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Middle-Class / White / Woman: The Unexamined Center in Expressive Therapies Education

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Middle-Class / White / Woman:
The Unexamined Center in Expressive Therapies Education
Capstone Thesis
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Abstract

Counseling psychology and the expressive therapies are majority-white, majority-female professions, and whiteness is the unnamed, normative center of expressive therapies and drama therapy education. As a middle-class white woman, I posit that by failing to examine this center we risk perpetuating the same systems that exacerbate our own and our clients' suffering. I review the available literature and investigate the socio-historical, cultural, and political significance of whiteness and the historical role of white women in maintaining oppressive systems. I then explore the identity reconstruction process for white people seeking to divest from whiteness, specifically looking at the key emotions of guilt and shame. I review how whiteness asserts itself in therapeutic encounters and discuss the need for further research. Finally, I advocate for increased support for therapists-in-training taking on this process.

Keywords: whiteness, white femininity, whiteness in counseling profession, whiteness in the expressive therapies, whiteness in drama therapy, white female therapists, therapist socioeconomic class identity, racism and therapy.

Consider, for example, how age, gender, being an outsider, and association with a neocolonial regime influence what the ethnographer learns. The notion of position refers to how life experiences both enable and inhibit particular kinds of insight.

- R. Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth* (1989, p. 19)

Whiteness is not a culture. There is Irish culture and Italian culture... there is youth culture and drug culture and queer culture; but there is no such thing as white culture. Whiteness has nothing to do with culture and everything to do with social position. It is nothing but a reflection of privilege, and exists for no reason other than to defend it. Without the privileges attached to it, the white race would not exist, and the white skin would have no more social significance than big feet.

- N. Ignatiev (1997)

When we as white women let an investment in institutional credibility take precedence over the action agenda needed to change the power structures and processes that produce elitist and exclusionary conditions, aren't we as white women making an(other) investment in whiteness, renewing, as it were, our allegiance to the race? - K. Davy, *Outing Whiteness: A Feminist/Lesbian Project* (1995, p. 203).

Middle-Class / White / Woman: The Unexamined Center in Expressive Therapies Education

Introduction

The United States was birthed by colonialist, capitalist, white supremacist patriarchy and these ways of functioning have only deepened and spread as our country has developed and its institutions multiplied (Biewen, 2017). As a country we now face undeniable and profound wealth disparities between people of different races, specifically between white people and people of color and most drastically between black Americans and white Americans. The wage gap between men and women continues to grow, as does the wealth gap between the ultra-rich and the working class and working poor (Coates, 2014, and Johnson, Wallack, Dungca, Kowalczyk, Ryan, & Walker, 2017). The number of people "othered" by our institutional and social structures has long since exceeded the number of people benefitting from them.

This group of "Others," in at least one respect, includes white middle-class women. As a white woman who grew up in a white family and attended majority-white colleges and universities, I have had a lifetime of opportunities to observe my fellow white women, especially my fellow white women of middle and owning class status. As I conclude my graduate study and attempt daily to consider the ways centuries-old systems of oppression have contributed to the ill health of millions of citizens of all nations, I wonder why it is so difficult for white women (myself included) to conceptualize the extent to which our most basic daily operations originate from a colonialist, capitalist, white supremacist, patriarchal system of values. As an emerging mental health professional, I fear that by *not* seeing these realities clearly, I am blindly acting in support of these structures, thus supporting the continuation of the illness I seek to alleviate.

Ann Cvetkovich wrote, “what if depression, in the Americas, at least, could be traced to histories of colonialism, genocide, slavery, legal exclusion, and everyday segregation and isolation that haunt all of our lives, rather than to be [merely] biochemical imbalances?” (as cited in Hedva, 2016). In light of recent literature about the effects of trauma on the body and brain both individually and generationally, I assert that the word “depression” in that statement could be interpreted to refer to all mental illnesses. If Cvetkovich’s assertion is true and it is also true that counseling psychology and expressive therapies programs train people to attend to suffering and increase health, then white women in the counseling professions – the majority in our field – have a great deal of work to do, most importantly on ourselves.

If left unexplored, white women’s investment in whiteness and their white racial and class identities will lead them to enforce the very systems of domination that perpetuate suffering and ill health in themselves and the people they serve. Indeed, we white women have historically and contemporarily been just that – enforcers of white supremacy (Rogers, 2016), patriarchy (Butler-Sweet, 2017), and the class hierarchy (Brownstein, 2017). In the following literature review, I will attempt to offer a simple and supported argument for a re-examination of self and practice by my fellow white female clinicians, paying special attention to those of us coming from middle-class backgrounds.

Literature Review

I performed electronic searches in Academic Search Premier, Gender Studies Database, Health Reference Center Academic, JSTOR, PsycINFO, SAGE Journals Online, ScienceDirect College Edition Social & Behavioral Sciences Journal Collection, and SocINDEX. I completed my final search on April 12, 2018. My main search strategy used combinations of keywords for whiteness (white clinicians OR white psychologist OR white racial identity OR whiteness in

therapy), white women (white female therapists OR white female clinicians), racism in therapy (race in therapy OR racism in therapy) class identity in therapy (middle-class clinician OR clinician class identity OR therapist class identity OR psychologist class identity), and how systems of oppression permeate the roots of the mental health field (capitalism OR consumerism OR imperialism OR colonialism OR racism OR classism AND mental health). Additionally, I manually searched the reference lists of the articles resulting from the above searches. I subsequently also performed separate electronic searches of works referenced by Resource Generation, a nonprofit organization focused on mobilizing white and/or wealth and class-privileged people towards racial and economic justice, because their work and perspective aligns with the subject of this literature review.

