



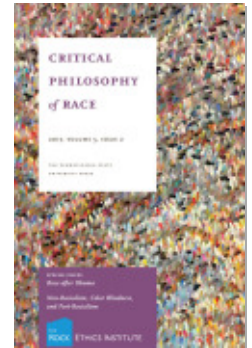
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WHITE PRIORITY

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Abstract

This article introduces the concept of white priority and challenges the false universalism built into the concept of white privilege. Proceeding from the perspective of “trash crit,” the article analyzes white domination from the perspective of poor and working class white people. While racial advantages exist for poor and working class white people, the concept of white privilege does not capture them well. The concept of white priority—the sense of coming before another, of not being at “the bottom of the well” (Derrick Bell)—is needed to help America grapple with race and class in a post-Obama era.

Keywords: white privilege, white priority, psychological wages of whiteness, class, race

Priority: a thing that is regarded as more important than another; the fact or condition of being treated as more important; the right to take precedence or to proceed before others.

—GOOGLE.COM DICTIONARY

After I recently gave a community-wide presentation on good white people and the problems of middle-class white antiracism, a white woman approached me, angry and defiant. Laura (a pseudonym) didn't see how her whiteness was gaining anything for her. She was a single mother working nonstop, she retorted, to keep the rent paid and find a way, somehow, to pay for her (white) son to go to college. There were so many scholarships just for black people and other people of color even though lots of them go to college, she exclaimed. Just look at the educational privilege of Ta-Nehisi Coates, author of *Between the World and Me* (2015), whose presentation the same week in Charlotte, NC, she also attended. *They* are the ones who have privilege, not her. She cared enough about issues of racial justice to attend both talks—"look, I'm here aren't I?" she exclaimed in exasperation at one point—but she was tired of hearing about white privilege when she was struggling so hard to make ends meet.

It would be easy to charge Laura with a form of racism that refuses to see or acknowledge her privilege as a white person. And in fact, one of the Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) white attendees standing near Laura and me did just that, with predictably counterproductive results. After being jumped on by the SURJ representative, Laura was more convinced than ever that all the talk about "white privilege" was nonsense. Even worse, in her eyes the concept of white privilege was not a way to address real inequalities but instead a means for the comfortable class to show up (pun intended) struggling white people. Laura walked away from the SURJ attendee and me looking thoroughly fed up.

I don't know Laura well, but I'd probably count her as middle-class or at least working class, rather than poor. (She is a real estate agent, I later learned.) She doesn't fit the "white trash" image that Gina Crosley-Corcoran (2014) describes when she says she comes "from the kind of poor that people don't want to believe still exists in this country . . . frigid northern-Illinois winter[s] without heat or running water . . . making ramen noodles in a coffee maker with water that you fetched from a public bathroom . . . liv[ing] in a camper year-round and us[ing] a random relative's apartment as your mailing address . . . attending so many different elementary schools that you can only remember a quarter of their names." Unlike Crosley-Corcoran, Laura was not grappling with dire poverty, at least I don't think so. But the two women share a similar experience of being beaten down and struggling—financially, emotionally, and psychologically—that whiteness did not protect them against. Laura's response to me was much like

Crosley-Corcoran's initial response to Peggy McIntosh's classic (1989) article on white privilege: irate resistance.¹

Rather than assume that Crosley-Corcoran and Laura's refusal to identify themselves as racially privileged is merely evidence of their unacknowledged racism, I think it can be used constructively to reveal a false universalization built into the concept of white privilege. My argument will proceed from a perspective of "trash crit" (Preston 2009). Reclaiming the concept and subject position of "white trash" as a standpoint with potential epistemological and political value, trash criticism analyzes white domination from the perspective of poor and lower class white people. This perspective is not opposed to or meant to erase that of poor people of color. The point of emphasizing poor *white* people is to challenge the related assumptions that "poor" means "black" (or perhaps "nonwhite") and that white people's financial, social, aesthetic, and other interests are all more or less the same. Trash crit suggests that the concept of white privilege is born out of a privileged experience that is not shared by all white people and that white privilege should instead be understood as white *class* privilege. The question that follows such a critique of white privilege is one of how to describe the advantages of whiteness held by all white people, including poor and working class whites. Those advantages exist—that fact is not in question here—but the term "privilege" does not accurately capture them in the case of poor or working class white people. Nor do the prevailing alternatives, such as "white supremacy," "global white supremacy," or (violations of) "human rights," as I will briefly discuss below. A different concept is needed, and this need is more than a narrow terminological issue. It is practical, political, and urgent, concerning whether large numbers of unprivileged white people—the "unglorious majority" of white folk, as Linda Martín Alcoff (2015, 189) calls them—will be motivated or turned off by the prospect of challenging racism against black people and other people of color.

