, be it from the socialist feminist or radical feminist perspective, does not speak to the experiences of Black women” (17).¹² Amos and Parmar argue here that no white feminist perspective exists thus that sufficiently includes women of color, despite the numerous schools thought. Because many white feminists only theorize about their race-specific experiences, nonwhite women are alienated from feminist theories and their experiences and needs are dismissed. According to these scholars, “many white feminists’ failure to acknowledge the differences between themselves and Black and Third World women has contributed to the predominantly Eurocentric and ethnocentric theories of women’s oppression” (20). As demonstrated by the scholarship of both Ngan-Ling Chow and Amos and Parmar, white women,

¹² Note that Amos and Parmar use the British usage of the term ‘Black women’ to describe all women of color, not just those of African descent.

in general, continuously refuse to explore the reality of nonwhite women's existence and therefore often fail to see how these realities differ from their own.

In short, many white feminists' refusal to regard difference is caused by their narrow focus on the experiences and needs of white women, their assumption that all women's experiences are similar to their own, and their determination to universalize all women as white. And, as Amos and Parmar assert, the ignorance of difference and subsequent white ethnocentrism in feminist thought is unacceptable. White feminists' failure to regard the differences between women results in the disregard for nonwhite women's oppression and the systems that facilitate that oppression. Because white feminists often deploy these tendencies in their scholarship, they consequently tend to utilize a reductionist approach, as well. That is, white feminists often reduce oppression to one or two fundamental causes, but fail to acknowledge racism as a cause, which is my next reason illustrating its inadequacy.

Third, white feminist theory, by and large, is racist because of its reductionist inclinations, which results from its universalization of white womanhood and disregard for differences between women. Many middle-class white theorists subscribe to reductionism to explain their one basis of oppression, which is their gender.¹³ White women, as members of the dominant race, are not oppressed by their racial identities. Similarly, middle-class women do not suffer from class oppression. It is easier for them, therefore, to use the reductionist approach because they are not oppressed on the basis of these identities. It is for this reason that white feminists often problematically claim that sexism is the fundamental cause of women's

¹³ See Linda Martín Alcoff's "What Should White People Do?" for examples and analysis of work by white feminists who argue that sexism is the most fundamental form of oppression, including Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology*, Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*, and Adrienne Rich's "Disloyal to Civilization."

oppression. However, singular oppression is not a luxury that other women can enjoy. In the article “White Woman Listen! Black feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood” (2000) black feminist Hazel V. Carby explains that unlike middle-class white women, women of color “can point to no single source for our oppression” (390). Women of color, working-class women, and those women victimized by other forms of oppression such as homophobia, transphobia, and ableism, cannot subscribe to reductionism. These women cannot identify sexism as their only oppression because they are oppressed by other systems as well. As Carby states, “When white feminists emphasize patriarchy alone, [women of color] want to redefine the term and make it a more complex concept” (390). The oppression that affects women of color is multidimensional; it cannot be explained in the one-dimensional sense that white women often employ. When white women use reductionist approaches in their scholarship, their theories are too simple to account for the complex historical realities of women of color.

While various schools of feminist thought reduce in different ways, the reductionism demonstrates an insufficiency of white feminist theory. Radical feminists, specifically, argue that patriarchy, a systemic social force that results in sexism, is the basic cause of all oppression. Socialist feminists, on the other hand, assert that oppression has two primary causes: sexism and classism.¹⁴ Although white socialist feminist perspectives incorporate classism into the conversation and examine the close relationship between class and gender, which is missing from many other feminist analyses, white socialist feminists often ignore the differences between

¹⁴ See Margaret Andersen and Dana Hysock’s *Thinking About Women* or Rosemarie Tong’s *Feminist Thought* for an overview of radical and socialist feminisms.

women and the racialization of class.¹⁵ So, within this paradigm, working-class and poor white women are included, but women of color from all class backgrounds are still oftentimes ignored. To illustrate, in “Transforming Socialist-Feminism: The Challenge of Racism” Kum-Kum Bhavnani, British feminist of South Asian descent, and Margaret Coulson critique several white socialist feminists¹⁶ by stating that “‘Woman’ continues to be defined as a universal category” (91-2). Their main argument here is that “an analysis of racism must be central to socialist-feminism” (98). The socialist feminist schools of thought, when theorized from a white perspective, fail to include race as a source of oppression in women’s lives, and are often reductionist, as well.

While it is not problematic to assert the existence of patriarchy or classism, it is problematic to reduce all women’s oppression to one or two sources. The reductionist approach is problematic because it does not address other systems of domination that cause other oppressions, such as racism. When sexism and/or classism are determined to be the primary source(s) of all women’s oppression, those women who are affected by other systems are excluded from the theoretical discourse. This approach excludes queer women who are affected by homophobia and heterosexism; it excludes differently-abled women who are affected by able-ism; and it excludes women of different ages who are impacted and oppressed by age-ism. Overall, reductionism, as a form of disregard, demonstrates white feminist racism. The

¹⁵ White socialist feminist Catharine MacKinnon is one such example. See Angela P. Harris’ “Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory” for a critique of MacKinnon.

¹⁶ In this example, Bhavnani and Coulson critique Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh’s book *The Anti-Social Family*.

insufficiency of reductionism is made evident by the writings of women of color and their responses to reductionist white feminist theory.

Some feminists of color critique specific works by white women for their racist and reductionist approaches. For example, mixed-race feminist Linda Martín Alcoff makes a claim that is similar to Carby's in her 1998 article "What Should White People Do?" In this work, Alcoff critiques white radical feminist Adrienne Rich for using reductionism in her widely-used 1979 paper entitled "Disloyal to Civilization." Alcoff states that, despite the fact that Rich is more perceptive to white women's racism than other radical feminists, "Rich continues to put sexism at the center of all women's lives" (267). Alcoff finds Rich's approach problematic because, in reality, sexism is not the most critical oppression for all women. Women of color, for example, may also desire to put racism at the center of their lives, alongside the sexism that they endure. Reliance on reductionism is another reason why white feminist theory is inadequate, exclusionary, and arguably racist.

In all schools of thought, white feminists tend to rank oppressions in their reductionist analyses. Latina feminist Cherríe Moraga describes in "La Güera" why feminist theory must, instead, take a broader approach to oppression. She states, "In this country, lesbianism is a poverty—as is being brown, as is being a woman, as is being just plain poor. The danger lies in the ranking of oppressions. *The danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of oppression*" [emphasis in original] (29). Despite the cautionary words of Moraga, white feminists do not heed her warning and continue to rank oppression when they adhere to reductionism by putting sexism at the center of all women's lives. Further, white feminists fail to acknowledge specific oppressions when they disregard the oppressions of women of color.

Overall, white feminist theorists oftentimes expose their racism by universalizing womanhood, disregarding differences, and, as a result, their use of reductionist approaches to oppression. Collectively, these problematic tendencies cause concerns that extend beyond the borders of theoretical scholarship. White feminist racism in scholarship, ultimately, obstructs community and solidarity in attempted feminist collaboration, which, inevitably, thwarts social change. This critical outcome is, therefore, the fourth reason I present to portray the problematics of white feminist theory.

Fourth, white feminist racism is inadequate because the aforementioned disregard for women of color hinders sisterhood, community, friendship, love, and solidarity among feminists. Because white feminism alienates women of color, feminist collaboration and organization is thwarted. When women cannot work together due to lack of respect, care, goodwill, and concern, a united movement for social change is impossible.

White feminists' racism in their scholarship is directly connected to their racism in activism. Because white feminists have a theoretical understanding of women's oppression and liberation that ignores women of color, correspondingly, they ignore women of color in their real-life attempts at liberation, as well. Menominee Native American feminist Chrystos writes about her personal experience as a Native American woman in 1980 and the feelings of rejection that she felt from white feminists, which shows how white feminists, at that time, exhibited racism towards women of color. In her poem "I Don't Understand Those Who Have Turned Away From Me" she speaks of feminism as a community where she sought comfort and acceptance but, after experience with white feminists in the movement, she realized that feminism was hypocritical and false. She states, "I still think that 98% of what happens – liberal

conservative or radical lesbian separatist is: bullshit” (68). Much of what Chrystos experienced was inauthentic and insincere. She articulates what she did find in feminism:

The lies, pretensions, the snobbery & cliquishness The racism which bled through every moment at every level The terrifying & useless struggle to be accepted The awful gossip, bitchiness, backbiting & jealousy The gross lack of love [sic] (69)¹⁷

Because of these atrocities she found in feminism, Chrystos could no longer stand to continue in the feminist struggle. Instead, she states, “I left the women’s movement utterly drained I have no interest in returning My dreams of crossing barriers to true understanding were false” [sic] (69). In the exploration of Chrystos’ experiences and others like it, it is clear just how alienating and destructive racism in feminist theory and practice is. It is because of these faults that, historically, cross-racial feminist organizing and action was challenging, and oftentimes stagnant and unfeasible.

The ability to organize is a powerful tool for social change. Many feminists claim that it is, in fact, necessary for women’s liberation. In her 1984 book *Sister Outsider*, black feminist Audre Lorde asserts, “Ignoring the differences of race between women and the implications of those differences presents the most serious threat to the mobilization of women’s joint power” (117). During this time period, because of many white feminists’ reluctance to include women of color, feminists were frequently unable to join forces and organize together across differences. Lorde also argues that, “Without community, there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression” (107). It is crucial that white

¹⁷ In order to maintain the creative integrity of the author’s writing, I have chosen to quote her directly, despite lack of punctuation.

feminists strive for enduring relationships between feminist communities in order to strengthen the feminist movement with women's joint power. According to Lorde, white women and women of color "need each other for support and connection" (69). In spite of the necessity for collaboration, Lorde argues that, at that time, feminists could not yet fully come together because they had not yet recognized each other (70). Therefore, white feminist racism thwarted the support, connection, community, and sisterhood needed for feminist mobilization, and, as will demonstrate, continues to thwart social change.

Community is inhibited by the problematic nature of mainstream feminist theory. Several other authors articulate this reality.¹⁸ Verna St. Denis, a Métis woman and Aboriginal scholar, argues in "Feminism is for Everybody: Aboriginal Women, Feminism and Diversity" (2007) that many Aboriginal women reject and dismiss feminism because of a general conception that "organizing women of the world against gender inequality under a banner of universal sisterhood both minimized and erased social, economic and political differences between vastly different positioned women, particularly Aboriginal women" (33). St. Denis refers to many Aboriginal and Indigenous women, both scholars and activists, who theorize about the irrelevancy of feminism to their lives, as well as its racist and colonial tendencies. She provides an overview of six reasons why Aboriginal women often critique feminism, including feminist tendencies to inaccurately universalize male domination; tendencies to impose colonial concepts, such as equality, onto Aboriginal societies; tendencies to reproduce white male patriarchal practices and traditions; and tendencies to focus on gender oppression (37-40). Because of the inadequacies of

¹⁸ See also bell hooks' argument that feminism is perceived as a threat by nonwhite women in "Revolutionary Feminism."

white feminist theory, which, as demonstrated by St. Denis, does not include Aboriginal women, many nonwhite women do not find feminist endeavors worthwhile. Therefore, white feminists cannot expect them to join a feminist movement.

It is important to note that many women of color are so deterred by racism within feminism that they refuse to identify as ‘feminists’ and instead choose to use different terminology.¹⁹ African American feminist historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham claims in “African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race” (1992) that, “indeed, some black women scholars adopt the term *womanist* instead of *feminist* in rejection of the gender-based dichotomies that lead to a false homogenizing of women” (273).²⁰ The fact that some women of color reject even the terminology associated with white feminism indicates the gravity of the discord between women across differences.

Scholarship by feminists of color repeatedly exposes the inadequacy of white feminist theory. Nonetheless, there has been little apparent recognition of this effort from white feminists. For example, hooks asserts in “Revolutionary Feminism” (1995) that, despite endless insistence from women of color, white women continue to “vehemently” resist the assertion that “an anti-racist agenda must be at the core of our movement if there is ever to be solidarity between women and effective coalitions that cross racial boundaries and unite us in common struggle” (101). The absence of antiracism is illustrated in most white feminist thought, which can be

¹⁹ See Angela Davis’ discussion of nonwhite women’s disassociation with feminism in the “Reflections on Race, Class, and Gender in the USA.” Davis notes, for example, that, in the 1970s, Toni Morrison denounced feminism as a white movement which was irrelevant to black women, thus refusing to adopt the title.

²⁰ The term “womanism” was coined by Alice Walker in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*.

demonstrated by the absence of solidarity and coalition between diverse women in feminist action.

Women of color and white women often do not align themselves because of the exclusion present in feminist theory. Carby claims that racism among white women “more than any other factor disrupts the recognition of common interests of sisterhood” (“White Woman” 401). Feminist organization and mobilization is complicated by the insufficiency of white feminist theory and the struggle for white women to correct this flaw. Racism within the movement largely prevents the sisterhood and community of feminists and obstructs feminist action.

The obstruction of community is not the only result of racism within feminist theory. Feminists of color have, furthermore, according to Amos and Parmar, “sought to define the boundaries of our sisterhood with white feminists” (“Challenging” 31). Because of the destructive racism displayed by many white feminists, women of color have oftentimes chosen to separate themselves from white feminism. However, white feminists fail to respect these boundaries.

Instead, in an attempt to organize across difference without a true consideration of difference, white feminists have commonly tried to force sisterhood and community onto nonwhite women without their consent.²¹ Mixed-race feminist Jennifer Lisa Vest argues in her 2008 article “The Internally Globalized Body as Instigator: Crossing Borders, Crossing Races” that, “Despite the seductive nature of claims by some modern Northern ‘global’ feminists that we ought to be able to identify women’s issues which transcend all racial, cultural, and national

²¹ See Hazel V. Carby’s “White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood.”

boundaries, little evidence exists that such a plan is viable or appealing to any but the most privileged women” (76). Vest asserts that the history of European colonization and global domination leave white folks feeling entitled to cross the boundaries of others. This colonial legacy renders white feminists blind to borders of any kind.