My initial electronic search of various academic databases yielded a plethora of articles from the tradition of multiculturalism, which is patently not what I was looking for. From the remaining results, I was able to glean a few articles from the “helping professions” (in this case, education, nursing, and social work) that focused on examining whiteness. McIntyre (2002) described leading a process examining whiteness with a group of predominantly white students in a teacher preparation program in the United States in an effort to get them to “see” their own whiteness and begin the process of reevaluation and change. Aveling (2004) wrote about undertaking a similar process with highly educated white women in Australia, focusing more on the colonial identity of the participants. Berg (2008) wrote about situated knowledges – the idea that all knowledge is subjective and gained through experience – and the process she led utilizing the technique of memory work to tell the stories of experiencing their own whiteness and their socialization into it. Rix, Barclay, and Wilson (2014) wrote about the importance of reflexive practice for white, non-Indigenous nurses working with Indigenous Aboriginal renal patients in

Australia. The remaining articles were largely written by scholars in the fields of critical whiteness studies and Canadian social work, as well as a few articles by feminist creative arts therapists.

I was not able to locate any article focusing on the particularities of being a middle-class clinician, a white female clinician, a white female creative therapist, or what effects these lived identities might have on a person's clinical work given their socio-historical meanings. This was a surprise and a great disappointment to me and caused me to reevaluate my research topic. In the discussion section I attempt to analyze the implications of this lack of literature on the fields of counseling psychology and the expressive therapies, as well as on the personal development of emerging clinicians, including myself.

An Invisible Center in Expressive Therapies Education

Ferguson wrote:

The place from which power is exercised is often a hidden place. When we try to pin it down, the center always seems to be somewhere else. Yet we know that this phantom center, elusive as it is, exerts a real, undeniable power over the entire framework of our culture, and over the ways we think about it. (as cited in Nakayama & Krizek, 1999)

In 2013, the American Psychological Association reported that 86.3% of registered psychologists identified as white and 68.3% identified as women (Lin, Nigrinis, Christidis, & Stamm, 2015). In the 2014-2015 academic year, 72.2% of public university students and 77.5% of private university students in psychology graduate programs identified as female. Out of all Master's-level psychology students in the same school year, 71.4% self-identified as white or Caucasian (Cope, Michalski, & Fowler, 2016). Out of all full-time students pursuing a Master's degree in Social Work in the United States in 2015, 84.8% identified as female and 55.4% as

white (Council on Social Work Education, 2016). As a profession whose majority demographic is white women, on one level it makes sense that the basic cultural sensitivity/humility training would start with exposure to the stories of cultural and racialized others. It is concerning that it stops there, with the exploration of these “diverse” identities, leaving unexplored the vantage point from which they are observed.

As Sue & Sue (2016) phrased it, “power, privilege, and oppression influence individuals’ psychological well-being and that subtle bias can have profound influences on conceptualization, diagnosis, and treatment” (as cited in Spanierman & Smith, 2017). What could the possible effects be of not exploring the racial identity held by the majority of the profession, or how gender and race have historically interacted with each other in powerful ways in the case of white women? What could the effects be of neglecting to explore social class and wealth status as aspects of “diversity” and culture, especially how class identity informs definitions of work, health, and care? As future members of the “professional class,” how does this neglect continually recreate our complicity in capitalism and colonialism?

At the university I attend – Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts – expressive therapies graduate students are all required to take a class entitled Power, Privilege, and Oppression (PPO), which fulfills the American Psychological Association’s “multicultural competency” educational requirement. The syllabus devotes one class each to highlighting various othered identity groups and important identity themes: immigration and acculturation; worldviews, values, and intersectionality; ethnicity and race; gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation; social class and age; disability; religion and spirituality; cultural identity formation models; and how issues of power, privilege, and oppression affect the Self. A foundational course like PPO is fated to be inadequate because of the need to start from the very beginning

with students; it must expose them to the breadth of cultural identities and experiences they will encounter in the field, which they may not have encountered before; it must establish a shared vocabulary to describe the power dynamics and inequities of our world; it must encourage the continuation of this learning process. Lesley's PPO class pays special attention to white students' racial identity development and requires white students to write a paper exploring their white privilege. Still, the potency of this identity investigation process depends entirely on who is facilitating the class and whether subsequent professors integrate white racial identity development into their curriculum. As such, completing PPO is potentially the point at which white students' racial identity development stops and at which class-privileged white students are most susceptible to white racial guilt and shame, which I will discuss later in this literature review.

