

The Five Refusals of White Supremacy

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Abstract: This article draws on the work of Charles Mills to posit white supremacy as a global political, economic and cultural system. Resistance among people of color is, and has always been, widespread. The focus here, however, is on what Mills (1997:18) describes as the ‘epistemology of ignorance’ among whites themselves, serving to preserve a sense of self as decent in the face of privileges dependent upon obvious injustices against (non-white) others. Five themes are identified within a broad and multidisciplinary range of literature, described here as the ‘five refusals’ of white supremacy. These are points at which white ignorance must be actively maintained in order to preserve both sense of the self and the wider structures of white privilege and dominance. There is a refusal of the humanity of the other – and a willingness to allow violence and exploitation to be inflicted. There is a refusal to listen to or acknowledge the experience of the other – resulting in marginalization and active silencing. There is a refusal not just to confront long and violent histories of white domination, but to recognize how these continue to shape injustice into the present. There is a refusal to share space, particularly residential space, with resulting segregated geographies that perpetuate inequality and insulate white ignorance. Finally there is a refusal to face structural causes – capitalism as it has intertwined with white supremacy from its earliest beginnings. To undo one requires the undoing of the others. For each refusal there is a potential affirmation, presented here in hope that they might provide an understanding of the breadth of work required to dismantle white supremacy and of the multiple points for intervention.

Introduction

White supremacy has come to inhabit a number of meanings over the centuries, the most comfortable, common sense version of it limited to the extreme racism of those openly preaching hate against others. Carol Anderson (2016: 100) describes the constant narrowing of its definitions as “the whittling down of racism to sheet-wearing goons,” which excludes ever greater numbers of people from being racist simply by shifting the definition rather than by any meaningful shift in practice or belief that leaves deep racial inequalities intact. While they may encapsulate an aspect of white supremacist violence and hatred, the existence of individuals and small groups cannot explain racism’s ongoing death-dealing inequalities of wealth and possibility (Gilmore 2002). These facts require a deeper understandings of the workings of domination, and the ways in which race connects to structural and systemic, as well as personal and bodily, violence and exploitation. In the words of critical race theorist, Francis Lee Ansley (1989: 1024):

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By "white supremacy" I do not mean to allude only to the self-conscious racism of white supremacist hate groups. I refer instead to a political, economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings.

This broader sense of white supremacy as a system of dominance "daily re-enacted" is the starting point here, understood as a continuously developing, violent historical construction built through multiple stages of colonial conquest, genocide and imperialism.

The ongoing need to dismantle such systemic white supremacy has been an important focus of research, critical thought and activism. Too often, however, it has been seen as belonging only to the area of "race relations" within the academic fields of sociology or ethnic studies, an object of study set apart from other disciplines (Mills 2003). It is rarely acknowledged as the institutional framework for them all, the status quo, the color of the "universal," the definition of "normal," the "objective" viewpoint. As Charles Mills (1997: 1-2) writes in *The Racial Contract*:

[Although white supremacy] covers more than two thousand years of Western political thought and runs the ostensible gamut of political systems, there will be no mention of the basic political system that has shaped the world for the past several hundred years. And this omission is not accidental. Rather, it reflects the fact that standard textbooks and courses have for the most part been written and designed by whites, who take their racial privilege so much for granted that they do not even see it as political, as a form of domination ... It is just taken for granted; it is the background against which other systems, which we are to see as political, are highlighted.

Those with power in the many interlocking areas within this system have actively built and adapted existing historical structures and spaces to maintain this dominance. The shared technologies, strategies and publications that first made white supremacy a truly global phenomenon through colonial rule are well documented, if not well known (Lake and Reynolds 2008). They have been maintained and reinvigorated into the present (Füredi 1999, Gilmore 2007, Goldberg 2009, Woods 1998). To survive, however, this visibly unjust status quo has relied primarily on the passive support of the wider population—in particular, an active form of not-seeing, not-thinking, and not-feeling for those who suffer under it. As Charles Mills (1997: 18) continues:

[It is] an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made. ... Whiteness ... is a cognitive model that precludes self-transparency and genuine understanding of social realities.

