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LIFE NARRATIVE IN THE #RACEWARS: TERMINISTIC SCREENS AND TWITTER FIGHTS

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Abstract

Discourse on the Internet about race has created a new lens for observing what lies behind denial of white privilege, giving researchers a new opportunity to see how grand narratives become personal narratives. This paper examines examples of this phenomenon by looking at two denials of white privilege as they developed in digital spaces, and argues that the life stories we tell ourselves act as “terministic screens” (Burke, 1966), filters composed of language that distort common understanding. After examining the rhetoric of white privilege, I propose the development of “narratives of discomfort,” in which white people begin to re-tell their stories in the light of their privilege.

keywords: white privilege, life stories, terministic screens, grand narratives

The topic of white privilege, defined by Kendall (2013) as “an institutional (rather than personal) set of benefits granted to those of us who, by race, resemble the people who dominate the powerful positions in our institutions” (p. 62), ebbs-and-flows as a discussion in digital spaces, especially as seen on public social media sites, blogs and comment sections of mass media sites. According to Google Trends (2015) (Figure 1), searches for “white privilege” peaks when news items sparks debates about its existence, such as September, 2008, just before President Obama was elected and October through December, 2014, during protests in Ferguson and the increased news coverage of police violence against people of color. Beyond news items, the topic can also find traction when a digital text—a Tweet, a blog post, a meme—is challenged for displaying problematic assumptions about race in American culture, which is the focus of this paper.

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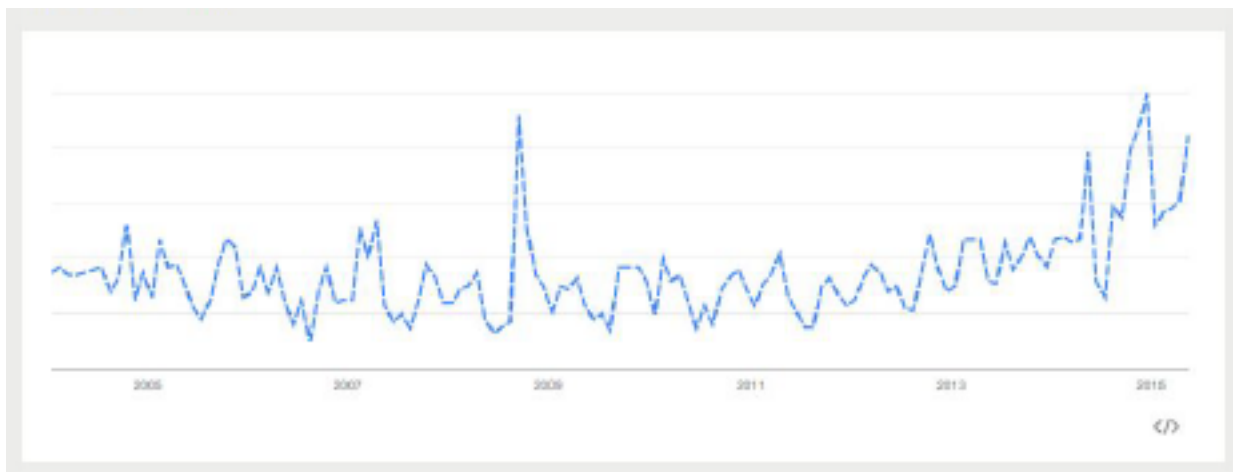


Figure 1 - Searches for “white privilege” as tracked via Google Trends (2015).