In my own experience as a drama therapy student, I never saw the phantom center of whiteness budge or receive formal address in academic settings (save for one class I took with a politically radical professor). The burden of challenging it consistently fell to people of marginalized identities, most notably people of color, people from poor or working-class backgrounds, people not from the U.S., or people from areas formerly or currently occupied by a colonial power (most notably Puerto Rico). As a white middle-class U.S. citizen attempting to raise her own consciousness around issues of classism, racism, and colonialism, I was left to my own devices to navigate what it meant to be a therapist attempting to commit anti-racist, anti-colonial, and anti-classist acts. Why would that be, if my university was indeed training me to be a healer?

Realizing and owning one's white racial identity, the desired outcome for white people in cultural competency training, is only the first step. Racism, classism, and colonialism exist and

thrive under white supremacy, which depends on the aforementioned center staying hidden and unexamined. It also depends on the lack of conceptualization of Whiteness, which I attempt to illuminate in the following section.

Exploring Whiteness

When I write about whiteness, I am not talking about skin color. Concentrations of melanin in the skin range widely across racial groups, creating a full spectrum of human skin color from the palest pink-beige to the darkest brown. To that end, people across all races and ethnicities are born with albinism, which much of the time leaves them with very low levels of melanin in their skin and gives them the lightest human skin color possible (National Organization for Albinism and Hypopigmentation, 2018). If whiteness was only about low melanin levels and light skin, people with albinism would consistently receive the most privilege and resource across the world and across all racial, ethnic, and national lines. Since it is easy to observe that this is not the case, what is whiteness? Is it a culture? Is it an identity? Is it something that only exists where there are white people, or can it operate in non-white spaces? Is it descriptive of a person's body/identity/culture only, or could it also describe a person's political orientation? Hannah Arendt defined "political" to mean, "Any act performed in public" (as cited in Hedva, 2016). I would like to expand that definition, using it more broadly to describe the way a person "shows up" in the world: how they wield their agency or use their self-instrument in relation to their own being and other beings, in public *and* private spaces.

For the purposes of this literature review, I define whiteness as a socio-historical, collectively embodied system of domination and erasure: a political affiliation and an invisible center. In her seminal work on the social construction of whiteness, Frankenberg

(1993) defined it as, "a set of locations that are historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced" (p. 6). Sleeter (2011) offered several definitions of whiteness as:

(1) a set of social relations in which people are categorized hierarchically by race, and those who are accepted as white collectively hold power and control over material resources; (2) an ideology that renders white power and white people's participation in an oppressive system as invisible to them; and (3) an identity when people of European descent accept these relationships, this ideology, and ways of life lived within this system of relations as "normal" (p. 424).

Shome (2000) understood whiteness as "...a process constituted by an ensemble of social and material practices in which whites (and often non-whites for survival) are invested, by which they are socialized, and through which they are produced" (p. 368). Nakayama and Krizek (1999) argued that whiteness is a discursive space, a place where a dominant reality comes into being, and a strategic rhetoric. Shome (1999) elaborated that whiteness as a discursive phenomenon does not require white bodies to exist, and that rather than being just about bodies and skin color, whiteness is about "the discursive practices that, because of colonialism and neocolonialism, privilege and sustain the global dominance of white imperial subjects and Eurocentric worldviews" (p.108). Warren (2001) observed that, far from only making its mark on the mind, whiteness can also be located in the body, through the way it is performed as an identity. Indeed, Mayor (2012) conceptualized race – and whiteness by proxy – as performed and enacted anew in each encounter.

A Brief History of Whiteness in the United States

There is much to write about when it comes to the history of whiteness and the invention of race, and by choosing any starting point one will inevitably be choosing to include certain parts

of the story and exclude others. Unfortunately, giving a comprehensive and complete history of whiteness (and, by association, capitalism and colonialism) is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, a certain amount of context and history is necessary. Having made this caveat, I will choose to pick up the story with the science of racial classification, which sprang forth from the naturalistic science tradition of the 18th and 19th centuries. Naturalistic science was founded on and proliferated the idea that nature was inherently hierarchical, that there were three races of humans: the Caucasoid, the Mongoloid, and the Negroid (some theorists claimed there were actually five), and that white people, Caucasoids, were the last and most developed link in the evolutionary chain (Wander, Martin, & Nakayama, 1999, p. 15). Basically, naturalistic science was a tool of colonial powers to explain why it was permissible for people of European descent to colonize and enslave non-European peoples – its scholarship occurred during a period of global expansion by European colonizers and the westward expansion of European-descended "settlers" into Indigenous territory in North America. This "proof" of naturally hierarchical racial categories had a reciprocally supportive relationship with accounts by colonial officials and journalists of the cultural, social, technological, and spiritual inferiority of nonwhites in colonies and potential colonies all over the world. Race theory enjoyed great support from religious institutions: presidents, scholars, theologians, and European elites in both Europe and the United States in the 19th century wholeheartedly believed that the mission of the white race was to "civilize and Christianize" the heathen, the savages, and the "less fortunate," who were all lesser beings in God's creation.¹ Efforts at colonization and

¹ Note that the language here – "helping those who are less fortunate (than we are)" – is identical to that used by organizations and individuals to articulate their mission and values. It effectively erases the structural, systemic, historical causes of a person's lack of health or resources and places the blame on that person's "lack of fortune" or unluckiness.

enslavement were proclaimed to be a blessing to African people, who were biologically inferior and thus incapable of reaching "civility," assumed to be the apex of evolution, on their own (Wander, Martin, & Nakayama, 1999, p. 15).