Wendell Berry (2010: 19), in a reflection on his own family history of slave-owning, writes in way that parallels Charles Mills' observation above:

[W]ithin the language there was a silence, an emptiness, of exactly the shape of the humanity of the black man; the language I spoke in my childhood and youth was in that way analogous to a mold in which a statue is to be cast. The operations, then, were that one could, by a careful observance of the premises of the language, keep the hollow empty and thus avoid the pain of the recognition of the humanity of an oppressed people and of one's own guilt in their oppression.

Berry's words offer a useful heuristic of an emptiness in the center of things, words that cannot be said or even thought without forcing a reckoning of privilege and self-awareness of one's own position within the interlocking structures of race, class and gender.

This project of dehumanization at every level has stretched over hundreds of years. It "marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it" (Freire 2000: 50). As Mills (1997: 93) elaborates:

The Racial Contract creates a racialized moral psychology. Whites will then act in racist ways while thinking of themselves as acting morally. In other words, they will experience genuine cognitive difficulties in recognizing certain behavior patterns as racist.

To understand that this is a world dependent on the ignorance of the privileged, is to understand why the oppressed must take the lead in changing this world as part of the vocation of becoming more fully human. But this is a collective process through which we come to understand that we produce our own social realities. Thus "transforming that reality is an historical task, a task for humanity" (Freire 2000: 51).

As Berry (2010: 19) says, for those in the position of privilege, change means allowing the hollow to "fill with the substance of a life that one must recognize as human and demanding." But this is not enough. A true transformation is only possible through joining together and working to transform the internal and the structural aspects of white supremacy. This involves the recognition of the intimate and personal nature of the internal emptiness that is co-constitutive with the systems and structures of an external social reality.

White Supremacy: Five Refusals

Drawing from the literature on the nature of white supremacy, five interconnected themes emerge around what white supremacy works hardest to destroy or marginalize. These are framed here as five interlocking refusals that are maintained to protect the hollowness at the core. There are five key moments where the eyes must be shut and the ears closed to reality. They underpin the inability to recognize another as "human and demanding" and are in turn underpinned by it

- First, refusing to acknowledge much less reckon with the depths of violence inflicted upon body, mind and soul.
- Second, clinging to the privileges emerging from a racialized hierarchy and blocking the voices that call into question those privileges, which are also defined by class and gender.
- Third, refusing to acknowledge the weight of history instead of actively coming to terms with the different ways in which our past continues into the present.
- Fourth, denying responsibility for white supremacy's spatial consequences, where a refusal to share space and resources deepens inequalities and maintains both white ignorance and dominance.
- Fifth, refusing to get down to roots—to acknowledge structure and grapple with the exploitative nature of capitalism and the centrality of racial logics in capitalist development that has ensured the longevity of both economic exploitation and racism.

These crippling limitations on knowledge are maintained and developed in support of white supremacy and internalized to different degrees and in different ways by everyone in a society (hooks 1989). To identify the five refusals is not to say that there is consensus around how each works. There are no easy answers about how to overcome them. Only the broadest outlines are sketched here of what needs to be centered in the hollow space. The ideas presented here may be further developed if they are useful in dismantling Mills' "global cognitive dysfunctions" through both our personal relationships and intellectual endeavors.

