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Obscuring the Importance of Race: The Implications of Making Comparisons between Racism and Sexism (or Other Isms)

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While this chapter was being written, Trina Grillo, who is of Afro-Cuban and Italian descent, was diagnosed as having Hodgkin's disease [a form of cancer]. In talking about this experience she said that "cancer has become the first filter through which I see the world. It used to be race, but now it is cancer. My neighbor just became pregnant, and all I could think was 'How could she get pregnant? What if she gets cancer?' "

Stephanie Wildman, who is Jewish and white, heard this remark and thought, "I understand how she feels; I worry about getting cancer too. I probably worry about it more than most people, because I am such a worrier." But Stephanie's worry is not the same as Trina's. Someone with cancer can think of nothing else. She cannot watch the World Series without wondering which players have had cancer or who in the players' families might have cancer. Having this worldview with cancer as a filter is different from just thinking or even worrying often about cancer. The worrier has the privilege of forgetting the worry sometimes, even much of the time. The worry can be turned off. The cancer patient does not have the privilege of truly forgetting about her cancer; even when it is not in the forefront of her thoughts, it remains in the background, coloring her world.

This dialogue about cancer illustrates a principal problem with comparing one's situation to another's. The "analogizer" often believes that her situation is the same as another's. Nothing in the comparison process challenges this belief, and the analogizer may think she understands the other's situation in its fullness. The analogy makes the analogizer forget the difference and allows her to stay focused on her own situation without grappling with the other person's reality. Yet analogies are necessary tools to teach and explain, so that we can better understand each other's experiences and realities. We have no other way to understand each other's lives, except by making analogies to events in our own experience. Thus, the use of analogies provides both the key to greater comprehension and the danger of false understanding.

From PRIVILEGE REVEALED: HOW INVISIBLE PREFERENCE UNDERMINES AMERICA by Stephanie M. Wildman et al.

Racism/White Supremacy as Social Ill

Like cancer, racism/white supremacy is a societal illness. 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. We use the term "racism/white supremacy" to emphasize the link between discriminatory racism and the privilege held by whites to ignore their own race.

Author bell hooks describes her realization of this connection: "The word racism ceased to be the term which best expressed for me exploitation of black people and other people of color in this society and . . . I began to understand that the most useful term was white supremacy."[1] hooks writes that liberal whites do not see themselves as prejudiced or interested in domination through coercion, and do not acknowledge the ways they contribute to and benefit from the system of white privilege. For these reasons, "white supremacy" is an important term, descriptive of American social reality. We link the term "racism" to "white supremacy" as a reminder that the perpetuation of white supremacy is racist.

This chapter originated when the authors noticed that several identifiable phenomena occurred without fail in any predominantly white racially mixed group whenever sex discrimination was analogized (implicitly or explicitly) to race discrimination. Repeatedly, at the annual meeting of the Association of American Law Schools (AALS), at meetings of feminist legal scholars, in classes on sex discrimination and the law, and in law school women's caucus meetings, the pattern was the same. In each setting, although the analogy was made for the purpose of illumination, to explain sexism and sex discrimination, another unintended result ensued—the perpetuation of racism/white supremacy.

When a speaker compared sexism and racism, the significance of race was marginalized and obscured, and the different role that race plays in the lives of people of color and whites was overlooked. The concerns of whites became the focus of discussion, even when the conversation had supposedly centered on race discrimination. Essentialist presumptions came to the fore: it would be assumed, for example, that "women" referred to white women and "blacks" meant African American men.[2] Finally, people with little experience in thinking about racism/white supremacy, but who had a hard-won understanding of the allegedly analogous oppression (sexism or some other ism), assumed that they comprehended the experience of people of color and thus had standing to speak on their behalf.

We began to question why this pattern persisted. We concluded that these phenomena have much to do with the dangers inherent in what had previously seemed to us to be a creative and solidarity-producing process—analogizing sex discrimination to race discrimination. These dangers were obscured by the promise that to discuss and compare oppressions might lead to coalition building and understanding. On an individual psychological level, we empathize with and understand others by comparing their situations with some aspects of our own. Thus, analogies deepen our consciousness and permit us to progress in our thinking. Analogies are an important, perhaps indispensable, tool in individual moral reasoning.

How the Sex/Race Analogy Perpetuates Patterns of Racial Domination

Comparing sexism to racism perpetuates patterns of racial domination by minimizing the impact of racism, rendering it an insignificant phenomenon—one of a laundry list of isms or oppressions that society must suffer. Consider three recognizable patterns: (1) the taking back of center stage from people of color, even in discussions of racism, so that white issues remain or become central in the dialogue; (2) the fostering of essentialism, so that women and people of color are implicitly viewed as belonging to mutually exclusive categories, rendering women of color invisible; and (3) the appropriation of pain or the denial of its existence that results when whites who have compared other oppressions to race discrimination believe they understand the experience of racism.