The need now is greater than ever: the need for white people to join people of color in confronting racism. This is because the backlash has already begun, against what some white people see as eight years of extremism from a black president who incarnated the nation's obsession with political correctness. As I give voice to white backlash in this paragraph, I want to be clear that I don't agree with it, but I think it must be heard. The so-called "extremism" of President Obama has little to do with the specific policies that he pursued. It concerns the sheer fact that a black man held the

nation's highest political office. There. Was. A. Black. Man. In. The. White. House. This is beyond the pale; it does not translate for some (many?) white people. It is as if a black intruder broke in and was allowed to stay, and we could say this almost literally given the white imaginary's understanding of blackness as inherently criminal. I have only anecdotal, not empirical support for this sentiment, but I have heard it said or half-said—sometimes via certain silences in conversation, prior to the election of Donald Trump—by white people who felt and still feel traumatized by the Obama presidency and who will use the specific word “trauma” to name this sentiment. It does not seem like a coincidence that many of these white folks also fiercely defend their right to own guns for protection against intruders into their own houses. If it could happen in the White House, it could happen anywhere. We might say that from this perspective, Obama's presidency warrants extremism in the other direction, but to call it extremism is to misunderstand it. From the perspective in question, it is not extreme. It is balanced and proportionate. It is an appropriate response to the politically correct disaster that Obama and his supporters created, countering eight years of the unthinkable. To save the United States, the racial needle needs now to swing as far in the other direction as Obama had it swing in his.

It's not that all the white folks who think this way are desperately poor. Many of them are not. (In fact, some of them are financially quite comfortable.) But like Laura, many of them feel that they are struggling mightily and that President Trump at least tries to speak to those struggles (Dreher 2016). Life after Obama is a time for greater nimbleness and dexterity as we think about race and its intersections with class.² We should not throw fuel on the fire by charging all white people with the same sort of white advantages. Blanket claims like that tend to shut down opportunities—few though they are—for a different understanding of race and whiteness to unfold. This understanding hopefully would provide language to acknowledge and grieve the horror of our collective racial past, a kernel of the “real” that the United States has not been able to digest (Winnubst 2015). Only in that way might there be a path to a different future.

Before I suggest a better term for the racial advantages from which even poor and working class whites benefit—if “advantages” is the right word here—let me note that I think the term white class privilege *is* the right term to describe middle-class and affluent white people's particular racial advantages. While it needs to be understood intersectionally with class, the

concept of white privilege should not be replaced by the concepts of human rights and/or (global) white supremacy. While fighting for human rights including racially specific rights such as black rights is important, securing those rights would not address the extra-legal advantages that white middle-and-upper class people often enjoy. Something like the concept of white class privilege is needed to do that work. Likewise for the concept of (global) white supremacy: while it has an important role to play in racial justice movements, the concept of white supremacy tends to connote blatant racism, like that of the Ku Klux Klan, or legalized discrimination, as in *Jim Crow*, making it easy for “regular” white people to think that racism largely has disappeared and that the few “extreme” strands of it that linger have nothing to do with them. The concept of white class privilege is needed to make visible the racial micro-kindnesses and other subtle advantages from which middle-and-upper class white people often benefit.³

So what should we call this “something else” that includes poor white people’s racial “advantages”? And what *are* those advantages if they don’t necessarily protect poor whites from financial hardships, including crushing poverty, and the equally crushing shame that is heaped upon poor people in the United States whatever their race? In many ways, the answer is clear: W. E. B. Du Bois (1962) provided it almost a century ago when he described the public and psychological wages of whiteness. Whiteness might not make much of an economic difference to white laborers, as Du Bois argued, but it provided them with public deference and recognition, via free access to public parks and other public spaces and recruiting police officers from their ranks. Poor white people could feel lifted up by their whiteness, as though they were valued citizens of their community and nation, even if their whiteness did not pay much of a monetary wage.