The Meaning of "Race"

Before outlining the five themes, a quick note is needed on how race is understood. Despite its axiomatic nature for cultural studies, the understanding that "race" as a concept is socially constructed it is still arguably not yet part of a wider common sense. "Race" as a signifier for individual characteristics has no basis in biology. Rather ideologies surrounding it have been consciously developed in the service of European expansion and domination and used to flatten human diversity—and to deny humanity altogether. In the United States, one drop of black blood has long marked an African American, while a Native American must demonstrate that they are at least a quarter to "officially" consider themselves as such. By default, those of mixed Native American and Black heritage (Jimi Hendrix and Rosa Parks, for example), are classified as African American. How have two such contrasting definitions of "race" so easily been accepted? In the Latin American or French colonial context a very different system of racial hierarchy or stratification has been at play, with a spectrum of racial classifications each named and ranked in what Albert Memmi (2013: 106) has called the "pyramid of tyrannies." Thus race has been imbued with very different meanings and markers in different contexts; they have never been fixed. As Patrick Wolfe (2016: 18) argues:

Race, it cannot be stressed strongly enough, is a process, not an ontology, its varying modalities so many dialectical symptoms of the ever-shifting hegemonic balance between those with a will to colonize and those with a will to be free, severally racialized in relation to each other. Race registers the state of colonial hostilities. The common factor is Whiteness ... the overriding goal is White supremacy.

"Whiteness" is as constructed and conflicted a category as any other, forged from bottom up and top down with definitions that have shifted to include and exclude different groups such as the "Irish" or the "Jews," while also splintering along the many lines of gender, class, sexuality, age, and ability (Dyer 1997, Alcoff 2015, Ignatiev 1995, and Roediger 2007). Yet all of these various constructions of race have, from the beginning, taken on a vile and violent materiality to support a broader system of white supremacy.

Centering Humanity

It is perhaps easiest to start with what Berry describes as the shape to the emptiness formed at the heart of white supremacy—the living, breathing human being. It is easier to understand, one might think, than the larger political and economic systems that grow from and reinforce white supremacy. As Ta-Nahisi Coates (2015: 10) writes, a focus on structure often:

serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth. You must never look away from this. You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body.

This violence can come whether or not you struggle or stay silent, whether or not you stand or run. It is made even more vivid in the poetic prose of Audre Lorde (2013: 119):

But Black women and our children know the fabric of our lives is stitched with violence and with hatred, that there is no rest. We do not deal with it only on the picket lines, or in dark midnight alleys, or in the places where we dare to verbalize our resistance. For us, increasingly, violence weaves through the daily tissues of our living—in the supermarket, in the classroom, in the elevator, in the clinic and the schoolyard, from the plumber, the baker, the saleswoman, the bus driver, the bank teller, the waitress who does not serve us.

Some problems we share as women, some we do not. You fear your children will grow up to join the patriarchy and testify against you, we fear our children will be dragged from a car and shot down in the street, and you will turn your backs upon the reasons they are dying.

It is freedom from this level of violence that separates one race from all of the rest, marking how whiteness gives a kind of freedom, safety, anonymity and comfort unavailable to others. Cheryl Harris (2011) and Sara Ahmed (2007), among others, describe this as one of the key aspects of whiteness, a minimum level of privilege belonging to white skin even for those for whom few other privileges exists.

Under a white supremacist system, the violence that operates on bodies is sanctioned at the level of system and structure. The institutionalization of police brutality and murder are not issues of the individual, but rather functions of the particular role of the police as armed agents of the state (Alexander 2011; Taylor 2016). Violence can also be found in the concentration of poverty, unemployment, slum housing, the withholding of resources, and the denial of opportunity for a full life. Rob Nixon (2011) describes what he calls “slow violence,” the daily and unspectacular damage inflicted on poor communities through the unfolding of environmental catastrophes such as long-term toxic poisoning resulting in cancers, birth defects, early death. Such structural and institutional forms of violence are widespread, and despite the many differences that result from very different geographies and histories, similarities can always be found in those who bear the brunt of them (Okiihiro 2016, Pulido 1996, Wolfe 2016). As Christina Heatherton (2018: 169) writes:

Fear, especially fear of impending bodily harm, is not an existential state nor a “subpolitical emotion” but a condition produced through specific shifts in the political economy.