Digital debate and material culture

Discourse on the Internet creates a new lens for observing the latent properties of white privilege for three reasons. First, the Internet has created what Papacharissi calls the “private sphere,” or a digitally networked, non traditional practice of citizenship. This online practice transforms activism from one of antagonism to agonism, more concerned with voicing disagreement than public accord, creating broad and ever-changing forums for debate. Secondly, the collapsed context (boyd, 2008) of digital discourse, in which a number of social contexts exist in one space at one time, lands people in discussions with strangers or acquaintances with whom they might not usually have discussions about race. Finally, the discourse that emerges from this type of citizenship creates one form of material culture (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011), namely, digital artifacts of synchronous and asynchronous discussions and debates. These artifacts that emerge can be thoughtfully and reflexively studied to find not just the presence of white privilege discourse, but key factors in how the privilege becomes obscured from the privilege-holder’s purview. To put it another way, it reveals how “grand narratives” (Lyotard, 1979), narratives that legitimize society, become not the “localized” narrative for which he hoped, but rather transfer largely undisturbed into personal narratives which largely reify the socialized norm. These opportunities for observation arise because conversations among culturally and racially separated people, which might not have happened in the offline world, take place before engaged publics and a rich set of perspectives are archived through timelines, blog posts, video recordings and other forms of media.

In this essay I examine, using textual analysis, two commentaries in two distinct digital spaces—one from an email exchange sparked by a Twitter fight (and eventually posted on a blog site) and one that originated on a blog—which were widely criticized for both displaying and denying white privilege. I do this primarily by using textual analysis to examine a factor of white privilege that has not received ample attention—the implied life stories of the white commentators, which are embedded directly in their arguments in both latent and manifest ways. These life stories act as terministic screens, conceived and defined by Burke (1966) as a filter composed of language that distorts common understanding (p. 45) about a social matter. In this case, culturally embedded stories

that privileged people tell as uniquely their own act as a screen from seeing the structural forces that disadvantage others.

Before applying the theories of life story as identity and terministic screens to the question of white privilege, as well as intersectionality, I will briefly review each theory as it relates to this topic. I will then apply those theories to the digital texts created by the two subjects of this article. I will then discuss how challenging one's own life story, especially by placing a filter of privilege on that life, could lead to an identity that is woven more broadly with realities beyond one's own experience and enculturation.

White privilege and intersectionality

As a white male, and thus a beneficiary of white privilege, it would be easy (as it always is) to examine these discourses from a disembodied objectivity. It is also tempting. To examine the terministic screens of white privilege is uncomfortable, a place many argue is the right place to be in discussing race from the white perspective. For me, denial of white privilege happened first in ignorance and happens these days as a reflex. It crosses my mind, for instance, that people of color should not run or confront police whenever I hear about another shooting, before I settle into a more thoughtful state of understanding the general distrust of police that I do not need to have. I too have hoped for a "colorblind" world and have held the idea that interracial relationships would begin to solve problems of race, before I saw that this is another form of cultural erasure. I have worried that people of color might win a job I want to create more "diversity," before I consider the implications in both my knee-jerk thought and the problems of how "diversity" is usually framed as a way to advantage white people. Consider this a confession as well as an expression of gratitude to writers and thinkers such as bell hooks, Jacqueline Jones Royster, Ta-Nehisi Coates and many others for beginning to re-color my own terministic screen and help me to begin the uncomfortable retelling of my place in this culture. Whitney Dow, director of the Whiteness Project, an interactive website in which white people talk about race, correctly states that, "if white people are going to participate in changing the racial dynamic, we need to deal with our own shit first" (Thrasher, 2014).

It would be easy, and useful for hegemony, to classify all rhetoric that misunderstands the dynamics of white privilege as racist. Bonilla-Silva (1997; 1999) warns us against such simplification in the pursuit of understanding racial matters, especially to eschew the ideas of reducing all matters to racism and to reduce racism to irrational thinking and the remnant of past racial constructs. The alternative is to consider "racialized social systems," or societies on which political, social, economic and ideological systems are somewhat based on race. Race, in this sense, is not simply phenotypical, but rather social construction, and so, race becomes a social fact closer to gender and class. (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). The point of these distinctions from traditional thinking is to make clear that race is "a real and central social vessel of group affiliation and life in the modern world" (Bonilla-Silva, 1999, p. 899; author's emphasis). This is a key point that is missed when white privilege is not acknowledged because, as Kendall notes in the quote that begins this essay, white privilege is also social-structural reality and is easiest to obscure using personal reference or anecdotal evidence. Bonilla-Silva (1997) makes this point in a both general and concrete way when he writes:

The fact that not all members of the superordinate race receive the same level of rewards and (conversely) that not all members of the subordinate race or races are at the bottom of the social order does not negate the fact that races, as social groups, are in either a superordinate or a subordinate position in a social system (p. 470).