The ongoing efforts to ignore and invade nonwhite spaces are problematic. Furthermore, lack of respect for feminist boundaries displays white feminist racism. Vest claims, “Being without borders is not the ideal... The eradication of boundaries and borders is something only the powerful celebrate” (80). It is crucial that white feminists develop an awareness of borders and the importance of those borders, but this has not yet been realized. Overall, the exclusion and racism characterized by white feminist theory results in failed attempts at cross-racial organizing and coalition building, and thus causes ineffective and unsuccessful conceptualizations of women’s oppression and solutions.

In their racism towards women of color, white women oppress women. This oppression is antithetical to feminist goals of equality, inclusion, and justice. As earlier indicated, feminist theory seeks to end the oppression of women, yet demonstrates flawed attempts to visualize this goal. These flaws are not trivial, but indeed urgent, since they result in fragmented women’s activist movements. While women of color are oppressed by racism, white feminists are simultaneously perpetrators of racism. In this sense, white feminist theory can be defined as an oppressor of women of color. Their frequent reluctance to name themselves as oppressors signifies their compliance within this role. Many white feminists fail to name racism as a significant feminist concern and refuse to examine their own racism, making a unified feminist

movement difficult. Women across difference cannot effectively organize a viable women's movement if they are actively oppressing each other.

If a successful multiracial feminist activist movement is to become more attainable, white feminist theory must take a broader approach to oppression than it currently does. Feminist theory needs to acknowledge and respect other forms of oppression, not sexism alone, if it is to be fruitful. Black feminist Barbara Smith in the 1982 article "Racism and Women's Studies" clearly explains why feminist theory must evolve in order to be successful. She states:

The reason racism is a feminist issue is easily explained by the inherent definition of feminism. Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women- as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement.

(49)

Because many women are affected by oppressions other than sexism, feminist theory must be concerned with these issues, as well. Furthermore, because white feminist racism prevents social change, it is necessarily a feminist issue.

Overall, white feminists routinely fail to conceptualize women's lives and ultimately fail to theorize women's oppression and liberation. White feminist racism is evidenced by disregard for women of color. Feminist theories written by white feminists have, on the whole, excluded women of color and failed to account for their needs. As outlined above, this is due to universalized white womanhood, refusal to acknowledge differences among women, and reductionist tendencies that fail to recognize nonwhite women's oppressions. What is more,

because feminist theory is intrinsically linked to feminist action, unsuccessful feminist theory leads to unsuccessful feminist activity. Because of the exclusion and racism displayed by the majority of white feminists, women of color often cannot rely on white feminist theory, despite its supposed liberatory intentions for all women. Consequently, women of color and white women rarely create community, solidarity, and sisterhood. The inadequacies of most white feminist theory tend to thwart attempts to establish a successful and inclusive feminist movement. Therefore, white feminists cannot be satisfied with their current theoretical framework.

Chapter II: The Inclusion Illusion: A Solution That Does Not Solve

“What woman here is so enamoured of her own oppression
that she cannot see her heelprint upon another woman’s face?”

-Audre Lorde, “The Uses of Anger” (132)

As illustrated in chapter one, the established white feminist model does not satisfy all women’s needs, but only those of a select few. In this case, the women who are included in the feminist discourse are those who are identified as white, leaving women of color out of the theoretical framework that supposedly exists to liberate them. White feminist theory, therefore, fails to actualize its goals. Furthermore, white feminists display racist tendencies that obstruct feminist solidarity and social change. Overall, because most white feminists refuse to acknowledge and engage racism as a feminist problem, they have failed to transform feminist theory and failed to transform themselves.

While plenty of scholars, especially nonwhite feminists, have suggested solutions, white feminists have failed to eradicate white feminist racism. The most popular solution offered is that feminism must give more attention and priority to the experiences of racially and otherwise marginalized women. However, this “add-on” approach is an ineffective means of rectifying the problems I presented in chapter one. In this chapter, I will explain why the addition of nonwhite women in itself attempts to reform feminism, but fails to transform it. The add-on approach does not transform white feminist theory because it does not decenter white women from the theoretical discourse; further, it recenters white women, puts the responsibility of solving the

problem on women of color, and allows white women to evade responsibility for white feminist racism. For these reasons, the add-on approach results in an illusion of inclusion.

According to the proposed approach, feminist thought must incorporate nonwhite women's voices into feminist discourse. Scholars who offer this solution stress the need to investigate the experiences of women of color in feminist theory in order to more fully understand women's oppression. While the proposal for white feminists to regard a wider scope of perspectives is important and necessary because diverse voices can no longer be ignored; feminism cannot rely on this solution alone. Asian American feminist Mitsuye Yamada explains why the addition of marginalized voices is not enough in "Asian American Pacific American Women and Feminism," published in 1983. She claims:

Some of us feel that visibility through the feminist perspective is the only logical step for us. However, this path is fraught with problems which we are unable to solve among us, because in order to do so, we need the help and cooperation of the white feminist leaders, the women who coordinate programs, direct women's buildings, and edit women's publications throughout the country. (71)

Indeed, as demonstrated by Yamada, white feminists are needed to help change feminism.

If women of color are to be truly included in feminist theory and action, white feminists must broaden their vision to incorporate a diversity of women of color's opinions, histories, and experiences. Failure to do so results in a limited white perspective that is not representative of the real plurality in women's lives, which, in turn, perpetuates white feminist racism. However, while the add-on tactic is valuable, it is not a satisfying solution, as illustrated by numerous failed attempts to implement it in white feminist theory and action. I will discuss several reasons

why this solution, as it is currently constructed, should not and cannot exist as a sufficient solution to racism in white feminist theory.²²

The first reason that the addition of women of color to feminist theory is insufficient is because it does not result in a transformation of white feminist theory where white women are decentered and nonwhite women are demarginalized. Instead, white feminists have merely resorted to an add-and-stir type approach that does not take seriously the needs and issues of women of color. The add-on inclusion of women of color in feminist theory does not necessitate equal respect and concern for their perspectives. Although marginalized perspectives may be *included*, white feminists are not necessarily required to *listen* or *respect* them.

As evidence of the add-on solution's failure to transform white feminist thought, some scholars use the newest and most contemporary expressions of feminism, often described as "Third Wave" feminism, to demonstrate the continuation of disregard for women of color. Feminist scholar R. Claire Snyder argues in the 2008 article "What Is Third-Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay" that, despite important writings by feminists of color in the early 1980s like *This Bridge Called My Back* and *Sister Outsider*, Third Wave feminism continues to have a white, middle-class bias (181). Snyder comments on the 1999 text titled *The BUST Guide to the New Girl Order*, edited by Marcelle Karp and Debbie Stroller, which is often considered central to the Third Wave (182). Karp and Stroller maintain that the voices in *BUST* express "our own

²² An additional reason that I do not expand upon here, due to lack of space and time, is that nonwhite women have less access to academic feminist spaces than white women, and subsequently, it is unrealistic and impractical to assume that they are able to add to the conversation at the rate of white women. For more on this point, see "Have We Got a Theory for You!" by Maria C. Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman in *Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: The Big Questions* eds. Zack et al. (1998).

Girl Culture—that shared set of female experiences that includes Barbies and blowjobs, sexism and shoplifting, *Vogue* and vaginas” (qtd. in Snyder 181). While Karp and Stroller presume that there is a shared female experience, Snyder notes that several of these activities, such as playing with Barbie and reading *Vogue*, are more likely experienced by white girls than girls of color (181). Snyder’s analysis illustrates that white women’s experiences are still centered and nonwhite women’s experiences are still marginalized, indicating that the inclusion of women of color in feminist thought does not necessarily transform the discourse.

Chiefly, the add-on approach does not succeed in altering white feminist thought. Adding women of color does not automatically negate disregard and racism. Recalling Taylor’s definition, ‘regard’ requires respect, concern, goodwill, and care, but the add-on strategy does not require these actions of white feminists. Therefore, this solution does not genuinely resolve the white feminist tendency to be dismissive. In fact, white women did not change their racist tendencies with the implementation of this solution. The inclusion of women of color has instigated but a trivial change in feminism as opposed to a true transformation. Despite an actualization of this solution, evidence of racism and disregard persists in white feminist thought, signifying the inadequacy of this approach.

For instance, the contemporary terminology used to describe the history of feminist movements is arguably racist. Kimberly Springer explains in her 2002 article “Third Wave Black Feminism?” that the “wave” model excludes feminists of color by obscuring the role of race in feminist history. According to Springer, the fluctuations of feminist activity that the three waves represent recount the work of white women but fail to account for the endeavors of women of color (1061). In particular, she points out that if feminism’s historical time line actually included

the antislavery, antilynching, and suffrage work of African-American, along with “American Indian women’s gendered resistance,” the wave analogy would no longer remain relevant (1061-2). In addition, the term “Third Wave” itself dismisses race. Springer argues that women of color used the term in the late 1980s to describe “an antiracist, women-of-color-led feminism for the coming decade,” but that “Third Wave feminism” is now used to describe something quite different (1063). Third Wave feminism currently indicates a new generation of feminists who perpetuate many of the same exclusionary attitudes and actions as previous generations of white feminists, such as disregard for women of color in theory and praxis (1063). Ultimately, as Springer states, women of color are largely “drowned out by the wave” (1061). In present-day feminist vocabulary and historical memory, evidence of white feminist racism remains.

Several other feminists of color agree with the arguments put forth by Snyder and Springer. Bhavnani explains the failed attempt to implement this plan in the Introduction to *Feminism and Race* (2001) by asserting, “Even when women of colour were considered in mainstream feminist scholarship, it was argued that this inclusion was merely an ‘add-on’ and did not decentre white women in feminist scholarship and practices, and thus avoided engaging with the tricky question of how feminist endeavours might be transformed as a result of such inclusion” (4). Even though feminist thought created a space for previously silenced women to be included, it did not result in a transformation of feminist theory wherein white women and women of color are mutually regarded and respected. In fact, as Bhavnani asserts, white women remained in the spotlight of dominant discourse and mainstream feminist theory remained virtually the same, despite inclusion.

Typically, as recently argued by several feminists of color, disregard for women of color is still present in feminism, despite an inclusion of difference. Higginbotham points out in her 1992 article, “Notwithstanding a few notable exceptions, this new wave of feminist theorists finds little to say about race....White feminist scholars pay hardly more than lip service to race as they continue to analyze their own experience in ever more sophisticated forms” (“Women’s History” 251-252). Occasional exceptions to the otherwise pervasive inattention to race by no means constitute a meaningful transformation in white feminist thought. According to the observations of both Higginbotham and Bhavnani, alike, the ‘add-on’ theory has not caused white feminists to regard women of color with respect, care, concern, and goodwill the way that a truly satisfying solution should, even in the most recent Third Wave feminism.

In “Theorizing Difference from Multiracial Feminism” (1996) Latina feminist Maxine Baca Zinn and black feminist Bonnie Thornton Dill argue that, while difference is recognized, it is not considered an important theoretical topic by white feminists. According to Baca Zinn and Dill, the add-on approach has resulted in more of a “live and let live” attitude, wherein feminist theorists include a diversity of voices but do not concern themselves with their needs (323). Instead, white feminists continue to disregard women of color, but are able to claim that their presence signifies a substantial change in feminist theory and practice.

For an illustration of the inadequacy of the add-on approach and contemporary evidence of white feminist racism, one can look to white Third Wave scholarship. The book *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*, for example, written by white Third Wave feminists Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards in 2000, is often cited as a prominent text of the Third Wave. Baumgardner and Richards display use of the add-on approach by briefly mentioning

scholarship by women of color, but focusing mainly on the history and issues of white women. In one instance, while presenting a history of American feminism, they briefly note (all in one paragraph) that Native American societies were traditionally egalitarian and quote Paula Gunn Allen's 1986 book *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*, which asserts that oftentimes feminists problematically overlook the empowering women-centered history of Indigenous North America women (69-70).²³ Immediately, Baumgardner and Richards go on to state, "Now that we have acknowledged the 'red roots of white feminism,' in Gunn Allen's term, we can turn our attention to the 'Seneca Falls Five'" (70).²⁴ This statement suggests that paying momentary lip-service to nonwhite women's history is satisfactory because it is included, although it is not deemed as important as expanding on white women's history. The wording also implies that the authors mention Indigenous women only because they were obligated to acknowledge this historical reality as an inclusive add-on, not because they sincerely regard it as critically connected and essential to feminist history at large. Here, as indicated by their scholarship, Baumgardner and Richards consider women of color to be marginal and separate from feminist discourse, while they consider white women to be central to it. These influential Third Wave feminists use the add-on approach, which merely gives an illusion of inclusion without a transformation of their theoretical discourse that genuinely regards women of color.

²³ Interestingly, Gunn Allen's work does not appear in the Bibliography section of *Manifesta*, despite Baumgardner and Richards' list of Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary sources used (403-10).

²⁴ According to Baumgardner and Richards, the Seneca Falls Five were Jane Hunt, Mary Ann McClintock, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Martha Wright (70). Also, see Angela Davis' "Class and Race in the Early Women's Rights Campaign," which investigates the classist and racist reality of the Seneca Falls Convention and its impact on future potentiality of an integrated women's movement.

