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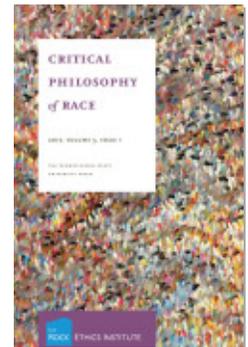
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*The Future of Whiteness* by Linda Martín Alcoff (review)

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**BOOK REVIEW**

*The Future of Whiteness*

By Linda Martín Alcoff,  
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As white people approach a United States in which they no longer hold a demographic majority, many questions arise about the future of *whiteness*; and more importantly, of the future of race relations. In *The Future of Whiteness*, Linda Martín Alcoff asks us to think critically about the *meaning* of whiteness, and how white people as a social category might fare in the coming “multipolar social landscape” (176). Is whiteness and white identity inextricably tied to white supremacy? Can white people continue to claim a white identity without reifying structures of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression tethered to coloniality? Are white people caught between choosing either white supremacy or abolishing whiteness? In her five-chapter book, Alcoff makes the claim that white identity should not, like any other social identity, be considered a fixed social category outside of social and historical contexts. Arguing for an alternative to the abolition/supremacy binary, Alcoff makes the case that domination is not essential to white identity, nor is the category of whiteness necessarily doomed to a kind of racial suicide if we are to imagine a world without white supremacy.

In chapter 1, “An Analytic of Whiteness,” Alcoff develops a four-part account for thinking about white identity as in fact real, involving an “explanatory capacity, materiality, relevance to subjectivity, and being an

effect of history,” showing that the realism of white identity claims is not simply ideological but also about how the social world works to produce identities in general (74). White identity, like all other identities, is not a single homogeneous experience but involves a complex constellation of factors such as class, gender, religion, ethnicity, able-bodiedness, sexuality, language, education, among others. Albeit, Alcoff argues, white identity, in all its complexity, remains a useful analytic tool. “If we drop the term whiteness,” Alcoff writes, “we will miss the proverbial elephant, and one of the most important explanatory variables for social dynamics of labor and material distribution” (60).

The following chapter, “White Exceptionalism,” grapples with an ongoing debate within whiteness studies and critical race theory on the fate of whiteness as a social category. Keeping with her framework, Alcoff argues that whiteness is not outside the influences of historical events and should not be understood as an exception to the rule, or what she calls, “white exceptionalism.” Alcoff claims that “the thesis that whiteness is so qualitatively distinct from other social identities that it can never mingle or harmonize, is based in a claim about the essential, and fixed, meaning of whiteness, and, in particular, its historical genealogy in white supremacy” (117). Arguing against scholarship that she refers to as “anti-racist white exceptionalism” which proposes to “give up on whiteness,” Alcoff suggests we refrain from circumscribing the future of whiteness and disabling the potential for coalition by putting unnecessary barriers on the “fluid alterations” people come to understand themselves. Alcoff points to the “idea that racisms are complex constellations in specific contexts” and approaching whiteness in this manner “will have a methodological payoff” by requiring an attentiveness to specificities rather than “moving too quickly to ahistorical causal formations or generic explanations that don’t explain much” (123). In line with theories and scholarship on Black or Chicana/o Latina/o identities, Alcoff extends her argument to whiteness warning against uncritically taking white identity as something so historically unique or exceptionally universal, unaffected by historical and social phenomena.

In the chapter “Double Consciousness” and the concluding chapter, “A Place in the Rainbow,” Alcoff juxtaposes two major positions on the future of whiteness. On the one hand “eliminativists” both on the right and the left operate under a post-racial conception of race as an illusion. Where the Right denies racism outright, the Left is motivated to eliminate the decaying and illusory category of whiteness. On the other hand, Alcoff sees

the possibility of white people finding a place “in the rainbow” among other groups, side by side, without power or control over others. “The left-wing push to abolish white identity,” Alcott argues, “is not based in denying racism or the power of white identity so much as it is motivated by a fatalism about the ability of whiteness to disentangle itself from white supremacy” (150). Through a kind of white double consciousness manifested in various historical moments of white people’s attempt to rectify, disavowal, or even put white identity to an end, by joining anti-racist movements such as SNCC, multiracial workers unions, and anti-Klan rallies, etc., white people continue to push back on the seductions of white supremacy and myths of racial superiority. Whether it is guilt, or some kind of empathy with people of color, white people have been motivated to “face the full-on truth of history,” and “avoid being continuously duped by pampering (white) nationalist narratives” (175). The challenge remains: antiracist white people must come to reassess the meaning of whiteness and take up the challenge of ending white supremacy by eroding the white material advantages resulting from slavery and colonialism.

Alcott weaves biographical narratives and autobiographical storytelling with social science research and philosophical inquiry to address a topic many would rather avoid. A book intended for left and liberal audiences, her research serves to advance debates in critical whiteness studies, critical race theory, and the broad field of philosophy of race. Although not fully developed in this text, concepts such as “white double consciousness” bear the potential for further discussion on the experience of race. Alcott offers those of us committed to ending racism and white supremacy plenty of questions to think through. “The solution will not be found in a flaccid universal humanism, nor in a pursuit of white redemption” the solution will be found, Alcott concludes, in “facing the truths about who we are, how we got here and then developing an offensive strategy for achieving a future in which we can all find a place” (204).

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