Taking Back the Center

White supremacy creates in whites the expectation that issues of concern to them will be central in every discourse. Analogies serve to perpetuate this expectation of centrality. The center stage problem occurs because dominant group members are already accustomed to being center stage. They have been treated that way by society; it feels natural, comfortable, and in the order of things.

The harms of discrimination include not only the easily identified disadvantages of the victims (such as exclusion from housing and jobs) and the stigma imposed by the dominant culture, but also the advantages given to those who are not its victims. The white, male, heterosexual societal norm is privileged in such a way that its privilege is rendered invisible.

Because whiteness is the norm, it is easy to forget that it is not the only perspective. Thus, members of dominant groups assume that their perceptions are the pertinent perceptions, that their problems are the ones that need to be addressed, and that in discourse they should be the speaker rather than the listener. Part of being a member of a privileged group is being the center and the subject of all inquiry in which people of color or other nonprivileged groups are the objects. So strong is this expectation of holding center stage that even when a time and place are specifically designated for members of a nonprivileged group to be central, members of the dominant group will often attempt to take back the pivotal focus. They are stealing the center—usually with a complete lack of self-consciousness.

This phenomenon occurred at the annual meeting of Law and Society, where three scholars, all people of color, were invited to speak to the plenary session about how universities might become truly multicultural. Even before the dialogue began, the views of many members of the organization were apparent by their presence or absence at the session. The audience included nearly every person of color who was attending the meeting, yet many whites chose not to attend. When people who are not regarded as entitled to the center move into it, however briefly, they are viewed as usurpers. One reaction of the group temporarily deprived of the center is to make sure that nothing remains for the perceived usurpers to be in the center of. Thus, the whites who did not attend the plenary session, but who would have attended had there been more traditional (i.e., white) speakers, did so in part because they were exercising their privilege not to think in terms of race, and in part because they resented the "out groups" having the center.

Another tactic used by the dominant group is to steal back the center, using guerrilla tactics where necessary. For example, during a talk devoted to the integration of multicultural materials into the core curriculum, a white man got up from the front row and walked noisily to the rear of the room. He then paced the room in a distracting fashion and finally returned to his seat. During the question period he was the first to rise, leaping to his feet to ask a lengthy, rambling question about how multicultural materials could be added to university curricula without disturbing the "canon"—the exact subject of the talk he had just, apparently, not listened to. The speaker answered politely and explained how he had assigned a Navajo creation myth to accompany St. Augustine, which highlighted some similarities between Augustine's thought and pre-Christian belief systems and resulted in each reading enriching the other. He refrained, however, from calling attention to the questioner's rude behavior during the meeting, to his asking the already-answered question, or to his presumption that the material the questioner saw as most relevant to his own life was central and "canonized," while all other reading was peripheral and, hence, dispensable.

Analogies offer protection for the traditional center. At another gathering of law professors, issues of racism, sexism, and homophobia were the focus for the first time in the organization's history. Again at this session, far fewer white males were present than would ordinarily attend the organization's plenary session. After moving presentations by an African American woman, a Latino man, and a gay white man, who each opened their hearts on these subjects, a question and dialogue period began. The first speaker to rise was a white woman, who, after saying that she did not mean to change the topic, said that she wanted to discuss another sort of oppression—that of law professors in the less elite schools. As professors from what is perceived by some as a less-than-elite school, we agree that the topic is important, and it would have interested us at another time. But this questioner had succeeded in depriving the other issues of time devoted (after much struggle) specifically to them, and turned the spotlight once again onto her own concerns. She did this, we believe, not out of malice, but because she too had become a victim of analogical thinking.

The problem of taking back the center exists apart from the issue of analogies; it will be with us as long as any group expects, and is led to expect, to be constantly the center of attention. But the use of analogies exacerbates this problem, for once an analogy is taken to heart, it seems to the center-stealer that she is *not* stealing the center, but rather continuing the discussion on the same topic, and one that she knows well. So when the format of the program implicitly analogized gender and sexual preference to race, the center-stealer was encouraged to think, "Why not go further to another perceived oppression?" When socially subordinated groups are lumped together, oppression begins to look like a uniform problem, and one may neglect the varying and complex contexts of the different groups being addressed. If oppression is all the same, then we are all equally able to discuss each oppression, and there is no felt need for us to listen to and learn from other socially subordinated groups.