Additionally, white feminists routinely fail to decenter themselves with the add-on solution because it causes them to subscribe to an additive approach to women's oppression. Feminists of color urge white feminists to interrogate the interconnectivity of women's identities in order to challenge the universalizing of white womanhood and the exclusionary disregard of women of color by asserting that a more effective approach to oppression is viewing identities and oppression as interlocking. However, many white feminists subscribe to an additive approach because they theorize identities as if they are merely piled upon another without interaction. According to black feminist Patricia Hill Collins in her 1990 book *Black Feminist Thought*, additive approaches are those "starting with gender and then adding on other variables such as age, sexual orientation, race, social class, and religion" (222). Many white theorists, even when they do include nonwhite women in feminist theory, fail to integrate intersectional analyses into their understandings of oppression, and instead resort to an additive approach.

A consideration of major feminist organizations in America illustrates recent usage of the additive approach. For example, The National Organization for Women (NOW)'s website, provides a list of its "Top Priority Issues." Out of six issues, NOW identifies the latter three as "Promoting Diversity/ Ending Racism," "Lesbian Rights," and "Economic Justice" ("Key Issues"). While it is commendable that this organization considers these issues as the most important, the separate categorization of each topic indicates that NOW considers inequalities based on race, sexuality, and class as distinct concerns, detached from its other key issues, which are listed first, such as "Abortion Rights/ Reproductive Issues," "Violence Against Women," and "Constitutional Equality" ("Key Issues"). Here, NOW demonstrates its reliance on and promotion of the additive approach by listing general issues relating to women's rights and

gender equality, and then adding issues that relate to other identities. Furthermore, by listing their priority issues as separate concerns, NOW fails to critically explore the connections between them. However, Collins and others argue that this approach is problematic and misinterprets the reality of intersecting identities in women's lives (220).

According to many feminists of color, intersectional descriptions of social location, which conceptualize all aspects of women's identities as interlocking entities, are more accurate and effective than the additive approach used by women's organizations such as NOW.²⁵ Intersectionality recognizes that most people are not affected by just one singular form of oppression because of the wide range of identities that humans possess. In Bhavnani's 2000 article, "Organic Hybridity or Commodification of Hybridity? Comments on Mississippi Masala" she describes her own intersectionality by using the term "hybridity" (188). She asserts that "all of the elements of my identity are not neatly related to each other, but instead, act to irritate and collide with each other" (188). For example, a blind working-class MTF²⁶ transgender Korean lesbian is impacted by able-ism, classism, transphobia, sexism, racism, and homophobia; yet, it would be difficult to separate her identities and the oppression that they might cause her. Thus, feminists of color have expressed the need to analyze oppression using an approach that conceptualizes interlocking aspects of identity that result in a matrix or web of intermeshing oppressions. Intersectional analyses account for what black feminist Deborah K. King calls the "multiplicative" effects of various isms in our lives, in her 1995 article "Multiple

²⁵ Intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw. See her article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." Feminist scholars who advance similar arguments include Angela Y. Davis in *Women, Race and Class* and Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins in *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*, among others.

²⁶ Male to female.

Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology” indicating that each form of oppression interacts and intensifies the others (#). Intersectional approaches do not make the mistake of reducing the cause of oppression to one singular source (such as white supremacy *or* patriarchy *or* capitalism), but instead recognize that all of these systems of domination are inseparable, as are our identities.

In another example, Maxine Baca Zinn and other authors, in their 2000 book *Gender Through the Prism of Difference*, describe the concept of intersectionality by explaining that “gender is organized and experienced differently when refracted through the prism of sexual, racial/ethnic, social class, physical abilities, age, and national citizenship differences” (1). By using this metaphor of a prism, feminist analyses consider different identities interacting differently when they react with each other, like light refracting through a prism. Alternately, King describes this concept as “multiple jeopardy” (297). King states that this term describes an “interactive model” that “refers not only to several, simultaneous oppressions but to the multiplicative relationships among them as well” (297). So, while there are different names and metaphors used to describe the concept of intersectionality, all of them expose the interconnectivity of identities that make up interconnected and diverse oppressions.

For the most part, as noted earlier, white feminists tend to theorize without attention to this concept of intersectionality by instead reducing the source of women’s oppression to gender. Within the reductionist framework, radical feminists identify this system as patriarchy; however, patriarchy does not exist within a vacuum, but is, in fact, connected to all other systems of domination such as white supremacy, heterosexism, capitalism, and imperialism. Therefore, the intersectional approach to conceptualizing identities leads to a different understanding of

oppressive systems as interlocking, as well. The add-on approach to feminism does not require an exploration of the connections between patriarchy and other oppressive power structures, such as white supremacy and capitalism. Described by Collins as the “matrix of domination,” this approach “sees these distinctive systems of oppression as being part of one overarching structure of domination” (222). The matrix of domination is significant, states Collins, because it “fosters a paradigmatic shift of thinking inclusively about other oppressions” (225). It also “opens up possibilities for a both/and conceptual stance, one in which all groups possess varying amounts of penalty and privilege in one historically created system” (225). The use of the matrix accounts for the intersectionality in women’s lives in ways that the reductionist and additive approach of white feminist theory does not. The matrix of domination is useful in visualizing connections between patriarchy and other oppressive power structures. It is helpful in offering an alternate framework for the use of reductionist and additive approaches in white feminist thought. However, the add-on solution does not necessitate an understanding of intersectionality, and causes white feminists to use additive theoretical approaches.

The second reason that the add-on solution is ineffective is it not only fails to decenter white feminists, but actually recenters them. The add-on approach has resulted in an inclusion of difference, but not a *regard* for difference. The illusion of inclusion allows white feminists to maintain white feminist racism under the guise of diversity within the movement. Because more women of color have been included in feminist theory, white feminists are able to center themselves in feminist theory and praxis with the assumption that feminism has achieved diversity causing critical examinations of women’s plurality to be no unnecessary. Whereas white feminists may have complied with suggestions to incorporate more voices into the

dominant discourse, they often inaccurately assume that the problem of racism has been solved and the work is complete. In other words, adding nonwhite women to feminist scholarship subsequently allows Third Wave feminists to believe that feminism has overcome its flaws, achieved its goals, and consequently no longer needs to analyze racism within the movement since it is thought to have been eradicated.

In order to illuminate the manifestation of this attitude in Third Wave scholarship, it is useful to return to Baumgardner and Richards' *Manifesta* for further exploration. The authors claim that the Second Wave in the 1960s and 1970s "busted open the canon" for marginalized voices (76). They proclaim that "women of color have been publishing important feminist texts" that were "circulated widely at the start of the Second Wave" (77). Women of color were included in feminist discourse and, therefore, "The Third Wave was born into the diversity realized by the latter part of the Second Wave" (77). To summarize, since 'inclusion' had been 'realized' by the Second Wave, the Third Wave has already achieved 'diversity.' Baumgardner and Richards imply that the realization of an inclusive and antiracist agenda in feminist theory has *already* occurred. They make the assumption that contemporary feminism succeeded in dealing with the old problems such as racism within the movement. Baumgardner and Richards' recollection of feminist history exposes their attitude that racial equity has been accomplished.

Overall, white Third Wave feminist thought scarcely identifies racism as an unresolved feminist problem. Thus, white feminist issues are recentered because white feminists are not required to concern themselves with issues of race, thus allowing them to return to analyses that are void of attention to racial implications. As an example, in a presentation entitled "Manifesting Feminism" in 2010, Baumgardner and Richards stated that the Second Wave

focused on breaking barriers but the main focus of the Third Wave, they claim, is struggling to answer the question “what does it mean to be in the space?” since the barriers are now gone. Assuming that all women are now in positions that are free of barriers is clearly a subscription to the idea that neither racism nor sexism affects women any longer. Additionally, they state in their presentation that “We already have many African American scholars who are critiquing feminism and creating the philosophical and political format that Third Wave takes.” They claim that because there are nonwhite scholars who “already” critique feminist theory, the Third Wave no longer struggles with racism and exclusion.

Furthermore, with this statement, Baumgardner and Richards declare that the presence of African Americans in feminism substantiates a satisfactory inclusion of all women of color, which is problematic. First, this does not signify the inclusion of those women of color who are *not* African American, thus discounting the existence of many other people of color. This demonstrates Baumgardner and Richards’ failure to display concern for the exclusion of a multitude of nonwhite groups. Next, the assumption that the concerns of one racial group represent the concerns of *all* people of color is problematic because it lumps all nonwhites into a monolithic category. This universalization of nonwhites denies the differences between nonwhite groups, thereby disregarding the specificities and particularities in the lives of various people of color. In the article “Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy,” Indigenous feminist Andrea Smith argues that it is inadequate to frame “women/people of color” as a unified category (as Baumgardner and Richards do) because it “tends to presume that [nonwhite] communities have been impacted by white supremacy in the same way” and that racism operates in a singular fashion throughout different communities of color (66-7). However, this framework

is limited, as Smith explains, because, in reality, “white supremacy is constituted by separate and distinct, but still interrelated, logics” and thus racism is enacted in a plurality of ways (67). For example, she suggests that black, Native, and immigrant peoples are all uniquely situated and oppressed in American society because of the discrete logics of Slavery/Capitalism, Genocide/Capitalism, and Orientalism/War, respectively (67-8). Therefore, when white feminists such as Baumgardner and Richards use the add-on approach to regard the inclusion of one group of nonwhites as representative of the inclusion of all nonwhites, they are ignoring the multifaceted historical realities and contemporary experiences of people of color by misrepresenting them as a monolithic group.

As demonstrated by Third Wave feminists such as Baumgardner and Richards, the add-on solution in feminist theory recenters white feminists because they are able to analyze their positions white women without attention to the role of race, since they believe that the inclusion of diverse voices indicates that racism has been resolved. White feminist scholarship frequently maintains that the inclusion approach was some kind of panacea, solving all of the race-related problems in feminist thought. Many white feminists within the Third Wave, especially, theorize with the presumption that the racism and disregard that previously plagued feminism no longer exists. This, in turn, leads to white feminists’ denial of the current existence of racism, which allows them to return to racist patterns of disregarding women of color. Nonwhite feminist critiques of the add-on approach, along with an exploration of Third Wave feminist theory demonstrate the failure of the add-on approach and the recentering of white feminists.

Women of color are still regularly marginalized by white feminists, even though they have now been included in feminist discourse. The add-on approach has been used by white

feminists as a way to reassert their normativity and pathologize nonwhite women. As demonstrated by Baungardner, Richards, and other Third Wavers, white feminists still tend to universalize womanhood by generalizing about women's lives, but are now able to say that they no longer exclude women of color. Baca Zinn and Thorton Dill (1996) argue that "even in purporting to accept difference, feminist pluralism often created a social reality that reverts to universalizing women" ("Theorizing Difference" 323). These scholars argue that white women are still considered the norm, and thus are the center of feminist analysis. Women of color are simply considered different and deviant because they do not fit into the category of the universalized white woman that white feminists still utilize.

In this way, I argue, Third Wave feminism subscribes to and reinforces a post-racial ideology. In the 2004 *Encyclopedia of Race and Ethnic Studies*, Suki Ali writes that there is "no real agreement as to how best define" the term "post-race" (323). Some define post-race as a viewpoint that desires a termination of the existence of race, others use post-race to refer to the inevitability of racelessness in the future, and still others use post-race to illustrate a contemporary reality. Academic scholars such as Paul Gilroy advance what is called post-race theory by arguing for the eradication of race in pursuit of a future raceless society, which he does in his 2000 book *Against Race* and his 1998 article "Race Ends Here."²⁷ Conversely, David R. Roediger illustrates in *Colored White* (2002) that there was an explosion of popular media in the 1990s asserting that American society will soon become post-race in the 21st century (7). Roediger cites an article in *The New Republic* called "Race Over," a *New York Times* article

²⁷ See Anoop Nayak's "After Race: Ethnography, Race and Post-Race Theory" for further analysis of post-race theories.

titled “Race is Over,” and a special issue of *Time* called “The New Face of America,” which all argue that the increasing racial and ethnic diversity in America indicates an end of racial categorization (3-7).

However, many posit that post-race is neither a preferred ideal nor a forthcoming development, but an existing reality of contemporary society. Discussions surrounding the recent election of mixed-race President Barack Obama, especially, provide evidence of this claim. In the 2008 and 2009, numerous news sources published articles presenting the idea of a new American society that is post-race, post-racial, and post-racism. Some examples include “Does Obama’s Victory Signal the Dawn of Post-Race Politics?” in *UCLA Today*; “Race, Post Race” in *The LA Times*; “No Racism in Obama’s Post Race America” in the *Huffington Post*; and “A New, ‘Post Racial’ Political Era in America” on *NPR*. The abundance of attention to this topic in mainstream American culture demonstrates the popular idea that post-race is a contemporary reality, and it is this specific definition of the term that I use to connect mainstream ideology to white feminist thought.

President Obama’s campaign and election was significant because this event suggests that idea that a person of African descent becoming President of the United States is evidence of racial equality. In this sense, post-race advances the notion that issues of race are no longer a problem in contemporary American society. In the 2008 article “Race Will Survive the Obama Phenomenon,” Roediger argues:

we hear often that race is almost spent as a social force in the United States, eliminated by symbolic advances, demographic changes, and private choices, if not by structural

transformations or political struggles. Nowhere is that argument more forcefully, or more contradictorily, made than in analyses of Barack Obama's campaign for president. (B6) Put simply, in accordance with popular post-racial attitudes, Obama's achievement proves that black and brown people can achieve anything. Because there is person of color in the White House, Americans somehow believe that racism no longer exists. Arguably, this idea is similar to my earlier assertion of the illusion of inclusion in feminist thought, whereby the addition of women of color in feminist scholarship leads a number of feminists to believe that racism has ended.