Both the individual and the institutional levels also connect to the global. For example, Andrea Smith (2012) argues that the principle logics maintaining white supremacy consist of three pillars that each refuse a shared humanity:

1. the logic of slavery which marks all black bodies as property, whether it be maintained through slavery, sharecropping or the prison-industrial complex;
2. the logic of genocide, that marks indigenous bodies for extinction or assimilation to give clear title to land and resources; and
3. the logic of Orientalism that marks certain people or nations as “permanent foreign threats” to empire, continuously rebuilding consensus around the logics of slavery and genocide in the face of an external enemy.

It is these logics that drive decades of war in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world. Again, it is key here to focus on the logics rather than the categories, for the categories can shift just as racial hierarchies have been able to shift to accommodate changes that maintain

the larger system intact. Yet it the color line remains, as Angela Davis (2017: 137-138) writes:

More often than not, universal categories have been clandestinely racialized. Any critical engagement with racism requires us to understand the tyranny of the universal. For most of our history the very category “human” has not embraced Black people and people of color.

A growing body of theoretical work has emerged from Latin America, Africa and Asia have challenged the violent logics of the color line as they have been embedded very differently around the world. A multiplicity of racial categorizations imposed through colonial domination have shifted and changed in multiple ways, yet continue to shape the world and connect nations and peoples more broadly into hierarchies of exploitation (see among others Mignolo 2012, Mbembe 2015, Santos 2016, and Stoler 2013). These logics must be undone. These divisions and hierarchies between human beings must be erased.

Centering Experience

These white supremacist logics work through categories and hierarchies to deny humanity, which in turn underpins a widespread lack of empathy and denial of experience and voice. As Charles Mills (1997: 85) writes of a system based on racialized exploitation, “it requires in whites the cultivation of patterns of affect and empathy that are only weakly, if at all, influenced by nonwhite suffering.” The maintenance of such patterns have required the marginalization of those voices and experiences that could challenge them, which has meant the marginalization of all those on one side of the color line.

From the beginning Du Bois described the global nature of that line, and the fact that white supremacy has been actively contested from that position from the beginning. It is also the reason that Du Bois was actively marginalized from the Chicago School as it consolidated its power and centrality in the fields of sociology, urban studies, and ethnic studies, despite his seminal work in each of these areas (Morris 2015, Yu 2001). While Du Bois achieved all he did in a period that also saw the rise of eugenics and other openly white supremacist pseudo-scientific theories, the academy continues to be experienced as a disrespectful, if not openly hostile, environment for people of color (Collins 2012, Mahtani 2014, Pulido 2002). Race remains a marker that places people at risk no matter their profession or standing. As Elijah Anderson (2011: 256) writes: “blacks can still find the color line sharply drawn at any moment. ... In the “nigger moment” the black person is effectively “put back in his place” — a situation that many in the middle class thought they would never have to negotiate.”

White supremacy has never been a thing of the past, rather it has carried all the weight of past conventions and language behind it to silence and marginalize non-white voices. For hundreds of years, as Europeans raced to claim the entirety of the planet, the racial superiority of the “white race” was purposively built and “scientifically” proven by numerous figures central to the development of anthropology, biology, geography, medicine, political science, sociology and philosophy. Some of these figures, such as Bacon, Locke, and Kant, are still respected, their most openly racist theorizations in support of conquest-by-virtue-of-white-superiority allowed to sink into oblivion alongside the reams of academic work emerging from now-discredited fields such as eugenics and phrenology (Mills 1997). They busied themselves drawing racialized lines between civilization and savagery to justify indescribable violence. They published and spoke to great public acclaim, establishing distinctions between who had a right to create theory or do science or plan cities, and who existed simply to be studied and controlled. In the process, they helped to weld together a

common sense notion of a white race from many classes, cultures, and nationalities that had always been understood as distinct, defining white in opposition to non-white. Working classes and immigrant groups themselves also worked themselves to define their own white identities. In a white supremacist system, those able to choose one side of the line over the other usually did so (Harris 2011, Ignatiev 1995, Roediger 2007).