Regarding European colonialism, Wander, Martin, & Nakayama (1999) wrote, "For centuries, Europeans held a firm belief that the best in life was the expansion of self through property and property began and ended with possession of one's body." In order to justify New World slavery, which was *essential* to the economic development of colonies there, slave owners and colonists needed to perform the psychological acrobatics of splitting the bodies of the people they enslaved from the selves of those people and then reducing those selves to sub-human status (p. 16). Systems of "scientific" racial classification are a later and more sophisticated version of these mental contortions. When the time came to structure the nation after the American Revolution, the interests of power (i.e. money and property) predictably won out and the slave-race complex became an official part of the U.S. Constitution and thus American culture, with black slaves quantified as three-fifths of a person for the purposes of political representation² (Wander, Martin, & Nakayama, 1999, p. 17).

The idea that imperialism and colonialism have disappeared is illusionary and incorrect. Besides the fact that the United States and Britain still have colonies, a colonial culture does not just die and evolve into something different after an occupier departs. The cultural structures it created continue to live. Shome (1999) asserted:

A colonial *culture* can remain even when the colonizer has physically departed from the colonized space. This is because one effect of colonialism is that it influences the epistemic structures of the cultures that it subjugates.... Through a dissemination of the

² Indigenous Americans were not acknowledged as citizens in any capacity until the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924, signed under U.S. President Calvin Coolidge (Indigenous Action Media, 2016).

values, languages, and ideologies of 'civilization' and a simultaneous repression of other indigenous forms of knowledge production, colonialism can interpellate the colonized into the epistemic structures and values of Western humanism (p. 111).

Whiteness is a colonial cultural structure that continues to reinvent itself. Today, it seems “natural” that the majority of people on Earth should speak the language of a colonizer (e.g. English, Spanish, French) and the majority of the world’s wealth should be concentrated in white-dominated countries. These huge differences in overall power, wealth, and influence, established over the course of hundreds if not thousands of years, have largely been rationalized through race theory over the past 150 years (Wander, Martin, & Nakayama, 1999, p. 23). Whiteness is an enormously influential force over the actions and interactions of people around the world. It is reproduced by people in their bodies, their actions, their speech, and in their outward creations. Evidence of the sustenance and reproduction of whiteness can be seen “in the history of law, in the extension and denial of credit, in the quality of health care and life expectancy, in the quality of education, and in job opportunities that, in the United States, continue to favor whites over nonwhites” (Wander, Martin, & Nakayama, 1999, p. 20). It is evident every time we read in our history textbooks about the genocide of six million Jewish people during the Holocaust³ but do not see any chapters devoted to the genocides implicit in the creation of nations like Australia or New Zealand, or those predicating the “settlement” of the U.S. Midwest (Wander, Martin, & Nakayama, 1999, pp. 23-24).

Divesting from Whiteness

Sue (2006) wrote: “As long as Whiteness remains invisible and is equated with normality and superiority, people of color will continue to suffer from its oppressive qualities” (p.

³ Or for that matter, the deaths of five million ethnic minorities, queer and gender-nonconforming people, cognitively impaired and mentally ill people during the Holocaust (Ridley, 2015).

22). This is why admitting and owning our whiteness is not enough. The challenge before white people is how to deconstruct whiteness at the individual, institutional, and cultural levels. Said Noel Ignatiev, editor of the journal *Race Traitor*, in a speech at the first “Making and Unmaking of Whiteness” conference:

The task at hand is not to convince more whites to "oppose" racism...there are already enough "anti-racists" to do the job. The task is to make it impossible for anyone to be white. What would white people have to do to accomplish this? They would have to break the laws of whiteness so flagrantly as to destroy the myth of white unanimity. They would have to respond to every manifestation of white supremacy as if it were directed at them (1997).

To begin to deconstruct one's white, colonized identity, a certain framing of the workings of identity is necessary. In her work on gender as an identity structure, Judith Butler (as cited in Warren, 2001), articulated a performative theory of identity, wherein the subject is essentially unstable and constructs themselves/ is constructed through embodied actions, thus eliminating the idea that identities organically arise in and of themselves. Embodied actions, or as Butler (1988) described them, "the stylized repetition of acts," include gestures, habits, movements, and patterns of speech, from the obvious or explicit to the seemingly mundane. "Since gender is instituted through the stylization of the body," she argued, "[it] must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (p. 519). Expanding this theory of identity to racial identity, Warren (2001) said, "Whiteness, while a systemic historical process that is diffuse and abstract, is also located through embodiment – through a repetition of mundane and extraordinary acts that continually make and remake whiteness, all while eluding

scrutiny and detection" (p. 92). According to Mayor (2012), "racial identity is produced and performed, embodied and enacted in the encounter of at least two bodies" (p. 215). Given the history of the very unnatural racial classification system, analyzing one's own whiteness and/or racial identity through a performative lens becomes useful and illuminating for white people trying to divest identity stock from whiteness (a foundational praxis for a white person attempting to commit anti-racist acts).