The post-race assertion is that people of color were oppressed in the past, but that racial oppression, discrimination, and subjugation are presently nonexistent. The post-racial framework constructs racism as passé and advances the untrue idea that one's race is no longer a substantial factor in one's life. Furthermore, according to the post-racial framework, since race is no longer an issue, whites do not have to concern themselves with it and can go back to concentrating on white issues, thus, recentering whiteness. Despite their inaccuracies, post-race theories are present in both mainstream thought and Third Wave feminist thought.²⁸

However, the election of a nonwhite president has not illustrated the eradication of racism in America. In fact, I argue, it has intensified racism because it no longer is seen as a social force. White antiracist scholar, Tim Wise, also investigates post-racialism and the change in societal ideas about race. In his 2010 book entitled *Colorblind: The Rise of Post-Racial Politics and the Retreat from Racial Equity*, Wise explores the consequences of President Obama's

²⁸ See also Cherrie Moraga's article "What's Race Gotta Do With It- November 2008" for her perception of the post-racial attitude during Obama's election.

victory. He claims that “far from serving as evidence that racism had been defeated, [Obama's election] might signal a mere shape-shifting of racism, from Racism 1.0 to Racism 2.0” (15).

Wise denies the allegations that racism is extinct, but instead believes that racism manifests itself in new and different ways.

According to the post-race paradigm, we live in a world that has abolished differential treatment of peoples based on race and, therefore, everyone is equal and should be treated as such. Consequently, American society has recently subscribed to the rhetoric of ‘colorblindness’ and ‘race-neutrality,’ alleging that, as a post-race nation, we should be blind to skin color and neutral on issues of race. Wise critiques the rise of post-racial liberalism, the current rhetoric of racial transcendence, race- neutral public policy, and argues “colorblindness not only fails to remedy discrimination and racial inequity, it can actually make both problems worse” (18). In his 2008 book *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son*, Wise, referring to the ideas of Julian Bond, asserts that colorblindness is ineffective because “to not see color is... to not see the *consequences* of color” (21). While race continues to be a significant issue that is indeed an enduring social force in American life, post-racial thought insists that color has no consequence and should be ignored.

Post-race ideologies also have significant political implications. In her 1992 book, black legal scholar Patricia Williams argues in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor*, that post-racial ideology is especially pervasive in American law. Williams asserts that because of the conception that America has moved past race, colorblindness and race-neutrality have manifested themselves in law and legal writing. Instead of addressing racism, Williams states, “Race-neutrality in law has become the presumed antidote for race bias in real

life” (48). Like Wise, Williams asserts that racism still exists, but in different forms. Racist acts are not considered racism “even if it happens only to, or to large numbers of, black people; as long as it's done with a smile, a handshake and a shrug; as long as the phantom-word 'race' is never used" (49). Therefore, contemporary legal theory develops with a disregard for contemporary racial implications. If we subscribe to Paul Taylor’s theory of disregard as a form of racism, then the denial of racism exhibited by legal theory is in itself racist.

Like mainstream thought and legal discourse, feminism, particularly white feminists of the Third Wave, subscribes to the idea that racial inequality is a thing of the past, as illustrated by examples of Third Wave scholarship and its criticisms. The act of incorporating women of color in feminist scholarship as a solution to the divisive racism within feminist theory has facilitated feminist post-racism, in a sense. Because white feminists attempted to meet the goal of adding nonwhite women to the discourse, they believe that racial disparity no longer divides feminist theory and activism. Therefore, the post-racial attitudes that resulted in the add-on approach signify its inadequacy as a substantial solution.

The problem with the add-on approach, the illusion of inclusion, and post-race feminism is that white feminists have not interacted with the addition of diverse women in feminism. María Lugones’ argument in “On the Logic of Pluralist Feminism” (1991) denotes the difference between the add-on approach used by white feminists and the goal of white feminist transformation. Lugones states that white feminists previously ignored difference, but “Now white women recognize the problem of difference. Whether they *recognize* difference is another matter” (38). White women’s mere acknowledgement that there is difference between women is unsatisfactory. Instead, white women must alter their feminist ideology in response to the

knowledge of difference. Lugones' asserts that white women must take an *interactive* recognition. She states, "If the acknowledgement is noninteractive, the knowledge that I want to see in feminist theorizing is missing" (38). Despite the addition of women of color, many white women still do not recognize how the lives of nonwhite women affect their own. Taking an interactive approach to difference would require white feminists to change themselves and their theoretical discourse as a result of their recognition with the plurality of women's voices made possible by inclusion in feminism.

The third reason that the add-on solution is problematic is that it further oppresses women of color. The overarching problem here is that white feminists disregard nonwhite women; therefore, as the active agents in this case, white women are the perpetrators of rendering women of color invisible and absent. Even so, with this solution, white women do not take responsibility for solving the problem that they themselves sustain. Instead, women of color are the ones who are held accountable for rectifying the problem. This particular solution asks women of color to insert themselves into feminist discussions so that white feminists can become cognizant of nonwhite women's existence and so that racism is no longer a defining characteristic in white feminist ideology. Women of color are responsible for bridging gaps in white feminist theory for the sake of white feminists' understanding. In essence, the burden and responsibility of solving racism is placed on feminists of color.

In 1984, Audre Lorde explained why this approach was unacceptable. She asserted that this solution was, in reality, an oppressive approach that reproduces the tactics of male supremacy (*Sister Outsider* 109). When white feminists use this approach, either in history or in present day, they are simply employing an extension of 'the master's tools.' She states:

Women of today are still being called upon to stretch across the gap of male ignorance and to educate men as to our existence and our needs. This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master's concerns. Now we hear that it is the task of women of Color to educate white women- in the face of tremendous resistance- as to our existence, our difference, our relative roles in our joint survival. This is a diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought. (109)

As demonstrated by Lorde, tasking women of color with educating white women of their racism is a distracting, inefficient, and unwanted request. Three decades after Lorde spoke out about this problem, it still persists.

One example is a 2004 keynote presentation of Mary McRae, a black woman, who addresses an audience of white women in "How Do I Talk To You, My White Sister?" McRae explains that white women generally do not speak about racism because they do not consider it to be their problem, while women of color are expected to (4). In discussions, the topic of race stimulates anger and rage for women of color, but white women are often scared, intimidated, or threatened by these expressions and respond by shutting down, which results in a "breakdown in communication" (1). Consequently, women of color bear the burden of educating white women about race "without getting too angry" (4). She states that they are:

expected to find a way to contain our anger and discuss this topic in a way that allows White women to hear it but not to experience the pain of our anger and frustration around it. (4)

McRae explains that she often feels misunderstood, frustrated, rejected, and discouraged after such encounters. And yet, she is repeatedly asked to speak at conferences sponsored by white

women (1). She suggests that “Perhaps women of color...take on the anger about race in the service of White women. Perhaps our backs are the bridges [getting] walked over again and again—we perceive the burden of dealing with race as one that is always on our backs” (4). Accordingly, as demonstrated by Lorde and McRae, this approach harms women of color by leaving them with the responsibility to deal with racism.

Ellen Pence is one white feminist who agrees with Lorde and McRae and articulates the detriments of this solution. In her 1982 essay “Racism—A White Issue,” Pence argues that, as the title implies, racism is a problem that whites perpetuate and, consequently, a problem that whites must tackle. She uses the historical example of slavery to illustrate this point by stating that slavery is a white history. She then, to a white audience, asks the profound question: “Why do we call upon those who have suffered the injustice of that history to explain it to us?” (46). Pence’s example highlights the absurdity and insensitivity of such requests.

Moreover, as a solution to racist exclusion within white feminist theory, white feminists request that women of color join the conversation so that feminist theory become more diverse and inclusive and so that white feminists are able to better comprehend the experiences of nonwhite women and understand the oppression that they face. Consequently, women of color are harmed in this process. When the oppressor asks the oppressed to explain the oppression that she has caused, the oppressed is potentially re-traumatized as she re-lives and recounts the traumatic experience at the oppressor’s request. Beyond the emotional tax that this causes, it is also important to consider the time and energy that it requires. The add-on approach requires that nonwhite women spend their time and energy serving the needs and wants of white women instead of focusing on their own needs and wants. Certainly, the implications of this approach

are troublesome. The idea that women of color must do the work of solving racism within feminist theory is a harmful notion propagated by white feminist theory. The fact that this solution intensifies the oppression of women of color indicates that this is, indeed, an insufficient and problematic solution. In its current form, because of the reasons I have just presented, this suggestion should not be implemented.

Yet, the fourth flaw of the add-on solution, and arguably the most important, is that it lacks a critical analysis of the underlying problem: white feminist racism. That is, it allows white feminists to avoid a critical self-reflexive examination that would thoroughly explore the issue of their ongoing disregard for women of color. In “The Pathology of Racism: A Conversation with Third World Women” (1983) black feminist doris davenport asserts that, “our limitations in dealing with this issue is that we stay on the surface. We challenge the symptoms of the disease while neglecting the causes” (85). In this statement, davenport likens the oppression of women of color within feminism to a disease and argues that white women’s racism is the cause of the disease. With this approach alone, white feminist scholars who theorize in oppressive ways are able to ignore and deny their own participation in and contribution to racist power structures. Inviting marginalized women to fill the voids in feminist theory and then assuming that racism within feminist theory has been successfully eradicated is merely an evasion of responsibility. Ultimately, it allows white feminists to avoid an investigation of their own racism and avoid responsibility in rectifying the underlying problem.

This argument is not new, as it has been professed by countless feminists of color. As Carby asserts, “it is not a simple question of [women of color’s] absence, consequently the task is not one of rendering their visibility” (“White Woman” 390). The visibility of marginalized

women is not enough to exist as a sufficient solution. Beyond inclusion, Carby argues that white women must thoroughly interrogate racism. She states, “Black feminists have been, and still are, demanding that the existence of racism must be acknowledged as a structuring feature of our relationships with white women. Both feminist theory and practice have to recognize that white women stand in a power relation as oppressors of black women” (“White Woman” 390). White women have failed to comprehend that their theories and actions are oppressive to nonwhite women. Similar to the way that white feminists continually disregard and disrespect the boundaries of feminists of color, they continually avoid taking responsibility for racism because they deny their own racism and its existence at large. If not evaded, the act of taking responsibility would require white feminists to examine their own racial identities and oppressive behaviors, as well as those identities and behaviors in society.

Likewise, Pence argues that this evasion of responsibility represents the resistance of white feminists to adjust behavior and recognize racism. She asserts, “white women ignored the need to reexamine the traditional white rigid methods of decision making, priority setting, and implementing decisions” (“Racism” 46). It is common, she explains, for white women to recognize the oppression of women of color without ever understanding that they too are involved in racism. The resistance of white women in considering their own racist attitudes and actions, however, is not surpassed with the mere inclusion of nonwhite women in feminist canon.

White feminists’ failure to transform white feminist racism is demonstrated by their incorrect application of intersexuality. I argue white feminists have misinterpreted the suggestion by feminists of color to analyze identities as interconnected entities because they do not consider both privilege and oppression, and only regard intersectionality in terms of

interlocking oppressions. If white women were to apply intersectionality to their own lives, they would realize that they are affected by both oppression and privilege: that is, they are oppressed by their gender, but privileged by their race.

In sum, the add-on approach as a means of inclusion of women of color used to eradicate white feminist racism is inadequate and problematic for several reasons. First, this solution does not decenter white feminists, it fails to engender concern and respect for those voices that have been added, and causes white feminists to use an additive theoretical approach. Also, the implementation of this solution demonstrates that it does not substantially alter white feminist thought. Second, it actually recenters white feminists because it causes contemporary white feminist theory, especially Third Wave rhetoric, to assume that the problem within feminism has already been acknowledged, and, therefore, solved. Third, this solution oppresses women of color by asking them to ‘fix’ white feminist disregard and racism and puts the burden of responsibility onto women of color. Fourth, this solution does not require white feminists to critically examine their intersectional privilege and oppression. For these reasons, the adding and including approach is clearly not adequate and should not be considered a viable solution for alleviating white feminist racism.

White feminists must take an active role in exploring not only the consequences of racism in the lives of women of color, but also the causes of racism. The causation can be found in their own lives. Without an interrogation of their own racial identities, there will be no substantial change within feminist theory and practice. If white feminists were to truly regard the voices of women of color, they would hear that they should explore the interconnectivity of women’s identities. As women, this means that they should critically interrogate how all aspects of

themselves intersect. As white women, they cannot ignore their racial identities. Therefore, it is the exploration of whiteness, I argue, that we find more effective strategies for improving feminist theories. Otherwise, feminists are fruitlessly employing a solution that does not solve the problem.

Chapter III: Whiteness Ignored/ Whiteness Explored

“White is nothing. White is everything”

– Chris J. Cuomo, “King of Whiteness” (59)

As demonstrated, white feminist scholarship commonly exhibits racial exclusivity, racist assumptions, and oppressive attitudes that ignore the experiences, contributions, and realities of women of color, which results in a failure to achieve feminist goals. I’ve also illustrated the inadequacy of the add-on approach that white feminists have attempted to use thus far to resolve this problem, and the subsequent perpetuation of white feminist racism. Therefore, white feminist scholars must approach the pressing issue of nonwhite women’s disregard in a different manner. Instead, white feminist theory must undertake this endeavor by examining the implications of white feminist racism.

I argue that the bastion of white feminist racism can be attributed to the fact that, in general, white feminists experience racial obliviousness wherein they are not conscious of whiteness, which results from white normativity and dominance in society, the social construction of whiteness, white privilege, and an epistemology of ignorance. For this reason, in part, white feminist scholars have not comprehensively prioritized the interrogation of whiteness as a significant feminist issue. Because whiteness and racial privilege are ignored in feminist theory, a multitude of complications arise, many of which were explored in chapters one and two.