It is hardly surprising, that a system of domination should isolate, marginalize and silence those who carry, and speak out against, its full weight. The silencing has taken many forms, one among them the enforced education in colonizer languages and the often successful attempts to destroy indigenous languages altogether from across Africa to North and South America (Djebar 1995, Mignolo 2012, Thiong'o 1986). This is paralleled by "the pernicious belief that epistemic validity matters only to Western-educated populations," whether because they hold a distinctive sense of time or understandings of evidence (Trouillot 1995: 7). These silences are equally maintained through violent suppression, limiting access to adequate education, particularly higher education, limiting access to knowledge through the media whether as reader or creator, and incarceration among other methods.

It is this ongoing silencing and marginalization that remain troubling about the emerging fields of whiteness, white privilege, or white studies. As Sara Ahmed (2004) writes, destabilizing and denaturalizing white identities for whites is an important political project. But in many ways making whites conscious of privilege is simply clarifying what most people of color have always known and experienced. Making white privilege the focus of attention also risks recentering white experience and voice in anti-racist, anti-white-supremacist struggles. It is true that white privilege allows whites to benefit from an oppressive system without actively engaging in it or themselves expressing racist ideas. But a focus on white privilege shifts attention onto individual whites once again, rather than the wider structures of white supremacy that must be identified and dismantled (Pulido 2015). The work to dismantle white supremacy is required of all, but it is the experiences of people of color that illuminate the totality of the existing systems of oppression, and theirs the voices that must be made central to the struggle.

Centering History

The maintenance of white supremacy rests on the dehumanization of people of color in contrast to white humanity and the centering of white thought through the marginalization of other voices and experiences. It also depends on the erasure of their histories, and the rewriting of Europe's own violent histories of conquest and genocide. Europeans themselves have legitimized their own dominance through particular retellings of history. For example, Europeans see themselves as inheritors of Greek civilization as the birthplace of rational thought, and they claim that Anglo-Saxon democratic traditions are the basis of the modern rule of law (Lake and Reynolds 2008, Mills 1997). Multiple versions of this dominant view have argued that Europeans brought progress, enlightenment, civilization and trains that ran on time to the rest of the world and that such benefits outweighed any costs. This refusal to confront the irrational violence, racism, and myopia of the European past limits any ability to achieve real change. As Frederick Douglass stated in 1855, "America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future" (Douglass, 1855).

There exists, however, a rich, oppositional historiography that unpicks these limited narratives. Michel Rolph Trouillot (1995: 26) writes of history as a "bundle of silences." Its

creation involves particular choices at certain points in a subjective process that can never be “neutral”; these choices are the legitimating of sources, the assembly of the archive, the creation of the narrative and the final “moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance).” Trouillot points to the marginalization of the Haitian Revolution in mainstream histories despite its being the first great challenge to the global colonial system and to the French republicans who proclaimed “the rights of man.” Haiti’s revolution disturbed the sense of natural order held by Europeans because it lay completely outside the limits of what European historians believed *possible*. The idea of a self-governing nation of former slaves violated all they held true about the nature of slaves and the nature of themselves as benevolent masters. It also revealed the hypocrisy of French and American intellectuals who used rhetoric about universal rights. Most of all, a successful slave revolt conflicted with the material interests of North American slave holders and “revolutionary” French merchants who profited from the slave trade and the production of sugar in the Caribbean.

Undoing the standard European narrative that erases the Haitian Revolution from memory not only offers new histories of struggle and resistance, but also exposes the limits set by white supremacy on what can be thought and what can be written, particularly in Eurocentric frameworks of thought. These are the points of vulnerability. Again, the violence inherent in the system is confronted, as Trouillot (1995: 48) notes that “one ‘silences’ a fact or an individual as a silencer silences a gun.”