Fostering Essentialism

Which leads to our next point: Essentialism is implicit in analogies between sex and race. Angela Harris explains gender essentialism as "[t]he notion that there is a monolithic 'women's experience' that can be described independent of other facets of

experience like race, class, and sexual orientation." She continues: "A corollary to gender essentialism is 'racial essentialism'—the belief that there is a monolithic 'Black Experience,' or 'Chicano Experience'."[3]

To analogize gender to race, one must assume that each is a distinct category, the impact of which can be neatly separated, one from the other. The essentialist critique shows that this division is not possible. Whenever it is attempted, the experience of women of color, who are at the intersection of these categories and cannot divide themselves to compare their own experiences, is rendered invisible. Analogizing sex discrimination to race discrimination makes it seem that all the women are white and all the men are African American. "Moreover, feminist essentialism represents not just an insult to black women, but a broken promise—the promise to listen to women's stories, the promise of feminist method."[4]

The Appropriation of Pain or the Rejection of Its Existence

Many whites think that people of color are obsessed with race and find it hard to understand the emotional and intellectual energy that people of color devote to the subject. But white supremacy privileges whiteness as the normative model. Being the norm allows whites to ignore race, even though they have one, except when they perceive race (usually someone else's) as intruding upon their lives.[5]

Whites need to reject this privilege and recognize and speak about their role in the racial hierarchy. Yet whites cannot speak validly for people of color, but only about their own experiences as whites. Comparing other oppressions to race gives whites a false sense that they fully understand the experience of people of color. Sometimes the profession of understanding by members of a privileged group may even be a guise for a rejection of the existence of the pain of the unprivileged. For people of color, listening to whites who profess to represent the experience of racism feels like an appropriation of the pain of living in a world of racism/white supremacy. The privileging of some groups in society over others is a fact of contemporary American life. It is identifiable in the ordering of societal power between whites and people of color; men and women; heterosexuals and gays and lesbians; and able-bodied and physically challenged people. This societal ordering is clear to children as early as kindergarten.[6]

Judy Scales-Trent has written about her own experience as an African American woman, of "being black and looking white," a woman who thereby inhabits both sides of the privilege dichotomy. As one who was used to being on the unprivileged side of the race dichotomy in some aspects of her life, she discusses how the privilege of being able-bodied allowed her to ignore the pain of an unprivileged woman in a wheelchair, humiliated in seeking access to a meeting place. She realized that her role as the privileged one in that pairing likened her to whites in the racial pairing. The analogy helped her see the role of privilege and how it affects us, presenting another example of how comparisons are useful for promoting understanding. But this insight did not lead her to assume that she could speak for those who are physically challenged; rather, she realized that she needed to listen more carefully.[7]

Not all people who learn about others' oppressions through analogy are blessed with an increased commitment to listening. White people who grasp an analogy between an oppression they have suffered and race discrimination may think they understand the phenomenon of racism/white supremacy in all its aspects. They may believe that their opinions and judgments about race are as cogent as those of victims of racism. In this circumstance, something approximating a lack of standing to speak exists, because the insight gained by

personal experience cannot easily be duplicated—certainly not without careful study of the oppression under scrutiny. The power of comparisons undermines this lack of standing, because by emphasizing similarity and obscuring difference it permits the speaker implicitly to demonstrate authority about both forms of oppression. If we are members of the privileged halves of the social pairs, then what we say about the dichotomy will be listened to by the dominant culture. Thus, when we employ analogies to teach and to show oppression, we should be careful that in borrowing the acknowledged and clear oppression we do not neutralize it, or make it appear interchangeable with the oppression under discussion.

The use of analogies by whites allows them to focus on their own experience and avoid working on understanding racism/white supremacy. Even whites who wish to end discrimination want people of color to teach them about race and are often unwilling to use their personal resources to explore this dangerous subject. As bell hooks writes:

> In talking about race and gender recently, the question most often asked by white women has to do with white women's response to black women or women of color insisting that they are not willing to teach them about their racism—to show the way. They want to know: What should a white person do who is attempting to resist racism? It is problematic to assert that black people and other people of color who are sincerely committed to struggling against white supremacy should be unwilling to help or teach white people.[8]

She says that many people of color have responded with an unwillingness to teach whites about combating racism/white supremacy because it often seems that white people are asking people of color to do all the work. She concludes that "[i]t is our collective responsibility as people of color and as white people who are committed to ending white supremacy to help one another."[9]

hooks encourages people of color to continue to struggle with whites about racism. To whites, the need for such encouragement may seem surprising, because many whites might ask, "How can we work on racism by ourselves, without people of color?" Listening to the reality of people of color *is* very important for learning about the oppression of racism/white supremacy. But whites need to examine their (our) own role in benefiting from that social construct. When white women analogize sexism to racism to emphasize the disadvantages society imposes on women, they (we) must also remember the privileging granted to whites by that same society.