This would not convince anyone who denies, or even doubts, white privilege in Western culture. The fact is that a century-plus of thought into what would become known as white privilege has done little to affect a generalized agreement about its existence. In more recent times, critical, historical, sociological, legal and educational researchers have attempted to form convincing arguments and evidence (e.g. DeCuir-Gunby, 2006; Boyd, 2008; Dei, Karumanchery & Karumanchery, 2004; Williams, 2010) that white privilege is pervasive and has a real impact on Western culture. Both academic and popular literature have shown statistically that people of color are less likely to benefit from, or more likely to be harmed by, social structures, such as education, employment, law-making, policing, incarceration, media representation, shopping, housing (e.g. Maxwell, 2014; Kendall, 2013; Crenshaw, 1991). This has created more of a ripple than a sea change of opinion shifting. These changes seem far less about logical debate and more about emotion. As DiAngelo, a white researcher, points out in a recent Huffington Post article, "It became clear over time that white people have extremely low thresholds for enduring any discomfort associated with challenges to our racial worldviews" (DiAngelo, 2015, para. 7). He refers to this as "white fragility," the inability to deeply engage with the reality of race in our lives. Our segregation from people of color, our reliance on old notions of racism, our individualism, our entitlement to racial comfort add up to a position for white people which makes it hard to admit an implicit role in the current racialized structure. This discomfort is eased by placing subtle blame on people of color. Hall (1995) refers to this phenomenon as "inferential racism," (p. 20), comments and images that appear to be natural representations of race, but are imbued with predicates that presuppose people of color are the cause of the problems. The shootings of Trayvon Martin (with his hoodie), Michael Brown (with his cigarillos and running), and even Walter Scott (shot in the back, but while he was running away) are examples of Hall's point.

How does this happen? Helms' (1990) theory of white racial identity describes how internalized racism develops by a process of acknowledgment but naivete of one's own racial difference, followed by a moral dilemma about one's racial identity which is followed by idealization of white group identity, a sort of doubling down on whiteness. If one's development stops here, inferential racism is a powerful tool to keep it in place. Even the first step of emergence (named pseudo-independence) toward a racially enlightened attitude is fraught with trap doors, as Helm's argues, because this stage makes us believe that the solution is for non-whites to act more like us. As most of this development is explained by the way we are raised, what we learn in school and what we consume in media, Helms final steps toward independent thinking about race includes immersion/emersion, qualified by a great deal of discomfort about one's own whiteness. Past that is autonomy.

What Bonilla-Silva, DiAngelo, Hall and Helms show is that an individualist notion of white privilege is powerfully reifying of that status. The ignorance, willful or not, of a

racial structure from which whites naturally benefit is deeply rooted in our enculturation by a system that self-perpetuates. While much of this phenomenon can be justifiably attached to a white, patriarchal system, Crenshaw (1991) demonstrated that white privilege does not begin and end with white men. Crenshaw's intersectionality argument is complex in its details, but the core premise is relatively simple: "The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences" (p. 1242). Race and class play an important role in what it means to be a woman in Western culture as well as what a feminist agenda might look like. Here, again, white privilege is obscured because all women can rightfully acknowledge their own marginalized status in a patriarchal system. But women of color are doubly marginalized, as are LGBTQ people of color, both by the dominant male group, but also by the dominant, straight white female group. In making this argument, Crenshaw primarily intended to show how the intersection of race and class (add sexual orientation) with gender, highlights the need to acknowledge "multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (p. 1245). The lack of such acknowledgement has caused a major rift in the feminist movement, as women of color are regularly left out of the justice equation, through what Ortega (2006) calls a "loving, knowing, ignorance" (p. 57), which is borne by either white feminists' arrogant and inaccurate knowledge production about women of color or by a desire to love and understand women of color, but profoundly missing the point. One of the two examples in this paper will address just such a dispute.