So, if identity can be reconstructed and a white person can, at the very least, force a wedge between the teachings of whiteness and their perceived notions of self, what does this process look like on the personal level? In her writings about reinterpreting her family's ancestral narratives to include the influences of race and whiteness, Sleeter (2011) encouraged readers to reframe their idea of the process of identity construction. Instead of a continual swapping-out of identifiers or a discarding of identifiers known to be harmful or stigmatized, Sleeter advocated for a "multilayered" vision of identify formation where, "over time, one does not trade one identity for another, but rather builds and weaves layers of identity onto each other" (p. 425).

In this reframing, the point is not to cut out certain threads but to weave different ones in. This interpretation of identity as "woven" speaks to the fact that one cannot solely pluck one thread of identity to examine it without also coming up with several related, intertwined threads (and without, sometimes, picking up the whole blanket itself). Likewise, as soon as someone begins to examine their whiteness, they see how intertwined socioeconomic class and even gender are with the specific tenor of their white racial identity.

Woven Identities: Whiteness, Class, and Gender

A poor white person's whiteness is different from that of a working class white person, is different from the whiteness of a middle-class white person, is different from the whiteness of an owning-class white person. They manifest differently in the bodies and speech of these people who all embody and benefit from the same violent system of racial hierarchy (Sullivan, 2014). When white people talk about racism in public and private discourse, working class and working poor white people are scapegoated fairly consistently for its continuation by middle and upper-class white people. Images of the KKK, Confederate flag-wielders in the South, as well as so-called "white trash" come to mind. Racism is delegated as the property and problem of *those* people with their undeniable, violent, frightening displays of racism; *that* whiteness is the dangerous kind, the kind that propagates inequity and violence, and is what needs to be addressed. It is just too bad that it is out of the control of the "good white people" (Sullivan, 2014).

Where does this idea of goodness originate and on what does it depend? Because a capitalist class structure motivated and informed the invention of whiteness – early English landholders "created it to offer impoverished European immigrants as a substitute for social mobility," convincing them they should be satisfied with the "presumption of liberty open to them but not to enslaved Africans, as a price for accepting their lower position in the class structure" (Sleeter, 2001, p. 429) – being a "good" white person necessarily involves an adherence to and enforcement of that structure.

Richard Dyer, classical film analyst, wrote that whiteness "is enacted in terms of rationality, rigidity, gentility, order, stability, and the capacity to set boundaries," and that whites exemplify "an over-investment in the brain" (as quoted in Davy, 1995, p. 196). Because of their

place in the class structure, poor and working-class white people might never be able to “properly” fulfill the requirements of respectability, gentility, stability, or rigidity set out for them by white capitalism in order to achieve maximum worthiness, and this is by design. It is also by design that they be barred from being able to do so while simultaneously blamed as the sole perpetrators of white supremacist racism and that they see their own domination over people of color, especially black people, as a cornerstone of their worthiness. It is by design that middle and upper class white people do not feel equally implicated in upholding an oppressive system.

Where would whiteness be without middle-class respectability to uphold it and police on its behalf? What would become of this “institutional whiteness, the kind of whiteness used to rationalize white domination and privilege, the kind of whiteness against which white trash is measured and from which it is distanced” (Davy, 1995, p. 195)? As a middle-class white woman in a majority white and female profession, I cannot pull away one thread of these identities without examining the others. I recognize them as deeply, historically intertwined, and I regard their examination as paramount to a white middle-class woman’s development as an ethically practicing clinician. Davy (1995) wrote:

Middle-classness denotes a kind of hard-earned, as opposed to birthright, “gentility” in the form of civility (a bedrock concept of imperialism) that encompasses a plethora of values, morals, and mores that determine sexual propriety, as well as the tenets of respectability in general.... White womanhood has long been understood as an ideology of white supremacy (p. 198).

Black women have long since known of and written about the role white middle class women play in upholding white supremacy. Ida B. Wells, Hazel Carby, and bell hooks are just

three examples of Black female writers who describe the category of “Woman” and to whom this does and does not extend. Schuller (2018) even contended that the creation of the categories “woman” and “man” – sex categories enforcing the idea of sex differentiation – were themselves products of the naturalistic sciences’ efforts at racial differentiation and categorization. Using the example of the 63% of white female voters who voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 election, Schuller explained that the idea of a woman’s role as the keeper of the home and the protector of the private realm is part of the “biopolitical logic that women’s role is to secure the stability of the civilized races. White Republican women who vote for sexual assaulters are not identifying with their whiteness over their gender, as has often been claimed. Rather, they are enacting their womanhood itself.”

Said another way, “Historically, the cult of 'true' womanhood has excluded women of color and some whitewomen (e.g. poor/lower class) and, as Carby (1987) observed, 'the ideology of true womanhood was as racialized a concept in relation to white women as it was in its exclusion of black womanhood’” (as cited in Moon, 1999, p. 55). White women have historically and contemporarily been called out for their investment in patriarchy (Butler-Sweet, 2017), the racial status quo (Rogers, 2016), and class structure (Brownstein, 2017). White women’s credibility in their home spaces and communities depends on their “respectability” and the performance of the role of “good (white) girl,” which depends on enacting traits like purity, temperance, industriousness, thrift, conservative sexual morality, and refined manners. Empowerment, in this setup, only involves aligning oneself with white hegemony and supremacy (Moon, 1999, p. 182). This is why, according to Davy (1995), that “in hegemonic Western cultural economies, good girls are straight-middle-class-white girls; they emerge at the intersection of all four categories” (p. 193).