Trying to educate whites about race is a great risk for people of color. They risk not only that whites will not care and will prefer to perpetuate the status quo, but also that even caring whites will not hear or understand the pain of racism. Talking about racism/white supremacy is painful for whites as well, but in a different way. Whites must confront their role as oppressors, or at least as beneficiaries of the racial oppression of others, in a race-based hierarchy. The pain of oppression must be communicated to the dominant group if there is to be any understanding of racism/white supremacy.

Toward Using Analogies Ethically

Given the problems that analogies create and perpetuate, should we ever use them? Analogies can be helpful. They are part of legal discourse, as well as common conversation. Consciousness-raising may be the beginning of knowledge. Starting with ourselves is important, and analogies may enable us to understand the oppression of an-

other in a way we could not without making the comparison. It is important for whites to talk about white supremacy—rather than leaving all the work for people of color—and without drawing false inferences of similarities from analogies. Questions remain regarding whether we can make analogies to race, particularly in legal argument, without reinforcing racism/white supremacy. There are no simple answers to this thorny problem. We will have to continue to struggle with it, and accept that our progress will be slow and tentative.

Epilogue

The Sunday before Yom Kippur, I (Stephanie) go with my parents to my children's Sunday school for the closing service. The rabbi is explaining to the children the meaning of Yom Kippur, the holiest Jewish day, the Day of Atonement. "It is the day," he explains, "when we think of how we could have been better and reconsider what we did that wasn't wonderful."

He tells a story of two men who came to the rabbi before Yom Kippur. The first man said he felt very guilty and unclean and could never be cleansed, because he had once raised a stick and hurt someone. The second man said he could not think of anything very terrible he had done and that he felt pretty good. The rabbi told the first man to go to the field and bring back the largest rock he could find. He told the second man to fill his pockets with pebbles and bring them back to the synagogue, too. The first man found a boulder and with much difficulty carried it to the rabbi. The second man filled his pockets with pebbles, brought them to the rabbi, and emptied his pockets. Pebbles scattered everywhere. Then the rabbi said to the first man, "Now you must carry the rock back and put it back where you found it." To the second man he said, "And you too must gather up all the pebbles and return them to where you found them."

"But how can I do that? That is impossible," said the second man. The rabbi telling the story says that the pebbles are like all the things you have done for which you should wish forgiveness—you have not noticed them, nor kept track. And so the rabbi reminds the children that they should consider when they had ever done things that they should not have done.

He then asks them what looks different in the synagogue. The covering of the dais had been changed to white, which he explains is for purity and cleanliness. He asks the children to stand to see the special Torah covers, also white to symbolize atonement and cleanliness.

My mother leans over to me at this point and says, "Can you imagine how someone black feels, hearing a story like this?"

Although no one in the temple was intending to be racist/white supremacist, the conversation privileged whiteness in a society that is already racist/white supremacist. Is that racism the large rock, the boulder? It must seem truly that large and intractable to people of color. It seems like a boulder to me, when I think consciously about it. Yet it seems that as whites we treat our own racism like so many little pebbles; part of our privilege is that it may seem unimportant to us. So many times we are racist, privileging whiteness, and do not even realize it, and so cannot acknowledge it or atone for it, or even attempt to change our behavior. We, like the second man, say we are not racist, because it is our wish not to be. But wishing cannot make it so. The sooner we can see the boulder *and* the pebbles, the sooner we can try to remove them.

Notes

1. bell hooks, *overcoming white supremacy: a comment*, in TALKING BACK: THINKING FEMINIST, THINKING BLACK 112 (1989).

2. Essentialist thinking reduces a complex being to one "essential characteristic." See ELIZABETH SPELMAN, INESSENTIAL WOMAN: PROBLEMS OF EXCLUSION IN FEMINIST THOUGHT (1988); Kimberlè Crenshaw, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*, 1989 U. CHI. LEGAL F. 139; Angela Harris, *Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory*, 42 STAN. L. REV. 581 (1990).

3. Harris, *supra* at 588.

4. *Id.* at 601.

5. Angela Harris writes, "In this society, it is only white people who have the luxury of 'having no color'; only white people have been able to imagine that sexism and racism are separate experiences." *Id.* at 604. Harris describes a meeting of women law professors who were asked to pick out two or three words to describe who they were. Harris reports that none of the white women mentioned race; all the women of color did. *Id.*

6. *See* FRANCES E. KENDALL, DIVERSITY IN THE CLASSROOM: A MULTICULTURAL APPROACH TO THE EDUCATION OF YOUNG CHILDREN 19–21 (1983) (describing the development of racial awareness and racial attitudes in young children). Although the prevalent view would state that children are "oblivious to differences in color or culture" (*id.* at 19), children's racial awareness and their positive and negative feelings about race appear by age three or four. *Id.* at 20.

7. JUDY SCALES-TRENT, NOTES OF A WHITE BLACK WOMAN (1995).

8. hooks, *supra* at 117.

9. *Id.* at 118.