Do the public and psychological wages of whiteness described by Du Bois in the 1930s exist today for poor and lower class white people in the United States? On the one hand, the answer is a simple yes. Whiteness still pays in non-monetary, psychological ways. On the other hand, however, the public part of the wage complicates an answer, and it is this aspect of the wages of whiteness that sometimes is given short shrift in contemporary scholarship. Du Bois’s wages of whiteness are not merely psychological, nor are they additively public and psychological. The public nature of the wages helps constitute their psychological value. It is a force multiplier, to adopt military terminology. The public nature of white wages greatly amplifies and magnifies something that otherwise would have a much weaker or

smaller impact. The strength of the emotional, psychological payoff that whiteness provides to white people is provided by its recognition by other people. The valuation of the wages of whiteness is performed in the presence of other people (of all races) who are supposed to defer to and respect a white person because of his or her whiteness. Without that public recognition and respect, the psychological currency of whiteness discussed by Du Bois isn't worth nearly as much.

One of the most blatant examples of the public nature of the psychological wages of whiteness can be found in Harriet Jacobs's description of annual musters of armed white people during the days of chattel slavery. After the regular muster involving all white men publically gathering with muskets in hand and demonstrate their military readiness, a second "muster" would take place in which white non-slaveholders harassed, whipped, and raped black slaves. The annual second "muster" provided a publically approved "grand opportunity for the low whites, who had no negroes of their own to scourge" the other 364 days of the year, "to exercise a little brief authority" and feel themselves to be higher than another group more miserable than themselves. (Jacobs 1987, 337). The public nature of white wages might have been less spectacular during Jim Crow (or not: think here of lynching), but separate water fountains, swimming pools, and other explicitly segregated facilities made very public the psychological lifting up of white people, including poor and working-class ones, at the expense of black people and other people of color.

Today the wages of whiteness are not as explicitly public and obviously visible as they were during the days of chattel slavery and Jim Crow. This is why the answer to the above question is, in some crucial respects, no. Contemporary wages of whiteness exist in a complex relationship with a very different social, legal and, civic space than that of Du Bois's time. The public sphere today supposedly provides equal opportunity to all and does not segregate or discriminate based on race. While it is untrue that the contemporary public sphere is racially equal or fair, the rhetoric of its fairness is what is relevant for my purposes here. Explicit displays of racial inequalities generally are not allowed in the way that they were in Du Bois's time. There are exceptions to this claim, of course. Psychological wages of whiteness are still paid publically to white people on some occasions, and Du Bois's observation about the recruitment of white police officers after the Civil War remains particularly relevant. The work of the police in the United States has long been to protect openly and brazenly the wages of

whiteness, and even with some black officers on city police forces today, that work continues.⁴

In general, however, the psychological wages paid to white people today tend to be less obvious, more difficult (for white people, anyway) to spot, and that is precisely the point. The felt loss of public respect for non-affluent white people helps explain the Blue Lives Matter movement, for example, which, according to its Facebook page, seeks to “once again shed positive light on America’s [law enforcement] heroes to help boost morale and gain society’s much needed support” and to give law enforcement personnel their “due recognition.”⁵ The psychological lifting up that white people of all classes experience today because of their race is not made a public event as often as it was decades and centuries ago, and this is true even as explicitly racial and racist claims were thrown around during the 2016 presidential race in the United States.