The concept of respectability and the “good girl” status are both deeply white supremacist. The “good girl” status is not one that has been historically afforded to Black women living in the United States or other white supremacist, colonized nations. As Kimberle Crenshaw argued, “the stereotypes and myths that justified the sexual abuse of black women in slavery continue to be played out in current society” (as cited in Davy, 1995, p. 194). These stereotypes and myths – black women as sexually promiscuous and voracious – are in stark contrast to the purity of the “good girl” role and serve to cast it in relief, delineating it as a separate, distinct, rarified category.

The middle-class woman has an important role in the continuation of white supremacist capitalism and the reproduction of whatever kind of whiteness is most closely aligned with these systems of domination in the U.S. context. “White women signify hegemonic, institutionalized whiteness by virtue of their association with a pure, chaste, asexual [womanhood]... attained and maintained via middle-class respectability, with its implicit heterosexuality” (Davy, 1995, p. 197). This socialization starts in the home. According to hooks (1990), for many black people the home space is potentially a place for resistance to white supremacy, where one is educated in revolution and resistance (at least in relation to racial domination). For white people, the home is where they are educated to take their “proper” place within these relations of domination (Moon, 1999, p. 180). For white women, the home space is often where our caretakers socialize us to take our “proper” place in the patriarchy, and so is a site of much contradiction and power. It is here they first teach us the importance of maintaining order and harmony, which we then reproduce in public spaces for potentially the rest of our lives. This “good white girl” behavior is what hooks (1994) calls “bourgeois decorum.” To maintain this decorum, dissenters to the status quo must be silenced in group settings so that “harmony” can be maintained, i.e. so dominant

ideologies continue to go unchallenged and group members do not have to feel the discomfort of discord. Dissenters are usually punished through various levels of exclusion and ostracism from the group or community for their failure to adhere to “respectable” ways of handling dissent, i.e. avoiding conflict and suppressing critical comments or making them in private (as cited in Moon, 1999, p.183).

White people possess a battery of tools to suppress dissent, force harmony, and manage their own discomfort within interpersonal or group dynamics. These include using euphemisms, or discussing potentially “distasteful” subjects using more “tasteful” language, which serves to disguise the facts of domination or present them as harmless, as well as disguise racism as civility; subjectifying racism instead of the people committing racist actions, so the responsibility is placed on the newly subjectified entity of “racism” instead of the agency of individuals or groups; using passive voice to eliminate the agent of action (e.g. “racist acts are committed all the time” versus “people commit racist acts all the time”); disembodiment (e.g. “society” is responsible for racism); and hyperpoliteness, or the privileging of the *form* of a comment over its *content* (Moon, 1999, pp. 187-191). As summarized by Christine Sleeter (1996), "white people learn to talk about race-related issues in ways that render the status-quo 'natural,' [and therefore] remove ourselves from complicity....We learn to do this so well that it takes some effort to become aware of strategies we use to deflect attention from white racism" (as cited by Shome, 2000, p. 366).

Guilt, shame, and self-loathing. Shame and guilt are inherent and perhaps even necessary features of a white person’s racial identity development, pushing them to continue developing themselves and “do better” (Helms, 2017; Parker & Schwartz, 2002). Indeed, it would be a great cause for concern if a person felt no guilt or shame, was completely comfortable with their racial

history. Nevertheless, shame and guilt can only be helpful for so long until they begin to be more of a hindrance in the development of a healthy sense of self as a white person than a helpful motivating force for positive change (Helms 2017). As Shannon Sullivan (2014) aptly asked in her book *Good White People: The Problem with Middle-Class White Anti-Racism*, “Do guilt and shame about whiteness and white domination help white people work for racial justice?” (p. 118).

So much literature focused on educating white people on their whiteness neglects to address what remains of a white person’s identity after the hypothetical removal of their internalized racism and white domination. Identity work is not like the surgery of malignant tumors; the structures of a person’s identity cannot be removed without finding healthier, more functional, less violent alternatives to take their place. Without these alternatives, there is nothing towards which to move and nothing but the old structures to hold up a person’s sense of self, which effectively guarantees that a white person would not ever fully move away from their investment in whiteness (Sullivan, 2014). To think about white clinicians entering into professional and therapeutic relationships with people of color under these circumstances, in a state of internal disarray or even identity crisis, is disturbing and concerning to say the least. Black feminist writers (such as bell hooks and Toni Morrison) advocating for studies of whiteness warn of how dangerous white people trapped in shame, guilt, and self-loathing can be to themselves and others, especially people of color (as cited in Berg, 2008, p.220). “I’m wary of many white attempts to use [relationships with people of color] to prove – to themselves? Other white people? People of color? A divine being? – that they are not racist,” Sullivan went on to write, “What is at stake for many liberal white people in their dealings with people of color seems to be

achieving self-righteous distance from whiteness and obtaining relief from the affective burdens of white guilt and shame” (2014, p. 151).