Because whiteness is a contributing factor to the urgent problem of white feminist racism and is a concept that most white feminists do not consider, I find it necessary to examine here. Therefore, in this chapter, I will give an overview of how whiteness manifests itself in society, the social implications of whiteness, and its role in oppression. Whiteness can be defined, generally, as a socially constructed racial category for those of Anglo descent that is invisible to a great extent, yet holds power in that it is the dominant race with privileges attached. To clarify whiteness and its many nuances, I will discuss its social construction; its systemic influence; its normativity, invisibility, and dominance; and its attached privileges. I explore whiteness in general society in this chapter because I believe it to be a beneficial gateway for exposing the negative influence of whiteness on white feminist thought.

To begin, race is a socially constructed concept and whiteness, as a racial category, is also socially constructed.²⁹ In other words, racial categories are not defined by any innate characteristic, but instead created by social attitudes. Therefore, race is not a biological, essential, or factual entity; alternately, race is a notion fabricated by cultural and societal conceptions. The social construction of race, therefore, categorizes people based on physical characteristics and bodily appearance, such as skin, hair, and eye color, body shape, and hair texture. Consequently, the social construction of race also establishes the white, or Caucasian, race based on a set of physical characteristics (such as fair hair and skin) that are typically associated with Anglo peoples. Evidence of the social construction of race is provided by the malleability of racial

²⁹ For more information about the concept of race, see *Thinking About Race* 2nd edition by Naomi Zack (2006) and *Racial Formations in the United States* by Michael Omi and Howard Winant.

classifications over time, as illustrated by the history of immigration in America the reracializations of groups such as the Irish and Italians.³⁰

Whiteness is embodied by whites, constructed by society to serve as a racial identifier. But a more in-depth investigation of whiteness reveals that it is more than simply a racial marker. The implications of the social construction of race suggest that race is constituted as a dichotomy between whites and nonwhites. The notion of race exists as a necessary distinction between these two separate racial categories. Within the racial binary, whiteness and brownness are codependent concepts. They are necessarily inter-reliant, needing each other to define themselves against the other.

Society constructs the interconnected racial binary in order to enforce white dominance. White law professor Martha R. Mahoney argues in “Racial Construction and Women as Differentiated Actors” (1997) that race is “a concept having no natural truth, no truth separate from historical development, and possibly no truth comprehensible apart from domination” (305). She claims that race as a socially constructed concept is partly about culture and partly about skin color, but “insistently about domination” (305). In reality, then, the idea of race, while socially constructed to differentiate physically-different groups, can be conceptualized as a hierarchy of power between groups.

Within the racial hierarchy, white is constructed as the superior group and nonwhite is constructed as the inferior group, composed of all people of color who are not identified as white. The racial power dynamic of white vs. nonwhite exists as a justification for white

³⁰ See *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* by Matthew Frye Jacobson for a detailed history of racial categories.

domination and nonwhite subordination. Black scholar Michael Eric Dyson argues in his 2006 work “Hubris and Hue: White Pride” that many people of color see whiteness as existing for one purpose only: “to contain, control, and at times, destroy black identity and pride” (49). Dyson goes on to state, “Ironically, the fate of whiteness was tied to blackness; the dominant group was symbolically dependent on a culture it sought to dominate” (49). Therefore, as interrelated constructions, the dominance of whiteness is sustained only by the corollary oppression of nonwhites as a subordinate group.

Whiteness is constructed, then, as a dominating force in society. It is useful to use the term ‘white supremacy’ to signify the system that enforces and maintains the racial hierarchy. Black philosopher Charles W. Mills defines white supremacy in *The Racial Contract* (1997) as “the system of domination by which white people have historically ruled over and, in certain important ways, continue to rule over nonwhite people” (1-2). The system of white supremacy upholds the superiority of whiteness in several ways, including white normativity and invisibility.

The dominance of whiteness is maintained because white racial identity is normalized. That is, whites regard themselves and their experiences as common, standard, and conventional. All things related to whiteness, including culture, experiences, and beliefs are considered by whites to be normal. They believe that their race and its implications need not be investigated because there is nothing about whiteness to investigate.

The normalization of whiteness causes whites to assume that the experiences specific to white people are normal, natural, and neutral. In “The Social Construction of Whiteness” Mahoney states, “What we ourselves do and think does not appear to us to be ‘culture,’ but

rather appears to be the definition of what is normal and neutral, like the air we breathe, transparent from our perspective” (331). All things white, therefore, are constructed and defined as ordinary and superior, and whites perceive themselves as normal and superior, as well.

Additionally, normalized whiteness leads to the assumption that white experiences are not racial. Because whiteness is considered the norm, white is not perceived as a race the way that others, such as Black and Asian, are. Race and its implications are only considered when in reference to nonwhites. The experiences of people of color are raced, yet the experiences of white people are not.

The experiences of people of color are considered to be racialized, therefore causing nonwhite cultural experiences to be ‘othered.’ According to Mahoney “White use of the term ‘race’ is based on definitions of the ‘other’ which imply a normal, neutral, objective, culture-less stance towards whiteness” (305). In comparison to the experiences of people of color, who are defined by their race, whites assume that their experiences are not racial, not cultural, and essentially normal. Thus, whiteness is not only normalized, it is also centralized whereas brownness is marginalized. Hence, in society, whiteness is constructed as the ‘norm’ and brownness is constructed as the ‘other,’ which are codependent concepts. Consequently, whiteness is normal, dominant, and centered, whereas brownness is ‘othered,’ subordinate, and marginalized. The center’s existence, by definition, relies upon the margin.

Because it is the norm and the center, whiteness goes unseen and unnoticed, yet the race of nonwhites, as the marginalized ‘other’ are visible. While white is indeed a racial category, the normalization of whiteness causes those in this category to be oblivious to it. Whites are generally unaware that whiteness, as a racial concept, exists. To reiterate Mahoney, whiteness is

similar to the air we breathe in that we are surrounded by it, but are not conscious of its presence. Barbara J. Flagg calls white people's ignorance of whiteness the "*transparency phenomenon*" in her article "'Was Blind, but Now I See': White Race Consciousness and the Requirement of Discriminatory Intent" (629). She asserts, "The most striking characteristic of whites' consciousness of whiteness is that most of the time we don't have any" (629). Whiteness is transparent to whites, causing them to be unconscious of their own racial identities.

Similar to the comparison of whiteness to air, Tim Wise argues that to 'be white' does not mean anything to whites, much like water does not mean anything to a fish. Wise claims that the question "What does it mean to be white?" is not often asked because it is mostly unnecessary (*White Like Me 2*). Whites suppose that this question is pointless because, as Wise says, "Being a member of the majority, the dominant group, allows one to ignore how race shapes one's life" (2). Whiteness is unspoken and taken for granted as an inconsequential aspect of one's life. As an identity that is assumed to have no influence or significance to the lives of white people, whiteness is overlooked.

The invisibility of whiteness, therefore, allows the dominance of whiteness and the system of white supremacy to go unnoticed and unquestioned. Whiteness contains power, largely without resistance because it is normalized and transparent, and, as the dominant and invisible culture, uses its power and authority to define the terms and conditions of race. When the dominance of whiteness remains uncontested and unchallenged, it is able to covertly produce and maintain hegemonic ideologies not only about race, but every aspect of society.

White ideologies are hegemonic because they are dominant, authoritative, and pervasive. While whites believe that whiteness is normal and inconsequential, in reality, whiteness is

responsible for creating a hegemony that creates a white-centered worldview. Ruth Frankenberg explains that there are significant implications and influences of whiteness. She asserts in “White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness” that “Fundamentally a relational category, whiteness does have content inasmuch as it generates norms, ways of understanding history, ways of thinking about self and other, and even ways of thinking about the notion of culture itself” (633). Whiteness provides a framework for viewing the world, and because it is socially constructed to exist as a source of dominance, white understandings become universal understandings, causing a white norm and white hegemony.

Mainly, white hegemony reinforces whiteness as the normal and superior group, causing whiteness to be the standard or background that we use as a comparison, much like the control group in a research study. Normalized whiteness is “the dominant template of identity” according to Dyson (47). Further, Dyson argues, “White ways of speaking, thinking, and acting are the unerring standard of human achievement” (47). Whiteness, as the prototype of humankind, is valued, whereas brownness is devalued because it is seen as a deviation from the model identity. The consequences of whiteness permeate and, in fact, structure society, even while they go largely unnoticed and unspoken. Mills’ *The Racial Contract*, for example, argues that whiteness has shaped institutions, economics, politics, morals, and spaces, both in America and worldwide. Particularly, white supremacy reasserts white dominance and, thus, nonwhite inferiority, through hegemonic ideologies.

Furthermore, as a framework and lens for viewing the world, whiteness is one determinant that structures how society at large perceives reality. Wise argues that whiteness as the dominant perspective is able to become “*perspectivism*,” which is “the elevation of the

majority viewpoint to the status of unquestioned and unquestionable truth” (*White Like Me* 60). As the producer of ‘truth,’ white dominance is able to create ideas that empower whiteness and disempower otherness. The hegemony of whiteness is therefore a system of power based on the stealthy maintenance and control of race and racial inequality. Hence, whiteness can be defined as a systemic arrangement of racist oppression, upholding the power of white supremacy and the hierarchical construction of racial categories.

Government and law, especially, are influenced by the white hegemony. The transparency of whiteness to the white consciousness has a major impact on law-making and legal practice. Flagg states, “Transparency often is the mechanism through which white decisionmakers who disavow white supremacy impose white norms” (“Was Blind” 629). She goes on to argue that “when government imposes transparently white norms it participates actively in the maintenance of white supremacy” (630). Because whiteness creates a dominant worldview that whites do not see, it is possible for whites to support white supremacy without their awareness simply by acting in ways that they perceive as normal and neutral. These actions, however normal and neutral they are assumed to be, are in fact racialized because they are guided by whiteness and white norms. Further, when white perspectives are taken as normal perspectives, they are used as the standard for everyone to follow, even though they do not account for nonwhite perspectives. Evidently, the invisibility, dominance, and hegemony of whiteness have significant consequences, ranging from individual perceptions to social attitudes to governmental sanctions.

Thus, white normativity results in the invisibility of whiteness and leads to whites’ unconsciousness of whiteness. In turn, whites (and those in positions of power, especially)

implement white norms on society unknowingly, causing a white hegemonic framework and the universalization of white truths. White hegemony, subsequently, upholds white supremacy through its authoritative perspectivism and the dominance of whiteness. It is in this cyclical manner that whiteness sustains white supremacy.

Furthermore, the normativity and invisibility of whiteness facilitates racism. Constructed as universal truths through perspectivism, white norms are imposed on society in general. The standards for all people, then, are determined by whiteness. Whereas whites are regarded in this paradigm, nonwhites are disregarded, and, as we know, disregard is an implicit form of racism. As an implicit process, all of this happens as though whiteness were not involved. So, similar to the invisibility of whiteness, the racialized structure of society goes unrecognized and white supremacy operates covertly, allowing whites to act in racist ways unknowingly.

How, though, do whites act in racist ways without knowing it? Whites perpetuate racism and maintain the system of white supremacy through ignorance, along with moral and cognitive dysfunctions, which allow white people to think and act in oppressive ways while they believe that they are, in fact, thinking and acting in fair and reasonable ways. For whites, being ignorant of reality allows them to deny the existence of white supremacy and overlook racism. Mills explains some of the specific mechanisms and thinking errors that cause whites to remain ignorant and justify the exploitation of people of color. Mills argues that whites live in an “invented delusional world, a racial fantasyland” where they “*misinterpret the world*” and “see the world wrongly” (*The Racial Contract* 18). In other words, whites’ perceptions are not always consistent with reality.

As a result, whites both believe in and perpetuate “white mythologies” (Mills 18). Therefore, in a racial hierarchy where white perspectives are considered authority, frequently, whites are taught lies about reality, trust in those lies, consider them to be universal Truths, and then disseminate those lies onto others as knowledge. Mills asserts that constructions of whiteness are rooted in “*an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance*” (18); in other words, whiteness is necessitated by distorted comprehensions, backwards understandings, and (strange as it sounds) a knowledge that is defined by a lack of knowledge. Basically, the racialized structure of our society conditions whites to be ignorant of reality, and especially racial realities.. In “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” white feminist Peggy McIntosh describes her personal experience as a white woman and notes that “My schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person or as a participant in a damaged culture.” (188). McIntosh believes that whites are carefully taught not to recognize implications of race.

This happens, in part, for example, because white hegemonic ideologies disseminate a distorted version of reality through conceptions of history. Untrue accounts of history are advanced by white authorities through such avenues as media and public education. In normalized version of history, white people are generally depicted as benevolent heroes, despite the violent reality of their responsibility of slavery, domination, and colonization; people of color, on the other hand, are barely, if at all, regarded as active agents in American history. White feminist author Inga Muscio provides a useful summary of American notions of history in *Autobiography of a Blue-Eyed Devil* when she states, “At its very, very, very best, U.S. history is an unimaginative and superficial saga, with a beginning, middle, and end, as told by the victors

of history's present telling" (13). History, then, is a fine example of what Mills calls a "white mythology" or "fantasy," which advances a falsified version of (white) history and, ultimately, perpetuates white ignorance.

Whites remain ignorant because they suffer from both psychological dysfunction and moral distortions that allows them to perpetuate racism. According to Mills, "white *misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception on matters related to race* are among the most pervasive mental phenomena of the past few hundred years" [emphasis in original] (19). The psychological errors that render whites incognizant of racial realities allow them to act in immoral (racist and oppressive) ways while imaging that they are upstanding citizens.