It is precisely this silencing that the Subaltern Studies group worked to undo, with a focus primarily on South Asia. Gayatri Spivak (1988: 3) describes their work of historiography as a strategy, taking the elite histories of colonial rule and upending them to locate the agency of change not in colonial powers but in the insurgent. The long denial of such subaltern agency, and marginalization of their voices has had consequences reaching far beyond the individual. In trying to understand this, Walter Rodney (1981: 225) describes the stakes of such silencing: “The removal from history follows logically from the loss of power which colonialism represented. The power to act independently is the guarantee to participate actively and consciously in history.”

Centering Geographies

It is not just control over narratives of time that has been pivotal in the maintenance of white supremacy, but control over space. It is domination over land that has made possible the multiple extractions of, first, colonialism, leading to the Industrial Revolution and the world as we know it today, and then a shifting imperialism demanding tea, coffee, soya, beef, minerals, wood, water... anything that can be made profitable. Thus, as described by Andrea Smith (2012), one of primary logics of white supremacy has been the genocide of indigenous peoples. This has underpinned the past and present in European settler colonies in the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, while it can be seen in its original form in the continuing violence against indigenous peoples across the Americas, Asia and Africa (Bonds and Inwood 2016, Totten and Hitchcock 2011). Mills (1997: 42) has described how abstract depictions of space in service of empire and expansion enter into a circular logic, in which a space is depicted as “dominated by individuals (whether persons or subpersons) of a certain race” while in turn individuals are “imprinted with the characteristics of a certain kind of space.” Mill (1997: 50) adds:

Part of the purpose of the color line/apartheid/jim crow is to maintain these spaces in their place, to have the checkerboard of virtue and vice, light and dark space, ours and

theirs, clearly demarcated so that the human geography prescribed by the Racial Contract can be preserved.

This demarcation marks not just the racial lines of residence, but also political lines of community. Mills (1997: 51) continues:

In entering these (dark) spaces, one is entering a region normatively discontinuous with white political space, where the rules are different in ways ranging from differential funding (school resources, garbage collection, infrastructural repair) to the absence of police protection.

These geographies are produced through beliefs in white supremacy, or at a minimum the importance of preserving space reserved exclusively for whites in maintaining property values. The experience of living in a zone of privilege also work to shape and reinforce white supremacist attitudes. Creating worlds that operate by different rules and at a distance supports white innocence. Active refusal is not required to remain ignorant of how deep inequality and injustice go on the other side of the tracks. Inertia is sufficient. Part of white privilege is to be insulated from dirty and dangerous streets, slum housing, incinerators, bad drains, and the multiple other noxious elements pushed onto certain neighborhoods (Pulido 2000). Those conditions lead to multigenerational poverty and deprivation along a multitude of indicators, and they result in limited possibilities for a fullness of life and a measurably shorter lifespan (Gilmore 2002, Sharkey 2008). At the same time, generations grow up never having to share space with the “other.” Instead they use social shorthand, equating certain people with a defined space and that space with a stereotype of the people who inhabit it, making almost unconscious the fear of anyone who is “out of place.” As Elijah Anderson (2011: 29) writes:

The most powerfully imagined neighborhood is the iconic black ghetto ... associated in the minds of outsiders with poverty, crime, and violence. This icon is by definition a figment of the imagination of those with little or no direct experience ... yet, when a black person navigates space outside the ghetto, those he encounters very often make reference to this residential area in order to make sense of him.

Several other “iconic” spaces are identified with people of color—they are the favela or slum, the prison, the camp, the reservation. Each of these spaces has become a bounded entity that is used to define the sub-humanity of human beings, even as each works to limit, contain and to kill. As Angela Davis (2017: 167) writes:

[These spaces] represent the increasingly global strategy of dealing with populations of people of color and immigrant populations from the countries of the Global South as surplus populations, as disposable populations. Put them all in a vast garbage bin ... and in the meantime, create the ideological illusion that the surrounding society is safer and more free.