Various social and psychological theorists have argued for the usefulness of guilt and shame as motivators for changing behavior, such as June P. Tagney, Helen Block Lewis, and David P. Ausubel (as cited in Parker & Schwartz, 2002). It is a sign of health that white people feel intense guilt in the process of owning up to their racial history of degradation, violence, and death. More and more, critical race theorists have identified white people’s guilt as a paralyzing emotion rather than a motivating one, ultimately impeding and even sending backwards the progress of racial justice movements (Sullivan, 2014, p. 128). White guilt can lead to the curious and violating phenomenon of cultural appropriation: white people commandeering the cultural property of nonwhite peoples in an attempt to fill the perceived cultural void in their culturally white lives. Instead of focusing on the ethno-cultural traditions of *their own* people, white folks coopt and commodify the practices of racialized others (p. 130).

White people’s racial shame is dangerous in its own way when left unchallenged. Numerous psychological studies demonstrate that shame regularly leads to destructive forms of hostility and rage, which in turn spiral into more anger in response (Parker & Schwartz, 2002). This is because shame as an emotion is not characterized by the strengthening of social bonds and connections but instead the turning away of one person from the other, the *abandonment* of one another. Shame thus tends to engender a festering of blame and violence instead of reflection, accountability, and action (Sullivan, 2014, p. 135). A destructive affect is incapable of birthing a constructive affect and thus incapable of generating a healing environment. A sick tree can only bear sick fruit.

So if white people should be moving past guilt and shame as we develop our identities, what should we be moving *towards* (and does feeling guilt and shame make us “less developed”)? In the same way that the practice of deeming one’s self as “good” insofar as one obeys or breaks the rules of white capitalism needs to be reevaluated, so does the practice of deeming one’s self morally “bad” based on one’s supposed regression in their white racial identity development process. It is only natural for any person to want to be good and not bad, even so deeply as to psychologically split themselves off from their “bad” parts. For white people, this most often looks like distancing from other white people, especially poor or Southern white people; erasing white ancestors, regardless of whether they owned slaves; or disconnecting parts of themselves, a common version of which is the strategy of colorblindness. Shome (2000) commented, “This is an interesting strategy of contemporary whiteness: the identification and acknowledgment of a part of itself as bad, corrupt, oppressive, and needing to be fixed, and a separation of itself from that part by denying identification with it” (p. 369).

White people are not making a healthy decision when they attempt to flee their own whiteness or split themselves in this way. According to Sullivan (2014), white people’s identities – anyone’s identity – should not be based on affects like guilt, shame, or betrayal, whose toxicities have a wide emanation from a person’s inner world to their community and beyond. It could be said that whiteness up to this point has been constructed out of toxic affects such as greed, hatred, jealousy, fear, destructive anger, and cruelty. Regardless of the dominion and power one enjoys in the wreckage of these affects, one’s psychosomatic and psychospiritual health only suffer and wither as a result. White people have been ill from white domination for centuries (Sullivan, 2014, pp. 121 & 162).

Whiteness in the therapy space. Within my own field of drama therapy, there is a well-known though eroding idea that drama therapists are like modern-day shamans because of our engagement with the embodied, communal, creative ritual of theatre for therapeutic benefit (Sajjani, 2012, pp. 186-187). This way of conceptualizing our work most likely harkens back to drama therapy's theoretical roots in the fields of anthropology, psychology, and theatre (the first two being highly white and male-centric fields). Sajjani (2012) critiques this line of thinking as deeply oppressive and ethnocentric: "[T]he idea that drama therapists may have considered themselves to be 'shamans' reveals the degree to which theorists and practitioners in this field had permitted themselves to appropriate the language and rituals of others for their own advancement" (p. 187). She argues that cultivating a critical race feminist praxis, which Dua (1999) described as one that "attempts to integrate the way race and gender function together in structuring social inequality," is vital for drama therapists as the field continues to develop (as cited in Sajjani, 2012, p. 188). The unexamined guilt of a white drama therapist does not remain personal and private; it affects the people they work with and the integrity of their practice, and the integrity of the field by proxy.

According to Sullivan (2014), "White people who are concerned about racism need a different set of virtues, a different *ethos* for their racial justice efforts, one that is not centered on dominant, liberal understandings of moral goodness" (p. 147). In other words, if white people are intent on doing racial justice work, our sense of our own worthiness or goodness cannot be what is at stake. If it is, we will never be able to do what needs to be done. Realities like the pervasive silence on the subject of race in the creative arts therapy community will not transform. Said Mayor (2012):

...I have watched issues of race emerge and be avoided by the creative arts therapy community in our writing, research, and training.... The existing writing often problematically includes essentialist discourse, color-blind statements, suggestions that the arts transcend difference, or “how to” instructions for working with racialized groups. Many writers make sweeping statements about how the arts allow people to come together without explanation or evidence, seeming to suggest that the arts transcend these identity categories. Other writers tend to avoid directly discussing the issue of race, instead employing euphemisms like “at-risk youth,” “immigrants and refugees,” and “multiculturalism.” Many of the authors problematically use “American” to describe White therapists and “culturally different” or “minority culture” to describe Persons-of-Color, thus reinforcing whiteness as the normative subject (pp. 214-215).