The theories reviewed above effectively reveal both what and how white privilege becomes socially submerged within white discourse. These insights can be broadened by observing how one's life story, observed specifically in Internet discourse, can perpetuate and legitimize denial or dismissal of white privilege by creating a terministic screen.

Life narrative as identity and terministic screens

Bruner (1987) puts it best when he writes, "The story of one's own life is, of course, a privileged but troubled narrative in the sense that it is reflexive: the narrator and the central figure in the narrative are the same. This reflexivity creates dilemmas" (p. 693). The dilemmas Bruner discusses include the impossibility of its verification, the confounding role of "rationalization" and the indeterminacy of the whole project, but he's after an even larger complication: instability. Life stories are shaky things, whether we acknowledge that or not, and that shakiness causes a susceptibility to "cultural, interpersonal, and linguistic influences" (p. 694). This can be good for people whose life narrative is hindering their progress or, worse, torturing them. But that susceptibility has large social implications as well. The stories we tell ourselves are the way we form identity (McAdams, 1985; 2001a), and thus feel idiosyncratic, but a culture's influence on that story plays a critical role on the way we look at other people's lives.

While McAdams addresses multiple codes for how life stories shape a sense of self, most famously redemption (bad to good) and contamination (bad to good), I am particularly interested in two codes he draws from Bakan (1966): Agency and Communion. These two factors of life story formation are most susceptible to influences

about the question of one's abilities and responsibilities within society. When one achieves a level of agency and communion, they feel both competent and connected to their surroundings (Bauer and McAdams, 2000). Rorty (1976) explains that as stories form in this culture, the actor agent of the story is driven by motivations to act in society, which in turns rewards them with rights. This framing of experience is reified in a system that favors the actor agent over a more collectivist agent. Systems are here to serve us in this model and if they don't serve you, it's because you're doing something wrong or you're unlucky. Thus, agency and communion become critical themes in developing a life story of personal success and communal belonging, which is easy to universalize to a society that purports to be a meritocracy for all. In an unpublished article (McAdams, 2001b) intended for coding life story interviews, McAdams delves into the concepts in-depth. I will summarize these definitions now.

Agency. This is a theme of self-involvement that is nearly inevitable in telling one's own narrative, as McAdams explains, because the focusing on the self, "encourages a rhetoric of agency in most autobiographical accounts, especially among contemporary citizens of Western societies, imbued with an ethic of individualism" (McAdams, 2001b, p. 2). The broader concept is categorized by four sub-themes that represent elements of agency, which are not mutually exclusive. They include: Self-mastery: Striving to master the self and become more powerful, wiser, or both in the world; Status/victory: Attainment of a heightened status among peers by virtue of special recognition; Achievement/responsibility: Success in achieving goals or taking on responsibility without necessarily defeating others; Empowerment: Attainment of improvement through the association of something larger than the self.

Communion. This is not a dichotomous variable with Agency, as it is quite possible to feel both empowered and connected with the world around you. However, communion places the emphasis on the motivation for intimacy rather than the power and expansion of the self. McAdams draws from multiple theories in developing this code, including the original concept of agency-communion developed by Bakan, but most importantly for this paper is the influence of Murray's (1938) insights about "need for affiliation" and "need for nurturance." The four elements of communion that McAdams defines include: Love/Friendship: The enhancement of erotic love or platonic friendship increases during the story; Dialogue: The presence of conversation that is not instrumental (e.g. directions to the bathroom); Caring/Help: The storyteller reports caring for, assisting, nurturing or even developing empathy for another; Unity/togetherness: Expression of belonging to a larger community.