These are the spaces created by white supremacy that in turn support and shape it. This is why, in the words of Ruth Gilmore (2002: 16): “A geographical imperative lies at the heart of every struggle for social justice.”

Centering Structure

All of the elements considered thus far come together in the political-economic structures of white supremacy. It is difficult enough to name and openly challenge capitalism, but harder to understand just how racial ideologies and capitalism have always been intertwined and have together structured the world as we know it. This is partly due to the complexity of this intertwining, though it has been comprehensively written and theorized and historically documented in a way that can only be briefly touched upon here. The connection between

white supremacy and an economic system of exploitation escapes attention primarily because it represents a direct challenge to a widely held and dominant understanding of the world that has so naturalized white dominance that seeing it for what it is becomes impossible.

These structures are firmly rooted in history that begins 500 years ago, when Columbus's encounter with the New World marked a new stage in world thought and development. Eric Williams (1989) writes of the first English slave-trading expedition of 1562, the growing importance of the triangular trade between England, Africa and the West Indies and America. The wealth generated from trade and sugar was channeled into banking, insurance, and industry. These are the profits that made investment in the Industrial Revolution possible, that drove the continuous development of factories, and that pushed forward new eras of colonialism and global domination. As Rodney (1981) explains, European and American development have been built directly upon the underdevelopment of the rest of the world, with nation and tribe stripped of assets and resources and left to struggle under immense burdens of debt and imposed austerity measures. This process has been theorized in different ways with reference to colonialism, imperialism and neoliberalism: core and periphery (Frank 1967), world systems theory (Quijano and Wallerstein 1992, Wallerstein 2004), and the incorporation of colonial racial dynamics into the modern/colonial world system (Mignolo 2012). Fanon (1961: 53; 1963: 96) encapsulates what the domination of white supremacy has meant at a global level:¹

The masses battle with the same poverty, wrestle with the same age-old gestures, and delineate what we could call the geography of hunger with their shrunken bellies. A world of underdevelopment, a world of poverty and inhumanity. But also a world without doctors, without engineers, without administrators. Facing this world, the European nations wallow in the most ostentatious opulence. The European opulence is literally a scandal for it was built on the backs of slaves, it has fed on the blood of slaves, and it owes its very existence to the soil and subsoil of the underdeveloped world. Europe's well-being and progress were built with the sweat and corpses of blacks, Arabs, Indians, and Asians. This we are determined never to forget.

There is a convergence in theorizing about racism and capitalism among a number of others working in different places. Within American studies, the work of Howard Omi and Michael Winant (1986: 55, 60) on racial formation has been foundational. They define racial formation as the "sociohistorical processes by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed and destroyed." This operates at all scales:

Society is suffused with racial projects, large and small, to which all are subjected ... it is not possible to represent race discursively without simultaneously locating it, explicitly or implicitly, in a social structural (and historical) context. Nor is it possible to organize, maintain, or transform social structures without simultaneously engaging once more ... in racial signification.

Stuart Hall (1980: 338) works along very similar lines in exploring the relationships between ideologies of race and their socio-political and historical context:

One must start, then, from the concrete historical "work" which racism accomplishes under specific historical conditions—as a set of economic, political and ideological practices, of a distinctive kind, concretely articulated with other practices in a social formation.

This is a framework that incorporates the understanding that racism can shift and change in dialectical relationship with economic and political structures. This highlights the

understanding that racism is not a static holdover from the past. Rather, it is renewed and reinvented to do the “work” of maintaining white dominance, while also offering hope in our ability to intervene and thereby shift the whole.