White theologian Mark Boswell (2016) recently has claimed that “white privilege doesn’t [necessarily] mean that one’s life is easy, but it does mean that one’s life is not made harder *because* one is white.” I think the accuracy of this statement helps reveal why white people often have difficulty identifying the psychological wages of whiteness. Especially for poor white people, whiteness can function as an absence of an obstacle, rather than a positive advantage, and it can be difficult to see or experience an absence of something that a person didn’t know was there. I think, however, Boswell’s claim also illustrates why the word “privilege” is misleading when speaking about the racial advantages that accrue to poor and working class white people. The term “privilege” *does* describe a life that has been made easy. The term doesn’t work well to describe a life that is very difficult, not just financially but also psychologically, but that has one less obstacle to flourishing in it than another group does. The obstacles in question, which are complexly connected and not additive, include the heaps of shape that are dumped on the poor—all poor people, regardless of race—in the United States for not “making it” in a nation that supposedly allows everyone an equal shot. And perhaps especially on poor white people, who do not have the “excuse” of racial discrimination to explain their poverty (read: their failure) as black people do (Moss 2003, 53). For all its value, I also do not think the Du Boisian phrase of “psychological wages” does the trick in day-to-day practice because the term “wage” tends to be a red herring. It yanks people’s attention to financial questions of how whiteness has or has not benefitted them, when the issue on the table doesn’t primarily concern

financial matters. It concerns the white self in its entirety: psychological, existential, physical—“ontological” for short. What then to call the ontological lifting up of poor white people provided by their race?

The terms “white superiority” and “white normalcy” are two possibilities, but I think both of them ultimately are vulnerable to trash crit analysis similar to the way that “white privilege” is. It is middle and upper class white people who count as normal, even superior, in the United States, not poor whites. The term I provisionally have settled on is “white priority”: the felt sense of coming before someone else. As a poor, struggling white person, I might not be financially privileged or very high up in social circles and many people might disparage me, but at least I’m not the lowest of the low. I come before someone else: people of color and black people in particular. I might be just one step up from the bottom, but at least I’m not at the bottom of the well.⁶ They are. This is not an empirical matter; it is an ontological one. *A priori*—hear the Latin root of the word “priority” in this phrase—a white person feels that s/he/they has more value than a black person even if some of black people have managed to work their way into the middle class (or the White House) and have more money or political power than the white person does. White people come before them in terms of who matters in the great chain of being, which is why it was frustrating to Laura to see black people coming before her or her family in practical, everyday ways: getting into college, and so on. It also is why the name of Black Lives Matter is so infuriating to some white people and why the name is so well chosen: the question here is one of who matters and white people’s ontological sense of their mattering being dependent on black people’s not mattering. As Dylann Roof, the murderer of nine black people at Charleston’s AME Episcopal Church, well understood, white people are very concerned not to be brought down, and a key way by which they know that they are not low down, that they are worth something even if they are dirt poor, is that there are people of color who are worth less (read: worthless).⁷ It is painful to read Roof’s so-called manifesto as it lays bare these concerns, but it needs to be read and, as George Yancy (2012) might say, critically tarried with.⁸

The concept of white priority applies to white people of all classes while that of white class privilege applies only to middle-to-upper class white people. Although the term “white priority” helps make this needed distinction, it isn’t perfect, of course. No term can eliminate the possibility of white denial, which could take the form of a white person’s claiming, for example,

that she is not being prioritized because of her race and that people of color instead are prioritized by affirmative action efforts. Laura's complaint about college scholarships for black students but not for her white son is a prime instance of this pattern. I think, however, the pattern demonstrates rather than conflicts with the operations of white priority. White priority is not something that can be empirically verified or disproven—for example, how many black students in fact are on college scholarships in comparison with white students? While important in some respects, the answer to that question is largely irrelevant to the issue of white priority. White priority concerns a white person's felt conviction about herself (however egregious or misplaced, and often unconscious) that no matter the quantifiable, statistical details of her life, she is not on the very bottom run of society's ladder. It is consistent with what Arlie Hochschild (2016) calls "the deep story" of many conservative, working class white people that people of color have been cutting in line (aided by liberal government) to get a shot at the American Dream. People who aren't white supposedly belong at the end of the line, enabling white people "to judge their own worth by distance from that [end]" (2016, 147). White people's anger that scholarships or jobs or whatever are not earmarked for them is a manifestation of the deep story of white priority, even as it might take the form of claiming that other racial groups supposedly are prioritized (read: "wrongly" treated as more important than white people). White people's sense of racial priority is found in their objection that their ontological worth is being overlooked or dismissed.