To not confuse matters, it is important to note these codes can be found in all lives and are often powerful and good elements in a healthy life. The point for this article, then, is to consider how these codes can also create a filter on the "way life is" in a more general way. At the same time, as I will show, these codes could also be found in telling stories that overturn systems. While it might be a bit more self-evident that Agency could play a big role in keeping white people from acknowledging their privilege, I argue both Agency and Communion play key roles. A sense of belonging in a system, or culture, that empowers a person makes it much easier to accept that the system is fair and merit-based. When it is clear that such a system or culture does not exhibit equal outcomes of success across all intersections of culture, a master narrative of the

agentic self is the perfect anecdote. The interaction of these two themes, an agentic self in communion with her/his surroundings, can produce structural filters for a person in a state of privilege. The more subtle the privilege, the more pervasive this effect would be.

This insight leads to Burke's (1966) concept of "terministic screens," which explains that our sense of reality is constructed by our "symbol systems," the education, the media, the discourses of our life. We are shaped by the language we know. That includes the stories we tell and the identity that follows. Burke says he came to this revelation when he saw multiple pictures of the same subject, but with different color filters. "Here something so 'factual' as a photograph revealed notable distinctions in texture, and even form, depending on which color filter was used ..." (p. 45). As an example for life stories, consider a memory in which you win a spelling bee in elementary school. There are at least three ways to filter that experience. One is to understand it as a successful communal effort of mother, father, teacher and you. Another way to observe is an act of good chance, in which words that appeared in the contest happened to align well with the preparation you did. Another way to observe it is by assuming the agency-victory role—you won because you studied harder than other students, spurred by outside forces, but ultimately to your credit. Depending on the language that is most available, and then the most salient, to you, a filter on that experience will be placed on your story. How we filter our experiences and the meanings we derive from them are not only constructed by language, but also reveal themselves in language. How one colors her or his experience reveals much about the screen through which they see the world. This is true in discourse about white privilege, which awaits researchers in the material culture of the Internet.

To examine this phenomenon, I am employing textual analysis, which McKee (2003) describes as a method to make educated guesses about "how other human beings make sense of the world," (p. 1) through texts created in digital formats. I have chosen two examples to examine how the screen can be found in the life story that is implicitly and explicitly revealed in the arguments of the privileged speaker. The arguments split into two different types of begging the privilege question: one attempt uses denial, while the other uses a dialectical approach. Both exhibit life story as terministic screens that become problematic in the discourse around white privilege.

White Privilege Denial - "I could use some ... privilege"

At this year's Academy Awards, actress Patricia Arquette's acceptance speech after winning the Best Actress was newsworthy. On stage, she called for equal pay for women, garnering plaudits from the likes of President Obama. It was backstage, during a more expansive explanation to the press, that Arquette's statement became a lightning rod for people of color. She said, "The truth is even though we sort of feel like we have equal rights in America, there are huge issues that are at play that really do affect women. It's time for all ... the gay people and people of color that we've all fought for to fight for us now" (Puente, Feb. 24, 2015).

This comment angered, among others, many women and men of color who wondered what exactly had been done for them that now needed to be repaid. Arquette engaged critics on Twitter, as did many of her defenders, including Nicole Sandler, who currently

hosts a show on RadioOrNot.com. While Sandler was defending Arquette, Elon James White, CEO of This Week in Blackness, started this exchange on Twitter (White & Sandler, Feb. 23, 2015):

Elon James White: So Patricia Arquette, huh?

Nicole Sandler: @elonjames I don't understand your problem w @pattyarquette. What did she do/say that's wrong? I'm asking sincerely as someone who like[s] you

Elon James White: 1 st ma'am, I'm not sure why you're tagging folks on here that I didn't tag. If I wanted to I would. @nicolesandler ...