Okihiro (2016) has built on both of these theories, drawing particularly on black feminist work from the Black Women’s Alliance, Combahee River Collective, Angela Davis, and Patricia Hill Collins to incorporate their understandings of the intersections of race with gender, class, nationality. He prefers “social formations” to “racial formations” as able to encompass all of these different intersections into account. A final framework emerges from the work of Patricia Hill Collins (2012), who turns both to political economy and to Foucault to describe four domains of power: structural (political economy and segregated geographies); disciplinary (prisons, police brutality); cultural (ideologies of white supremacy and patriarchy); and interpersonal (our relationships with one another). Each of these frameworks stretch to theorize white supremacy as a whole in different ways—from the individual body to institutions, structures and global systems of exploitation—based on the understanding that such a whole cannot be transformed by struggle on only one aspect. Instead they offer multiple points of intervention at multiple levels, without losing sight of the wider structural transformations necessary for lasting change.

Conclusion

It is uncomfortable to explore the ways that white supremacy continues to be knitted into the dominant economic, political, economic and cultural foundations of—and relationships within and between—Europe and its former colonies. Understanding white supremacy as a global system “disrupts traditional framings, conceptualizations and disciplinary divisions,” and thus “registers a commitment to a radically *different* understanding of the political order” (Mills 2003: 184). This pushes against the full weight of the status quo on multiple levels, but also highlights the intellectual challenges involved in undertaking the work of rethinking on such a scale. While this article tries to give a broader sense of just how much of this work has been undertaken, it is clear why such engagement with white supremacy continues to be marginalized across multiple disciplines. This ‘radically *different* understanding’ does not just require rethinking the inequities embedded in wider social structures or within the professions, but also within individual structures of identity and feeling. To return to Wendell Berry (2010: 19), for many filling the hollow within requires “the pain of the recognition of the humanity of an oppressed people and of one’s own guilt in their oppression.”

This article explores the series of defenses erected to defend against precisely this pain of recognition. Individual defenses in turn support the defenses of a larger white supremacist political order. Each defense reinforces the other—this is not a system that will ever simply melt away. Thus the ‘five refusals’ as stated here attempt to usefully delimit these mutually reinforcing defenses to better identify how each might be subject to intervention. White refusal of empathy with or belief in the very humanity of people of color must be rejected, and the multiple layers of coercive individual, community and state violences against them dismantled. White refusals to listen to or value experiences emerging from people of color must end, and these voices and experiences be made central. White refusals to acknowledge the histories of genocide, colonialism, slavery and exploitation that continue to shape our world must be replaced with an active process of remembrance, reconciliation and reparation. White refusals to live side by side with people of colour must shift, and segregated geographies of wealth and life possibilities be reconstructed. And finally, capitalism itself as it has intertwined with white supremacist social, political and

cultural structures needs to be confronted, and profit as the ultimate value replaced with others such as fairness, equity and sustainability in refashioning a better world not just for ourselves, but for future generations. This world is possible, can already been seen in moments of conviviality (Gilroy, 2006), in spaces such as the cosmopolitan canopy (Anderson, 2011) and the ‘ferocious engagement’ with culture and the ‘fierce embrace of the skin and all of its contradictions’ found in Vijay Prashad’s theorization of polyculturalism (2002, p. xii). We have much to build on, just as we have much to tear down.

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¹ The translation in this text is by the author from the original (1961) French text. The following is from the translation by Constance Farrington on page 96 of the 1963 English version:

The mass of the people struggle against the same poverty, flounder about making the same gestures and with their shrunken bellies outline what has been called the geography of hunger. It is an underdeveloped world, a world inhuman in its poverty; but also it is a world without doctors, without engineers, and without administrators. Confronting this world, the European nations sprawl, ostentatiously opulent. This European opulence is literally scandalous, for it has been founded on slavery, it has been nourished with the blood of slaves and it comes directly from the soil and from the subsoil of that underdeveloped world. The well-being and the progress of Europe

have been built up with the sweat and the dead bodies of Negroes, Arabs, Indians, and the yellow races. We have decided not to overlook this any longer.