So, in addition to cognitive functioning, whiteness also shapes white morality and moral concern. Mills argues that white morality is distorted because of a "*racialized moral psychology*" [emphasis in original] (93). He claims:

Whites will...act in racist ways *while* thinking of themselves as acting morally. In other words, they will experience genuine cognitive difficulties in recognizing certain behavior patterns as racist, so that quite apart from questions of motivation and bad faith they will be morally handicapped simply from the conceptual point of view in seeing and doing the right thing. [emphasis in original] (93)

Because of many whites' stunted cognition, they struggle to accurately comprehend the reality of their world, which allows most of them to function without guilt and deny responsibility for racial oppression. Without these mechanisms, white people would be able to cognitively understand that racism is immoral, although many whites surely do but often experience feelings

of guilt upon realization of racial realities. Thus, for the most part, the racial hierarchy has created a partitioned moral concern in which whites are allowed the capacity to have empathy for other whites, but nonwhites are excluded from the racialized boundaries of moral values.

White ignorance is a way for whites to act in racist ways without knowing, and therefore, is a necessary white supremacist tool used for racial domination. As Mills argues, it is not that whites are living in denial by chance. Accordingly, white racial incognizance and distorted morality are intentional and racial ignorance towards racial realities is deliberate, used as a way to justify treating nonwhites as inferior. Taking a historical approach, Mills claims that whites suffer from cognitive and moral dysfunctions that are tied to a history of colonialism. In fact, he argues that psychological dissonance is “required for conquest, colonization, and enslavement” (19). If whites are conditioned to believe that they are superior and all others are inferior, whites can morally allow themselves to exploit people of color, both historically and contemporarily.

Subsequently, whites are oppressive and racist without their realization. Dysfunctional cognizance and morality, while existing within individuals on a personal level, has widespread influences on dominant thought processes making it consequently systematic, as well. Therefore, the system of white supremacy continues functioning under the radar because white people (those in the dominant and powerful group) are unconscious to the fact that it even exists.

It is not only Mills who describes the phenomenon of white incognizance and its effect on systemic racism. Joyce E. King describes the racist tendencies of many whites as “a form of racism that tacitly accepts dominant white norms and privileges,” which she calls “dysconscious racism,” in her aptly titled article “Dysconscious Racism: Ideology, Identity, and Miseducation” (128). King explains that whites are not completely *unconscious* of racism; that is, they don’t

have a complete *absence* of racial consciousness. Instead, whites have an impaired or distorted conscious in that they are uncritical when it comes to racial matters and social inequity.

Dysconscious racism, therefore, might be described as the opposite of a critical consciousness that challenges “culturally sanctioned assumptions, myths, and beliefs” regarding race (128).

King argues, like Wise and others, that dysconscious racism is a new manifestation and expression of racism, shifted and transformed in a post-civil rights era (128).

Similar to Patricia Williams’ demonstration of the detriments of post-racial beliefs in law, as presented in chapter two, Flagg also discusses the racialized implications of law, this time referring to the systemic consequences of whiteness and white supremacy as illustrated by white dysconscious racism. Flagg argues that race-neutrality in law causes a new manifestation of discriminatory racism. According to Flagg, white norms and the transparency of whiteness causes “a unique form of unconscious discrimination” (630). Discriminatory intent is a contestable issue, Flagg argues, and views on intent are highly racialized. She states, “White people tend to view intent as an essential element of racial harm; nonwhites do not” (630). Whites generally are largely concerned with defining racist actions by the “motives or intentions of the perpetrator,” while people of color are less likely to care whether there was specific intention to be purposefully racist (630). Flagg notes that this displays whites’ complacency in the racial status quo.

Subsequently, subscription to race-neutrality and inclination towards the discriminatory intent rule demonstrate whites’ complacency in maintaining white supremacy as a dominating system of power in society. The idea of post-racism intensifies racism because of the denial of racial implications. We can see manifestations of white ignorance in dysconscious racism,

unconscious discrimination, and dysfunctional morality and cognition that whites display towards people of color, all the while proclaiming a non-racist stance by subscribing to colorblind and post-racial ideologies.

While it may seem as though whites are disadvantaged by ignorance, psychological dysfunction, and moral distortion, on the contrary, whites receive immeasurable benefits simply because of their whiteness. Therefore, another consequence of whiteness is the systematic conferment of privilege given to whites. Racial privilege, which can be described as the advantages and benefits given to whites, proves to be one of the central components of whiteness. While racism is easier to identify in society (similar to the race of the nonwhite ‘other’), privilege is not as visible (similar to the white racial category). Like whiteness itself, white privilege is unnoticed by those who receive it, yet is one of the normalized aspects of society that creates and maintains a racial hierarchy. Correspondingly, privilege and oppression are reliant concepts; however, white privilege is not as readily discussed as its opposite.

McIntosh describes white privilege as a corollary aspect of racism. She asserts, “As a white person, I realized that I had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage” (“White Privilege” 188). Similarly, white privilege, as defined by Wise, is “the flipside of discrimination against persons of color” (*White Like Me* xi). Wise also makes the comparison between the “psychic tax of color in this culture and the psychic subsidy that is whiteness” (54). In this sense, oppression might be viewed as a tax, something that is taken away from someone, while privilege can be seen as a subsidy, or something that is given to someone.

McIntosh goes on to provide a more detailed definition of privilege, which she likens to an invisible knapsack. She describes white privilege as:

an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks. (188)

While white individuals are socialized to not think about race and are often incognizant of their racial identity, whiteness bestows upon them many unearned benefits and opportunities that people of color do not receive.

Racial privilege comes in many different forms and the advantages of whiteness are manifold. Wise explains that white identities allow whites to have a sense of legitimacy and belonging. Whites are privileged in that they rarely, if ever, have to “prove ourselves deserving of our presence” (Wise 3). White privileges include opportunity, access, authority, and comfort. Moreover, as Wise explains:

These privileges have both material components, such as better job opportunities, better schooling, and better housing availability, as well as psychological components, not the least of which is simply having one less thing to constantly worry about during the day. To be white is to be free of the daily burden of constantly having to disprove negative stereotypes. (xi)

Racial privilege affords whites physical, social, economic, and emotional advantages. Overall, white experiences are characterized largely by the privileges that they receive.

For example, white privilege allows whites to feel the comfort of belonging to the racial group that is considered normal. The consequences of white normativity facilitate this privilege because whites who internalize the norms and schemas of whites do not suffer, but nonwhites who internalize white normativity are negatively affected by it. While many people of color actively and vehemently reject whiteness and its supposed superiority and normativity, others subscribe to it. White supremacy is powerful enough to charm even those who are its victims.

There are several avenues through which whiteness pervades nonwhite cognition and morality. Dyson contends that the dominance of whiteness causes people of color (he refers to blacks in particular) to believe the alleged myth of white superiority. In turn, they believe the corollary allegation that blackness or brownness is inferior, despite its evidence on their own skin.

Dyson states:

perhaps the greatest damage of white pride flares in the black psyche when black folk spurn self-respect and sadly embrace a seductive self-loathing. White pride is most effective when it finds expression in black voices. (54)

In general, whiteness privileges whites with a sense of pride and superiority that, by the same token, disadvantages nonwhites with a sense of inferiority. As argued by Dyson, the idea that ‘whiteness is better’ is manifested in nonwhite minds when racism is internalized. As an example, he cites the adage “white water is wetter” to denote the common conception of white superiority apparent even today (54). As this example demonstrates, white normativity privileges whites because they receive societal messages that their race is normal and superior, while nonwhites internalize messages that they are deviant and inferior.

Like whiteness, privilege is unseen by those who possess it, and white privilege is one of the social realities that whites are unconscious of. Stephanie M. Wildman and Adrienne D. Davis state in “Making Systems of Privilege Visible” that “Privilege is not visible to its holder; it is merely there, a part of the world, a way of life, simply the way things are” (316). Thus, white privilege is also subject to the transparency phenomenon, unrecognized by whites as a norm, or considered a universal reality of life.

One specific component of white privilege is the ability to ignore race and its implications, which is also connected to the idea of dysconscious racism. Trina Grillo and Stephanie M. Wildman in “Obscuring the Importance of Race: The Implication of Making Comparisons between Racism and Sexism (or Other Isms)” argue that ignoring race and its resulting privilege or oppression is in itself a privilege. They state:

To people of color, who are the victims of racism/white supremacy, race is a filter through which they see the world. Whites do not look at the world through this filter of racial awareness, even though they also constitute a race. This privilege to ignore their race gives whites a societal advantage distinct from any received from the existence of discriminatory racism. (45)

Beyond the fact that whites do not experience discrimination on the basis of their race, whites are advantaged because they are socialized to be ignorant of racial matters. Whiteness provides the societal advantage of emotional and psychological comfort to not worry or think about racism.

Furthermore, the disregard for racism and racial matters also constitutes as racism; thus, white privilege, and the privilege to ignore race facilitates white racism. As South Asian transnational feminist Chandra Mohanty states in “‘Under Western Eyes’ Revisited: Feminist

Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles,” “privilege nurtures blindness” (79). Basically, white privilege causes an ignorance of privilege. If privilege nurtures ignorance, ignorance fosters disregard, and disregard necessitates racism, then it can be reasoned that privilege maintains racism. And, as illustrated up to this point, it is not only this logic that demonstrates the racism of those with racial privilege.

Ultimately, whiteness is powerful and pervasive, yet invisible. Racial categories are social constructions, which means that they are not real, but nevertheless have real life implications. As the dominant identity in a racial hierarchy, white identities are normalized and white ideas are hegemonic. Despite the racialized organization of our society, whites are inhibited by cognitive and moral dysfunctions that result in ignorance of white supremacy’s oppressive consequences. Consequently, the system of white supremacy privileges whites and oppresses nonwhites. Because of its transparency, along with the benefits it affords to those in power, whiteness is unnoticed and unopposed by those who remain ignorant and unconscious of its oppressive influence.

The effects of whiteness are personal, cultural, and structural. Especially when using Frankenberg’s definition of whiteness as a framework for understanding the world, whiteness can clearly be understood as a systemic phenomenon. White supremacy, as a system of domination that perpetuates racism, is upheld by the dominance and invisibility of whiteness. Consequently, if whiteness was challenged, white supremacy would be challenged as well. However, whiteness remains ignored by whites in both mainstream culture and feminist scholarship. The negligence of whiteness results in grave consequences, such as the perpetuation of racial subjugation, oppression, and domination. Primarily, leaving white culture intact and

unexamined upholds white supremacy by allowing hegemonic ideologies to remain unquestioned. An exploration of whiteness exposes many of its hidden intricacies and covert manifestations in society. As a necessary component of racism, understanding whiteness can greatly inform the causes and solutions for not only mainstream racism, but white feminist racism, as well.

Feminist thought is a product of society, written and produced by and about those who exist within power systems. Therefore, feminist theory is formulated in the context of not only a patriarchal society, but a white supremacist society that simultaneously creates and is created by whiteness. Overall, whiteness remains mostly unchallenged, especially within mainstream feminist theory. But because white hegemony and supremacy are systemic in nature, they influence every aspect of society.

As demonstrated, feminism is not free from racist influence. On the contrary, white feminist thought is characterized by racist influence and white dominance. To highlight this pervasive tendency within mainstream feminism, it is useful to note Amos and Parmar's appropriate term "white feminist supremacy" ("Challenging" 20). Two major flaws of mainstream feminist theory are its assumption that whiteness has no significance in women's lives and the reluctance to critically interrogate whiteness. These two insufficiencies are a clear indication of the reality of white feminist supremacy. For the most part, because it rarely challenges whiteness, white feminist theory follows the societal pattern of ignoring and remaining complacent with white cultural dominance.

However, white feminists can unlearn racism, overcome white ignorance, and develop an ability to produce inclusive feminist theories. To make this possible, it is vital for them to

recognize, comprehend, and analyze whiteness, privilege, and white supremacy. To be inclusive and overcome conscious or unconscious racist tendencies, white feminists must become aware of the privileges that they receive on the basis of their whiteness, and understand how their tacit participation in a system of privilege and oppression, in fact, perpetuates oppressive white supremacist systems of racism.

Chapter IV: Critical White Studies: (Mis)Informing Feminist Theory

“When race politics are the issue, it is one of the rare moments
when white men prick up their ears to hear what black men have to say.

No one wants to interrupt those moments of interracial
homo-social patriarchal bonding to hear women speak”

-bell hooks, “Introduction: Race Talk” (2)

As displayed in the last chapter, whiteness is an important concept that deserves attention because of its significant influence on society. In feminist theory, an interrogation of whiteness can yield an understanding of white feminist racism and white women’s involvement in racist structures. Because whiteness has *not* been sufficiently explored in feminist thought, white feminists disregard their participation and complacency within the system of white supremacy. Despite the transparency of whiteness and the contemporary post-racial climate that encourages and facilitates racial silence, some scholars have been disrupting this silence by analyzing whiteness through the discourse of critical white studies, or whiteness studies. Therefore, I assert that critical white studies can potentially inform white feminist thought. However, while critical white studies provides a model for interrogating whiteness that is valuable to feminism, I argue that it is not a sufficient framework to understand the intersectional nature of women’s oppression.

Critical white studies is valuable because scholars in this field examine white identities and the transparencies of whiteness. In the introduction of *Critical White Studies: Looking*

Behind the Mirror, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic define critical white studies as “an emerging body of scholarship that analyzes what it means to be white” (xvii). They contend that critical white studies, as the next step in critical race theory, focuses on understanding race, racism, power, and society (xviii). As opposed to other critical interrogations of inequality that focus on the results of oppression, critical white studies focuses on whiteness as the cause of racial oppression. As an emerging field, only recently have scholars begun to contribute vital insight to this discourse.

One problem is that the critical white framework lacks a feminist lens. Many scholars who address racism and whiteness do so without attention to the implications of gender. Critical white studies seeks to investigate whiteness, but does not account for its intersections with gender, class, and/or other identities. Further, while many feminists have contributed to critical white studies, the discourse tends to be male-dominated and androcentric in its analyses. In this chapter, I provide several examples of recent critical white scholarship and dissect them in order to illustrate the problematic framework to which they subscribe. Through my investigations, I hope to display some reasons why critical white studies is not satisfactory in its interrogation of oppression, and thus, why feminism cannot apply these theories as they currently stand.