Secondly I'm actively pointing out what my issue is right now. I've posted multiple tweets. And many WoC are speaking on it. @nicolesandler

Nicole Sandler: @elonjames My appreciation for @pattyarquette have no bearing on my support for PoC or LGBTQ. They're not mutually exclusive . Suprised at u

Elon James White: Surprised at me for what? Who said anything about YOUR support of anything? This literally has nothing to do with you. @nicolesandler

Nicole Sandler: @elonjames Because I'm a fan, a colleague (of sorts) and a woman. I'd love to have you on my show to talk abt this. Come on tomorrow am?

Elon James White: I'd argue you should have one of the many WoC who are speaking up on this and are at the erased intersection to discuss... @nicolesandler

Nicole Sandler: @elonjames "erased intersection"? WTF are you talking about

Sandler's last statement set off a firestorm on Twitter. Imani Gandy, co-host of TWiB, came on Sandler's show the next day, trying to explain intersectionality, but Gandy reported on Twitter that Sandler talked over her explanations and refused to acknowledge intersectionality, which only exacerbated the conflict on Twitter.

In Sandler's blog about the confrontation, entitled "They Sure Told Me!" (nicole, 2015), she posted an email exchange between her and White (Appendix 1). It is here we observe Sandler's use of life narrative as a rhetorical tool and as window into how white privilege is screened out by the holder. I will quote three examples, and then as a way

to better illustrate the story-screen, offer alternative themes that, had they occurred, would create greater understanding about intersectionality.

Example 1: “I’m a woman and a feminist. I never considered color as part of my being a feminist. I always thought the issues we feminists fought for were inclusive of ALL women.”

Agency-Responsibility and Communion-Unity emerge here, as Sandler takes on the role of a feminist, unified in a fight for all women. This sense of both engaging and belonging to the fight, a large community of like-minded people, overwhelms the notion that to truly fight for all women would mean understanding the plights of all women.

An alternative screen, which applies to all of these examples, would be to see the experience through Communion-Dialogue, in which the act of generating understanding through exchange is the key element of the life story and that learning what is not, cannot be, covered by a single form of feminism.

Example 2: “I get that African Americans have been persecuted and have had a rough ride through history. I’m of Jewish descent. Shall I tell you the stories my grandparents told me? Do I think that every injustice has to do with the fact that my forebears were targeted by Hitler? Not for a second.”

The theme of Agency-Self-Mastery is subtly exhibited in this argument, as well as Communion-Unity. By reaching to a legitimate aspect of personal heritage, the rhetoric assumes the role of an intersected member of society, but then applies a latent notion of self-mastery to argue those intersections do not explain, or cause, injustice. This statement became highly controversial on Twitter, because it assumed equality of impact to have a latent intersection (Jewish woman) with having a fully manifest intersection (black woman). But more importantly, the implication that one has overcome (through wisdom) a state of oppression, so black people must do the same, is the most troubling aspect of this discourse.

An alternative story-screen is Communion-Caring, of which empathy is one key element. To engage in the data that shows that women of color are oppressed at far higher levels than white women, and to understand that walking in a white-dominated world as a person of color is fundamentally different than walking in that world as a white person would have sufficiently changed the dialogue to a more constructive one.

Example 3: “I am denying that I benefit from White Privilege. Care to tell me how I benefit from anything right now other than my own hard work, cuz I’m trying really hard to make it through to the end of each day. I could use some of any kind of privilege right about now.”

The theme of Agency-Achievement emerges here and creates the most blatant denial of white privilege in the dialogue. By stating that nothing is benefiting the white woman beyond hard work is the most common life trope that creates the terministic screen. There is also a note of struggle in this, which would not code for Agency or Communion, but the overall notion is one of personal willpower to achieve the success at hand and

the continuation of the struggle. The final statement, however, is not so much a theme of Agency. I would argue it is a very latent form of Communion, again, in which Sandler references her own oppressed state (a woman in a patriarchal society) as an equivalent, exhibiting the “erased intersection” White referred to on Twitter.

The alternative screen here might seem counter-intuitive, but I would suggest it lies in Agency-Empowerment, the story of how forces greater than one’s self improves your status. This screen would tell the stories of how being white is an advantage, at least over women of color. This is not to deny the existence of one’s oppression as a woman, nor does it deny the work one does to succeed, but substantively acknowledges the differences in oppression based on factors beyond gender.