It's going to be very difficult to get white people to tarry with their whiteness, to have them (us) consciously acknowledge so they can let go of their felt sense of racial priority over nonwhite people and over black folks in particular. The ontological change it requires will involve significant struggle. It will be a long haul. We (no matter what our race) shouldn't kid ourselves about that. As American historian Nancy Isenberg (2016, 98) has argued in her acclaimed work on whiteness and class, the United States was fundamentally built on the conviction that "Americans . . . needed someone to look down upon." The civil war that took place between its northern and southern regions was, in many ways, a fight over whether that "someone" could be poor white people as well as black slaves. It is unclear whether (white) Americans know how to be Americans without dumping on some group of people made out to be lower than them, just as it is unclear whether America can overcome both the racialization of its habits of dumping and

its pattern of teaching new immigrants to become American by learning to dump on other groups (usually black or dark skinned people).

This why Bell's racial realism, as well as kindred positions such as Afro-pessimism (Wilderson 2010) and black nihilism (Warren 2015), are extremely important, to provide strategies for black people and other people of color to flourish in the midst of white people's death grip on their sense of racial priority. But perhaps trash crit also can help by supporting this change. By not scornfully criticizing poor white people for their allegedly unrecognized white class privilege, perhaps we (whatever our race and class status) can begin talking about the problematic feeling of racial priority that is precious to poor and financially comfortable white people alike. Only in this way do we have a chance of understanding the intricate relationship of race and class that continues to support racial injustice.

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NOTES

Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for very helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier version of this essay.

1. Crosley-Corcoran's language was far more colorful than Laura's, however: "THE F&CK!?!? . . . My white skin didn't do shit to prevent me from experiencing poverty" (Crosley-Corcoran 2014). In Crosley-Corcoran's case, she eventually acknowledged that she benefits from white privilege in some respects, even as she argues that "class" could be substituted for "race" at many points of McIntosh's essay. Unfortunately I do not have space here to analyze Laura's likely response to McIntosh's long list of examples of white privilege.
2. And gender, to name another salient axis of lived experience. If Hillary Clinton had been elected president, I think it would have become a time of significant backlash against black women in particular. (That is not an argument against Clinton's presidential candidacy, however.) In an era of tremendous intersectional irony, for a woman president to have followed a black president would have resulted in black women being regarded as having been "given too much" politically. On that scenario, we could say that all the women presidents are white, all the black presidents are men, and black women would still have to be brave (cf. Hull, Bell-Scott, and Smith 1993). The tenor and ferocity of backlash against women of all races in the era of Trump's presidency remains to be seen.

3. There might also be situations in which black discursive and/or political power is strengthened by using the term “white privilege,” which would be another reason to retain it. For a full argument that the concept of white privilege should not be replaced by that of (global) white supremacy or human (black) rights, see Sullivan (2017). On black rights, see Zack (2015). For more on racial micro-kindnesses, see Sullivan (2015, 154–56).
4. See, for example, the shooting of Keith Lamont Scott in Charlotte, North Carolina, on September 20, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/30/keith-scott-shooting-no-charges>.
5. https://www.facebook.com/bluematters/about/?entry_point=page_nav_about_item&tab=page_info.
6. I refer here to the title of Derrick Bell’s (1992) book *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*.
7. Speaking to white people, Roof says that “segregation did not exist to hold back negroes. It existed to protect us from them. And I mean that in multiple ways . . . it protected us from being brought down to their level [. . .] The best example of this is obviously our school system [. . .] But what constitutes a ‘good school’? The fact is that how good a school is considered directly corresponds to how White it is [. . .] The pathetic part is that these White people dont [sic] even admit to themselves why they are moving. They tell themselves it is for better schools or simply to live in a nicer neighborhood. But it is honestly just a way to escape niggers and other minorities” (<http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/06/alleged-charleston-shooter-dylann-roof-manifesto-racist>). Roof exposes the ontological value, which is acknowledged publically, that de facto housing segregation provides middle-to-upper class white people. I consider such segregation to be an instance of both white priority and white class privilege.
8. On the need for white people to tarry with and not rush through “the muck and mire of their own whiteness,” see also Yancy (2015, 26).

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