Other researchers have observed the “seeping” of whiteness and bourgeois decorum into therapeutic spaces and discourse. Helms (2017) wrote about the plethora of white researchers, teachers, and practitioners writing about white privilege or racism and addressing multicultural issues in their fields yet neglecting to reflect on how their internalized Whiteness has impeded the fulfillment of their scholarly and professional goals. Wallis & Singh (2014) conducted focus group discussions with white systemic psychotherapists (both students and trainers) about whiteness and then analyzed the transcripts using Foucauldian data analysis. They illuminated three major discourses in the way that group talked about their own whiteness: whiteness as the invisible norm, “political correctness” (which seemed to be a euphemism for how white fear, guilt, and shame show themselves in discussions about race), and “systemic therapy discourse,” or talking about the ways whiteness manifests in the therapeutic relationship.

Lee and Bhuyan (2013) used poststructural discourse analysis to study audio-recorded sessions between white therapists and racialized immigrant clients from an urban community mental health center in Canada, exploring the ways whiteness shows up in and shapes clinical encounters. Not surprisingly, they found that despite the therapists' best intentions or level of experience working with racialized others, they maintained whiteness as an unmarked norm in their assessments and conversation, leaving the clients to figure out how to respond to, negotiate with, and resist whiteness.

When a person's clinician is their oppressor, a therapeutic relationship is impossible. White clinicians and expressive therapists need to engage in solidarity work and attempt allyship, which can include many different things but which begins with self-work by the majority group. According to Spanierman and Smith (2017), white people attempting allyship will:

...demonstrate nuanced understanding of institutional racism and White privilege...enact a continual process of self-reflection about their own racism and positionality...express a sense of responsibility and commitment to using their racial privilege in ways that promote equity...engage in actions to disrupt racism and the status quo on micro and macro levels...participate in coalition building and work in solidarity with people of color...and encounter resistance from other White individuals (pp. 608-609).

For white clinicians and clinicians-in-training in the United States, attempting allyship involves cultivating a nuanced understanding of not just their white privilege, but their investment in whiteness as a system of domination on material and spiritual levels. This necessarily involves cultivating an understanding of the ongoing workings of colonialism and the ways the United States' economic system was and is built on the racial domination of white people over nonwhite people. For middle-class clinicians and clinicians-in-training, it involves

recognizing that one's class status – in other words, one's economic power – was constructed by and within that same system, and thus made possible by the domination and dispossession of nonwhite people, especially those of African and indigenous descent. For middle-class white clinicians and clinicians-in-training who were socialized as women, attempting solidarity and allyship involves understanding the ways white women have repeatedly upheld systems of oppression while simultaneously engaging in white “savior” or “helper” discourse, relying on myths of white female innocence and fragility to disguise and protect their true intentions.

Discussion

As I exit academia and begin the process of finding my identity as a clinician, I feel that more important than finding my clinical specialization is figuring out how, to put it bluntly, not to be a weapon while I do my work. I wanted this paper to be about how the fields of mental health, psychology, and social work find their roots, like all American institutions, in power-imbalanced systems and the domination of many for the benefit of a few. I wanted to contribute to the literature by examining how whiteness, middle-classness, and socialized femininity shape the way we make decisions and converse about mental health in this country. I wanted to dissect the identity of the typical “helping professional” and explore how the mental health profession/industry is tied up in Whiteness, colonialism, capitalism, and state violence. I was only partly able to do so because of the current dearth of research in this area.

The mental health profession – a term I use to include the fields of social services, mental health counseling, creative arts therapies, and behavioral health – certainly was not designed to uplift people at the margins and encourage people's liberation from oppression. Having direct lineage in the naturalistic sciences, the medical model, and Freud's Euro-centric misogynist psychological theories, a radical field we are not. Perhaps we may never be at large. I believe it

would be helpful for therapists-in-training to learn a critical history of their profession as part of their training, but more research needs to exist in order for that to happen.

Constructing this literature review also made apparent the true absence of research pertaining to whiteness in therapy, the sociohistorical role of white women, and how these both might affect a white female clinician's practice. It is clear the more research needs to be done, especially qualitative research by white female therapists themselves that frames the subject in the personal and professional instead of just the theoretical. As a drama therapist, I am curious to explore the role of the middle-class white woman using Robert Landy's Role Theory and Judith Butler's work on performative identity, as I believe it would be helpful for drama therapists to have literature from their own field exploring the significance of white female counselor identity.

Each clinician's practice is a political entity, regardless of whether it is conceived that way; as agents seeking to affect change, the way a therapist shows up *matters*. Perhaps just for the sake of my own sanity, I have to believe that there are other emerging mental health professionals who are deeply disturbed by the state of the field, who are searching for wisdom for the future by examining the past. There have to be people whose loyalty to the field is tenuous and thinning or even nonexistent, but who know that mental and emotional health are a basic human right, essential to the kind of future we hope to create. My true hope is that as the field continues to progress into the future, it progresses politically and socially as well.

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