White Privilege Dialectical - “If I was a poor black kid”¹

Dialectical rhetoric regarding white privilege could broadly exhibit two motives. It could be an honest observation of the complexities of whiteness in contemporary society, one that relents on the denial of privilege but not on the demands that the oppressed must be responsible for overturning it. Or it could be a clever argument, one that works like a feint in boxing, where it seems the fighter is retreating, so the roundhouse comes as a greater surprise. It is unimportant which category the following example might fall under because, as Ortega says above, genuine love and false love may take different routes, but usually end at the same dead end. With that, I will begin.

In December of 2011, Forbes contributor Gene Marks created a firestorm of comments on Twitter and Facebook, blog posts, videos, memes and news stories with his essay, “If I Were A Poor Black Kid” (Marks, Dec. 12, 2014; Appendix 2). The post, which begins with agreement with President Obama that the gap between rich and poor is widening and that education is a key reason. Marks introduces the topic by writing, “The President’s speech got me thinking. My kids are no smarter than similar kids their age from the inner city. My kids have it much easier than their counterparts from West Philadelphia. The world is not fair to those kids mainly because they had the misfortune of being born two miles away into a more difficult part of the world and with a skin color that makes realizing the opportunities that the President spoke about that much harder. This is a fact. In 2011” (Marks, para. 4). But rather than meditating on the hegemonic powers that make this the case, Marks’ article turns into what Hall would almost surely label “referential racism,” tacitly blaming West Philadelphia’s state of affairs on West Philadelphia, a move Bonilla-Silva would explain is due to the inability to see the racialized structure that creates the situation Marks is trying to address. Marks, on the other hand, writes that the availability of technology in public spaces could be a catalyst for change within the black community, especially for the “special” black kids who are enlightened to see it. And it is within this thesis that we see how Marks’ life story develops his dialectical terministic screen. Nearly the entire essay could be analyzed, mainly because of Marks’ rhetorical move that begins with, “If I was a poor black kid ...”

¹ 1 It should be noted that like the subject of this next section, I am a technology contributor at Forbes.com and, for that matter, share all the same privileges of the next speaker. So my own screens should be carefully acknowledged.

Example 1: “I am not a poor black kid. I am a middle aged white guy who comes from a middle class white background. So life was easier for me. But that doesn’t mean that the prospects are impossible for those kids from the inner city. It doesn’t mean that there are no opportunities for them.”

Communion-Unity is the implied life story screen in this statement, which becomes more apparent when you read the whole piece. Each of the solutions for poor black kids emerges from the world white person inhabits—charter and private schools, technology hardware and software, business networking, etc. This is the world that has, admittedly, makes life easier for white people and, so, would offer opportunities for poor black kids as well. In a very subtle way, this statement and the entire essay could also reflect the code of Communion-Help, in that the language used here appears to be a guide to tap into those resources in which the privileged speaker has already benefited and reflects Helms’ Pseudo-Independence stage of white development.

As I mentioned in the last piece, a counter-intuitive alternative story screen would meditate not on community, but on empowerment, to flip the question from, “What opportunities exist for poor black kids?” to, “What opportunities are given to me automatically that are not given to poor black kids?” The story that follows would have to be deeply reflexive and framed via Communion-Caring, an empathy informed by those knowledgeable about the systemic disparities, instead of by tropes of the single mother too tired to help her children.

Example 2: “It takes brains. It takes hard work. It takes a little luck. And a little help from others. It takes the ability and the know-how to use the resources that are available. Like technology. As a person who sells and has worked with technology all my life I also know this.”