Specifically, critical white studies regularly reduces the cause of oppression to white supremacy. Like white feminist theory’s subscription to the reductionist approach by viewing patriarchy as the root of all oppression, reductionism in critical white studies is problematic and insufficient. Racial oppression is, without a doubt, a severe and widespread form of domination; yet, reductionist theories are inadequate to fully address the matrices of domination that account for the intersectionality in women’s lives.

For example, while Charles Mills is not necessarily identified as a critical white theorist, he unmistakably displays a profound and thorough exploration of the consequences of whiteness in his *Racial Contract*. Many critical white theorists (including Ricky Lee Allen, Zeus Leonardo, and David S. Owen who I will shortly investigate here) are informed by his work. Because of the important contributions of Mills ideas to my own conceptualizations of whiteness and the great deal that he informed this work, both directly and indirectly, I feel that it is necessary to dissect his analysis here. It is important to note that despite his immense influence on critical white studies, Mills takes a reductionist approach to oppression, as well.

To begin, Mills blatantly denies that other aspects of one's identity, such as gender, are as significant as one's race. According to Mills, white supremacy is "the most important political system of recent global history" as well as "the basic political system that has shaped the world" (1). In Mills' view, racism is the fundamental form of domination and implies that all other forms are simply secondary. Mills analysis of the social contract shows that it is a misleading account of society because it ignores the realities of racism, but I find his approach to be insufficient because of his desire to present a reductionist analysis of race.

Mills briefly mentions gender and alludes to patriarchy, but only acknowledges it as a separate and distinct system from white supremacy. In the acknowledgment section he states, "My focus on race in this book should not be taken to imply that I do not recognize the reality of gender as another system of domination" (xi). In the introduction he claims that his inspiration came from Carole Pateman's *The Sexual Contract*, but that the use of his book is "somewhat different" (6). By stating that gender is "another" and "different" system, Mills admits that he is using not only a reductionist analysis, but an additive analysis of oppression as well. He denies

that oppressions are interlocking or intersecting, but instead asserts that they work as separate entities. *The Racial Contract* does not combine the two analyses, and instead reduces all oppression to race. Mills attempts to ignore multilayered oppressions and instead present race as the central factor in societal organization, which is exclusive and inadequate to those affected by other identities.

While Mills alleges that race is the primary source of oppression, he acknowledges that it is possible that gender *might* contribute to oppression as well. However, he does not describe the two as interlocking. Instead, he implies that gender may be added onto his analyses of race as a separate and less significant matter. Recalling the insufficiency of additive and reductionist analyses in feminism, I argue that Mills' reductionism and additivism is problematic as well. Moreover, Mills' approach does not take into account the way that racism affects men and women in different ways. *The Racial Contract* is unconvincing in this regard because it does not proficiently speak to the specific experiences of women of color, and therefore does not speak to all people of color.

Theorists specific to the field of critical white studies demonstrate similar flaws in their scholarship. For example, Ricky Lee Allen resorts to reductionism in his article "Whiteness and Critical Pedagogy." Here, Allen expands upon W. E. B. Du Bois' critique of Marxist thought for its racial exclusion. Allen's argument is that critical pedagogy (a Marxist inspired movement) is problematic because it is "normalized around a discourse that sees class as the principal determinant of social and political life" (121). Basically, Allen critiques critical pedagogy for its reduction to class.

However, Allen then subscribes to a similarly problematic reductionism. He asks, “What would critical pedagogy look like if it had been founded upon the belief that white supremacy, not capitalism, is the central problem of humankind?” (122). It is clear that by claiming there is a “principal determinant” or “central problem,” whether it be race or class, Allen fails to see the connection between systems. Instead, he asserts a fundamental and essential source of oppression. Additionally, he completely disregards the influence of patriarchy as a system of power. Without attention to gender oppression, Allen’s approach to critical white studies is useless as an effective application to feminist theory.

Zeus Leonardo, another critical white studies scholar, conveys reductionist tendencies as well. In “The Color of Supremacy: Beyond the Discourse of ‘White Privilege,’” Leonardo suggests that white supremacy is the primary oppressor. He states, “whites as a racial group secure supremacy in almost all facets of social life” (140). While this is not untrue, Leonardo’s fault is exposed when he alludes that race is more oppressive than other identities. He reveals this assumption when he asserts, “race is an organizing principle that cuts across class, gender, and other imaginable social identities” (140). If Leonardo took an intersectional approach, he would argue that race, class, gender, and other social identities cut across each other as equally powerful organizational systems. Instead, he falls into the all too common trap of reductionism, a way of thinking that is limiting and oppressive in its own right.

As Mills, Allen, and Leonardo show, critical white scholars do not always value the significance of gender and other identities. David S. Owen provides an even more obvious example than the aforementioned authors in his 2007 article “Towards a Critical Theory of Whiteness.” In this article, Owen displays blatant disregard for diverse identities. Although he

indicates his intention of aiding in “the liberation of peoples of color around the globe,” he provides a deliberate and intentional neglect for addressing the specificities in women’s lives (203).

Owen explains that there is ambiguity, or what Paul Taylor calls “murkiness,” in the definitions of whiteness that have appeared in recent critical whiteness scholarship (210). Despite the definitional variety of critical concepts of whiteness, Owen asserts that unification, as opposed to fragmentation, is a more effective strategy for theorizing the systematic nature of whiteness as an oppressive system. He contends that a general, unified account of whiteness is more useful than one that “begins from the contextual differences in the meaning of whiteness” (213). According to Owen, a “microanalysis” of “specific locations and contexts, while useful, will not address its systemic nature” (213). Owen even goes so far as to say that gender, class, and sexuality should *eventually* be included in the discussion, but that critical white studies is not ready for such specific analyses at this time. Overall, this neglect for an analysis of difference within whiteness is exclusionary and insufficient.

In this section, I have chosen to critique four critical white theorists in order to expose some of the flaws that are readily apparent within the discourse. Noticeably, all of them deny the influence of gender and other identities. While these few authors do not make up the whole of critical white theory, it is clear that they represent the existence of a problematic trend. What is more, each of these authors is male, which might explain their androcentric viewpoints. Nonetheless, it is problematic that the men who are exploring whiteness, and who have the privilege to act as authorities on whiteness, disregard the implications of gender. These scholars’ exploration of white supremacy as a singular cause of oppression reinstates patriarchal thought

patterns. Therefore, I argue, the male discourse on whiteness, while attempting to be antiracist by exposing the dominant race, displays sexist tendencies.

The tendency for men to explore race while forsaking gender is not new. In fact, this was one of the main feminist criticisms of university Ethnic Studies programs during their formulation. With the inception of such programs, academia took the experiences of people of color seriously both in coursework and scholarship for the first time. However, more realistically, academia was only taking seriously the experiences of *men* of color. As Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith claim in "Introduction: The Politics of Black Women's Studies," the burgeoning of Black Women's Studies was a result of both racism in Women's Studies and sexism in Black Studies (xxi). Historically, racial discourses excluded women's experiences and perspectives. While sexism in Ethnic Studies is not necessarily the norm today, there are lasting implications of this historical trend.

Contemporarily, sexist exclusion in scholarship on race continues as the subject of race is dominated by male scholars and male perspectives. hooks argued in 1995 in "Introduction: Race Talk" in that men continue to dissuade women from joining in race-based discussions because of the "long tradition of sexist and racist thinking which has always represented race and racism as male turf" (1). In public discussion, she argues, women who attempt to discuss race are delegitimized, disregarded, and disempowered.

Specifically, male scholars tend to devalue feminist perspectives, especially when they are applied to race. hooks asserts that feminist analyses of race are "seen as derailing the more important political discussion, not adding a necessary dimension" (2). Hence, while some scholars seem to forget intersectional analyses, others intentionally avoid them and view them as

disruptive. The critical discourses on whiteness reproduce the same sexist androcentric framework by ignoring feminist considerations of gender and other intersections of identity, as revealed here by the work of critical Mills, Allen, Leonardo, and Owen.

What is even more problematic about critical white scholarship written by many men is, like most white feminist thought, they disregard women of color's contributions. While much of the critical white framework was inspired by the writings of feminists of color, scholars continue to disregard the integral interconnectivity of oppressive systems. As Delgado and Stefancic noted, critical white studies is a result of critical race theory, and critical race theory was formulated by the contributions of women of color such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term 'intersectionality.' As Chris J. Cuomo and Kim Q. Hall assert in "Introduction: Reflections on Whiteness," that "It is perhaps only a matter of time before traditionalist male scholars announce their 'discovery' of what the Combahee River Collective argued in 1978- that we must theorize the intersections of gender, race, class and sexuality in our analyses of race" (6). While women of color were the original intellectuals to provide insight on intersectionality, and are thus foundational to the critical white discourse, critical white theorists ignore their main arguments while building on their theories to create their own.

Even in work of those critical white scholars discussed in this chapter, there are references to feminists of color, but a denial of some of their most profound arguments. For example, Ricky Lee Allen and Zeus Leonardo cite feminists such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Linda Martín Alcoff, Angela Davis and bell hooks in their work. And yet, as discussed earlier, both Allen and Leonardo have overlooked the significance of gender oppression while centering their on racial oppression alone. As displayed here, critical white scholars are greatly informed by

feminist thought, yet lack a feminist lens. The reductionism, sexist exclusion of women's experiences, and disregard for the contributions of women of color in critical white studies indicate a problematic framework.

Overall, I argue that critical white studies is a generally worthwhile informant for white feminists, save its problematic aspects. Because it explores whiteness critically, it is invaluable to feminist theorists who have yet to do so. However, its sexist exclusions are inadequate for application within feminist scholarship. Both white feminist theory and critical white studies are flawed because of their inclination towards reductionist and additive approaches. Because neither approach takes gender, race, and other aspects of identity equally into perspective as contributors to oppression *and* privilege, neither is sufficient to address the problem of white feminist racism within feminist theory. White feminist thought is arguable racist and male critical white thought is arguably sexist. It is with both dissatisfaction and hopefulness in these two frameworks that I encourage feminism to look towards the formulation of critical white feminism.

Chapter V: Towards Critical White Feminism

“It is an act of love to take someone at her word,
to expect the most out of a woman who calls herself a feminist –
to challenge her as you yourself wish to be challenged”

-Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge* (62)

Due to the problematics of white feminist theory, the insufficiency of the proposed addition solution, and the influence of whiteness on white feminist racism, what is needed is a critical examination of whiteness in order to improve white feminist thought. While several white feminists do interrogate whiteness, such as theorists Ruth Frankenberg, Martha Mahoney, Peggy McIntosh, Anne Russo, Chris J. Cuomo, and artists Lucy Lippard and Arlene Raven, I argue that more white feminists should follow their lead. Overall, relatively few white feminists critically consider whiteness. Although the field of critical white studies offers a valuable framework, feminist scholars cannot rely on critical white theorists because of their sexist tendencies and failure to regard feminist concerns. Therefore, another approach is necessary for an antiracist transformation of white feminist theory.

Overall, my main intention is to suggest the development of an alternate framework: *critical white feminism*. Critical white feminism can be generally defined by its name, that is, feminism that is critical of whiteness. The formulation of critical white feminism, which includes an interrogation of whiteness and racial privilege, will improve feminist theories. Considering the problems in feminist thought that I have presented thus far, I believe it is imperative that

feminist theorists conceptualize and implement critical white feminism in order to overcome exclusion, racism, and oppression in white feminist thought and visualize a more inclusive and effective framework for the liberation of all women.

As I envision it, the purpose of critical white feminism is to a) conceptualize an inclusive and transformative antiracist feminist framework and agenda, b) challenge white feminist racism and white feminist hegemony, c) encourage open and honest communication between feminists across differences, and d) facilitate feminist solidarity and mobilization. Specifically, critical white feminism has several objectives: to establish racism as a feminist issue; to expose whiteness as an invisible, normalized, hegemonic, and privileged racial identity; to explore the interconnectivity of white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, and other systems; to address hierarchical power structures that exist within feminism; and to decenter white women and demarginalize women of color.

A critical white feminist framework will not only inform white feminists, but critical white theorists and feminists of color, as well. The inadequacy of both white feminist theory and critical white theory is displayed by the tendency to reduce the cause of oppression to a singular source. Instead, oppression must be understood as a result of a multidimensional matrix of domination. While feminists of color have advanced the concept of intersectionality that is invaluable to this formulation, I believe that critical white feminism's emphasis on privilege encourages *all* people, not just white feminists, to consider the privileged interconnections of their dominant and normative identities. So, while feminists of color may not receive white privilege, per se, they may, in fact, benefit from the privileges of religion, able-bodiedness, class, or sexuality. Comprehensive intersectional theories that address privilege *as well as*

oppression, such as critical white feminism, are crucial to the production of liberatory theories that have the capacity to formulate new ways of conceptualizing social change. For example, new methods and tactics are needed in both scholarship and activism that do not perpetuate oppressive behavior, as so many approaches do. Critical white feminism offers a theoretical framework necessary for antiracist and antisexist consciousness and action. With this potential, there is a possibility to combat the dangerous post-racial ideology that is pervasive in mainstream thought and also Third Wave feminism. The emergence of critical white feminism, its integration into feminist dialogue, scholarship, pedagogy, and activism will contribute to more inclusive and antiracist feminist theories. White feminists must interrogate whiteness as a racial identity along with its attached privileges, hegemonic influence, and structural manifestation as a system of white supremacy.

Because of the demonstrated connections between white feminist racism and whiteness/privilege as discussed throughout this work, I suggest critical white feminism as a solution. In order to provide some examples of why this framework should be utilized, I will refer to several of the problems that I have presented thus far and discuss how critical white feminism might be applied to each. To begin, white feminists problematically universalize white womanhood and conceptualize all women as white. Within a critical white feminist framework, this dilemma might be attributed to white normativity in society, which conceals white culture as normal. The transparency of whiteness causes white feminists to think that their experiences are normal and natural for all women, and thus, when they theorize about “women” they do not consider the fact that they are only theorizing about white women and disregarding those women who live outside of white culture. White women do not see the influence of white culture or the

influence of race on their lives because they fail to see white as a racial identity. Therefore, critical white feminism allows white women to perceive how white normativity invisibly shapes their lives, leads them to assume that their experiences as women are universal as opposed to race-specific, and blinds them to the realities of nonwhite women's lives. Furthermore, in this example, white feminists are able to recognize that whiteness facilitates their racist and exclusionary tendencies, which displays a strength of critical white feminism.

Additionally, critical white feminism provides the foundations for an interrogation of racial privilege. When white feminists subscribe to white normativity and universalize womanhood, they fail to take into account the differences between women, even when women of color are "included" in feminist discourse. Here, an interrogation of white privilege can illuminate some of the racialized particularities of women's differences. Conversely, an exploration of the racialized particularities can also lead to an understanding of white privilege, if analyzed with a critical white feminist lens. Either way, attention to specific racialized experiences in women's lives could potentially allow white women to conceptualize how white privilege influences their lives by awarding them advantages that women of color do not receive. Lugones' conceptualization of white and nonwhite feminists as "faithful mirrors" is helpful to white feminists in this instance because they are able to reflect on themselves by reflecting on women of color (42). A thorough consideration and reflection upon the specificities in individual nonwhite women's lives as they are compared and contrasted to the specificities in white women's lives can reveal to white women, among other things, their privileges which they might not have recognized. In this sense, critical white feminism aids in the development of white feminists' racial awareness.

Critical white feminism might also help with feminist collaboration. As discussed in chapter one, white feminist racism thwarts cross-racial feminist relationships and organizing. Successful feminist organization requires open and honest dialogue across all identities, a conversation that cannot be structured by unacknowledged power dynamics between members. White feminists continuously meet women of color unequally in their attempts to organize and dialogue, by oppressing women through disregard, disrespect, and ignorance, and an insistence on invading boundaries. While feminists of color have insisted that an antiracist feminist agenda is needed for solidarity and community, most white feminists fail to implement antiracism in theory and practice. In order for white feminists to achieve antiracism, they must first understand their own racism, which requires an understanding of whiteness. Additionally, an interrogation of whiteness unearths the racialized power structures and hierarchies that white feminists do not readily perceive. It is through this process that white women can resist their authoritative inclinations and dialogue with women of color in an equal discourse that resists power structures. Critical white feminism challenges white feminist racism and emphasizes the exploration of whiteness, making it a beneficial approach to understanding and resisting obstructions to feminist solidarity and action.

These examples display some of the practical applications of critical white feminism by applying it to problems identified in white feminist theory. This theory also proves to be beneficial, as we have seen in the productive outcomes of its application here, such as white feminist recognition of racism and white privilege through the analysis of feminist theory. This approach is also effective in overcoming some of the obstacles preventing cross-racial feminist community and activism. Overall, because of the examples illustrating its usefulness, critical

white feminism is a beneficial framework that should be developed.

It is particularly white feminists, as key contributors to racism in feminist theory and action, who are in need of a transformative solution. Therefore, in order to realize a critical white feminism, the following actions are necessary from white feminists: commitment to acknowledge their power and authority; acceptance of responsibility for oppressive thoughts and actions; respect, concern, goodwill, and care for the contributions, ideas, perspectives, experiences, and boundaries of *all* feminists; recognition of privilege; interactive acknowledgement of plurality; and critical reflexive self-analysis. It is my belief that white feminists can overcome racist and oppressive tendencies that they currently deplore.

In order for white feminists to achieve an antiracist transformation, they must take a more active approach in recognizing women of color, and allow new perspectives and knowledge to transform their perspectives and worldview in response to it. I believe that it is particularly important for white feminists to recognize the white feminist racism that may exist in their daily interactions, unconscious perceptions, or theoretical discourse. Lugones uses Spelman's phrase "boomerang perception" to illustrate how white women should interactively recognize women's difference and plurality ("On the Logic" 41). According to Spelman "boomerang perception" happens when "I look at you and come right back to myself" (qtd in Lugones 41). Boomerang perception is a self-reflective process that happens when one thinks about oneself after perceiving the difference between oneself and another. This approach is necessary to counteracting and reversing the problematic tendency to inactively acknowledging women's differences: to consider another without reflecting on ourselves. In this way, Lugones explains, white women and women of color are "faithful mirrors" who are able to reveal their true selves

to each other (42). A true self is not an isolated self that engages in self-reflection without cognition of others; instead, a true self interprets itself in relation to others by comparing and contrasting similarities and differences. Thus, between white and nonwhite feminists, reciprocal reflection and genuine critical regard for each other provides the opportunity for a clearer and image of self, much like faithful mirrors.

However, as demonstrated, many white feminists do not perceive their true selves because they do not fully acknowledge differences between women. Therefore, as Lugones argues, many white feminists avoid perceiving women of color as “faithful mirrors” because they wish to “block identification with that self” that they see reflected back at them. According to Lugones, this blockage occurs because the reality of the white self is inconsistent with the white perception of self. In order to truly understand whiteness and truly understand their own racism, white feminists must actively and reflexively regard women of color. As Lugones says, “knowing us in the way necessary for you to know that self requires self-conscious interaction” (42). Critical white feminist antiracist transformation, then, requires critical self-interaction and critical interaction with women of color, both of which are missing thus far in white feminist theory and action.

It is important, also, for feminists to seriously consider the emotional responses to the realization of critical white feminism. As Lorde reminds us “Any discussion among women about racism must include the recognition and use of anger” (128). Feminists must regard the emotions within themselves and each other. According to Lorde, “We cannot allow our fear of anger to deflect us nor seduce us into settling for anything less than the hard work of excavating honestly” (128). Furthermore, white feminists must recognize the fear, denial, guilt, blame, and

shame associated with the process of exploring whiteness and privilege.³¹ Because emotions are a part of the human condition, it is impossible to separate them from feminist theorizing and organizing. Instead, feminists must be aware of them and prepare for the painful process of responding to their own and others' emotions.

As it is important to regard and explore the emotional implications of critical white feminism, I believe that there are other subjects which this framework might encompass. While I do not intend to provide a comprehensive agenda here, I find it necessary to share a few thoughts that others' may be more able to explore. For instance, I believe that critical white feminism could be greatly informed by the contributions of mixed-race and racially-ambiguous feminists. Feminists who theorize about the fluidity of race and the implications of mixed-race bodies can significantly contribute to an understanding of whiteness, because they are often able to transcend color lines. Race is socially constructed and thus malleable, but the implications of this construct produce real life consequences that can be seen most clearly by those who are able to experience race-fluidity.

An example of a racially-ambiguous scholar who explores race fluidity in her work is Judy Scales-Trent, who identifies as a black woman who can pass as white and is often mistaken for white. In the 1997 article "Notes of a White Black Woman," Scales-Trent states that "my very existence demonstrates that there is slippage between the seemingly discrete categories 'black' and 'white'" (475-76). She also notes, "There is something about living on the margins of race that gives me a unique view of [racial] categories" (478). Scholars with insights such as

³¹ For more on the emotional responses to whiteness, see *Investigating Affective Dimensions of Whiteness* by Allison Brimmer and "White Women Teaching White Women About White Privilege" by Gillespie et al.

these provide a unique understanding of race because they explore the experiences of both racial privilege *and* racial oppression. Additionally, Stephanie M. Wildman, in the 1997 article “Reflections on Whiteness,” argues that racial categories are so powerful because of the stipulations of inclusion and exclusion. She argues that thinking about the racial ambiguity of Latinas/os, since many of them are also white, reveals “the construction of race as not about race at all, but about power” (325). The insights of Latina feminists, therefore, are also invaluable to critical white studies.

Adrian Piper also provides critical white feminism with vital insight. Like Scales-Trent, Piper discusses her experiences being perceived as black or white in different social settings. In her 1997 essay “Passing for White, Passing for Black,” Piper claims that being a person of color is “a social condition, more than an identity” (427). She also destabilizes the meaning of whiteness in her work by arguing that most white Americans have black heritage. In her 1988 art installation *Cornered*, Piper digs into the white psyche by asking, “What does it mean to be white/black?” She asks those who have been living as white to discover their black heritage and join the black community. In this way, Piper forces whites to see the privilege of feeling white by asking them to feel *not* white. Her work is important to white feminists who wish to truly understand their racial identities and the meaning of whiteness.

Piper also argues that her very existence disrupts whiteness because of her racially ambiguous body. In “Flying” (1996) she says, “I am the racist’s nightmare, the obscenity of miscegenation. I am a reminder that segregation is impotent; a living embodiment of sexual desire that penetrates racial barriers and reproduces itself. I am the alien interloper, the invisible spy in the perfect disguise who slipped past the barricades in an unguarded moment” (229).

Therefore, her mere presence is a threat to the racialized structure of society, which relies on rigidly defined racial categories to perpetuate racist domination.

Similarly, Jennifer Lisa Vest argues in “The Internally Globalized Body as Instigator: Crossing Borders, Crossing Races” (2008) that mixed-race women have been marginalized in very specific and significant ways. According to Vest, “feminist activists... fruitfully employ appeals to cultural identities and homelands, in order to unify women’s movements” (76). However, Vest asserts that “There is no mixed homeland the mixed race feminist can appeal to in her organizing” (77). Because of this special marginalization and oppression, mixed women have a special positionality that can be utilized as an advantage. She states, “Outsiders have little to lose, and thus often without even trying, propose revolutionary strategies, which are more radical in their proposal for change” (78). It is in this way that mixed-race women have a unique standpoint that can produce critical stances and enhanced opportunities. I propose that critical white feminism must explore the work of authors like Scales-Trent, Wildman, Piper, and Vest in order to more fully understand the complex and unstable dimensions of racial oppression and privilege.

I expect skepticism towards the formulation of critical white feminism. Throughout this work, I argue that feminists must interrogate whiteness; however, some scholars disagree with this approach and argue that the attention on whiteness is not a beneficial way to address racism. A major concern is that the focus on white identity formation may be putting whites back in the center. For example, in a 2008 speech delivered by Asian American scholar Fred Ho entitled “Why the Emphasis on White-Skin Privilege is White Chauvanist,” Ho argues against my proposed interrogation of whiteness and white privilege as a means of antiracism. He states, “The

political logic of ‘anti-racism’ or ‘fighting white-skin privileges’ ironically privileges the target of struggle upon the attitudes and behaviors of whites.” He argues that a focus on whiteness is harmful and hurtful and he therefore “reject[s] the dominance, centering, [and] emphasis” on whites. In response, I assert that the interrogation of whiteness does not result in the privileging, dominance, and recentering of whites. Instead, critical white feminism encourages whites to examine whiteness and privilege in order to understand the systems that perpetuate their privilege and dominance, which, I argue, decenters whiteness from its invisible dominance. An understanding of whiteness reveals to whites the racialized mechanisms of society that they are often not aware of because of the normativity and transparency of whiteness.

Furthermore, this approach is recommended by feminists of color. According to Combahee River Collective in “A Black Feminist Statement,” (year) white feminists must do the work of understanding and eradicating racism since they are the perpetrators of it. They claim, “Eliminating racism in the white women’s movement is by definition work for white women to do” (243). Grillo and Wildman agree, and argue that the elimination of racism relies upon an exploration of privilege and the articulation of white supremacy. In their opinion, this is the only way for white feminists to talk about racism, since they cannot speak about being victims of racism. They state, “Whites need to reject this privilege and to speak about their role in the racial hierarchy...whites cannot speak validly for people of color, but only about their own experiences” (“Obscuring” 49). Therefore, critical white feminism does not recenter or privilege white issues. Instead, critical white feminism is fighting racism by identifying racism as a white issue, one that white feminists can only conceptualize in terms of their own white privilege and identity. It is the responsibility of white feminists to theorize issues about whiteness and the

reality of living with a white identity, which includes the recognition of racist tendencies. White privilege provides whites feminists with authority and credibility, and thus whites often listen to and trust other whites more than people of color. It is important, I argue, to use the privilege of authority responsibly and respectfully. Using this privilege to promote critical white feminist ideology can lead to antiracist awareness in more whites. Therefore, critical white feminism does not perpetuate racism by putting whites back in the center. Instead, it offers an alternative solution for antiracist white feminists by providing them with an understanding of their privilege and how they can use it responsibly to theorize feminism effectively, which, ultimately, is a fight for social justice.

It is my hope for the future that feminists expand upon, challenge, and strengthen critical white feminism. While I am unable to formulate a comprehensive outline for a new theory in this work, I do propose preliminary thoughts that might guide future endeavors. For example, the goals of critical white feminism might be accomplished through reconceptualizations of history, challenges to post-racial ideology, reconsiderations of Third Wave feminism, and considerations of media and popular culture. I also think that queer theory would greatly inform critical white feminism because of its ability to critically examine the underpinnings of normalization. Additionally, in-depth global and transnational feminist analyses are also necessary in order to examine intersections of nationhood, broaden considerations of class exploitation to global capitalism, and continue considerations of borders and boundaries.

I am optimistic that critical white feminism can provide an opportunity for white feminist theory to transform into a more antiracist, inclusive, and liberatory framework. The work is up to white feminists, and it is certainly not an easy feat. But, as noted by Moraga and Anzaldúa at the

start of this chapter, it is an act of love for feminists of color to challenge white feminists in this way. I believe that it is an act of love to accept this challenge.

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