Because this passage is written in context of “if I were poor and black,” it is quite possible to see a whole host of life story codes—Agency-Self-mastery, Agency-Victory and Agency-Empowerment. This reflects the type of rhetoric DiAngelo (2015) refers to when he writes, “This distinction -- between individual prejudice and a system of unequal institutionalized racial power -- is fundamental. One cannot understand how racism functions in the U.S. today if one ignores group power relations” (para. 4). I argue the causal agent of this ability to ignore group power relations largely lies in the combination of Agency codes exhibited here and is widespread in white rhetoric. It is a model for universalizing one’s own success to all races and classes, simplified by redacting group power relationships from the story.

Here, I would argue that the screen is so intense that Communion-Dialogue is not enough. Instead, a story that would challenge such a screen is one of Agency-Responsibility, one in which the privileged protagonist takes on the role of investigator of the system that has benefited him. This is a willful reversal of assumptions, a kind of story that almost looks like a mystery. In such mystery stories, the detective becomes obsessed with their responsibility to “solve the case” and uses a mix of savvy and self-endangerment to find the truth. I say endangerment, in the case of white privilege, because a foundational shift in perspective of one’s own Agency can be deeply troubling. It is the journey from the right side of the “but” in a dialectic sentence to the

left side, to leave the focus of “there is opportunity for all” for the focus of “I know I have it easier” and then ask why.

Example 3: “But the biggest challenge we face isn’t inequality. It’s ignorance. So many kids from West Philadelphia don’t even know these opportunities exist for them. ... Many of these kids don’t have the brains to figure this out themselves – like my kids. Except that my kids are just lucky enough to have parents and a well-funded school system around to push them in the right direction.”

This passage seems to be driven by Communion-Help and Communion-Empowerment, as both the parent (Marks himself) and the school system play the key role in lifting his children out of the ignorance that poor black kids mainly must reside within. Obviously, the rhetoric of Agency-Self-Mastery and Agency-Responsibility is again at play. In looking at Marks’ responses to some of the 200+ comments on the site, it is clear that his primary motivation for writing the piece can be found in this comment. He responded to one commenter, who asked what motivated his essay:

I thought about the charter school where a close family member has taught for the past 7 years. I thought about all the people I also know who work there and in the system. I thought about the fact that 99% of the kids in that charter school are black. And many of them are poor. I thought about how that’s same throughout most of West Philadelphia. I thought about what it was like when I was in the public school system. And I said to do myself: “what would I do if I were a poor black kid?” (Marks, 2011, comments section).

While a terministic screen of Agency implies a certain leg-up on the Other, the Communion screen implies something a little more insidious. One, that the luck of birth is the causal agent behind these disparities because, two, some communities are better at taking care of their children than others for, three, no other reason than history. This becomes most insidious if Marks never intended to imply any such thing.

Rather than offer another alternative screen, I will end this section by stating what I assume has become obvious to many while reading this. Alternative screens, in these cases, could only be created by alternative actions. A simple flip of the screen would not be enough to understand the situation differently. That is the nature of a complex systematic racial favoritism. White privilege is reified by story, but is likely undermined by action. Still, the desire to tell different stories can be the beginning of that change in action, as is demonstrated by a response to Marks, which I will now explore, that speaks well beyond the controversy created by the essay.

Conclusion: Narratives of Discomfort

Textual analysis, in which we examine how terministic screens are constructed by life stories, is a powerful way to shed light on the impasse about the state of white privilege. It neither indicts or excuses the thought pattern of any particular commenter, but instead shows how cultural forces shape our sense of self through language and in turn creates

blindness. It also offers an alternative that could do much work toward rebuilding the discussions about race and privilege, without the pressure of a certain ideology. Screens are created by stories left unexamined. Analyzing rhetoric for its implicit and explicit stories, especially if we were to turn the analysis inward, could offer a new kind of vision.

In responding to Marks' article on the Atlantic website, Coates (2011) writes that the Forbes piece reminded him of rhetoric he heard from classmates at Howard University, who claimed they would have died rather than give in to slavery, or white people who claimed they would have freed the slaves had they lived in the antebellum South. "What all these responses have in common is a benevolent, and surely unintentional, self-aggrandizement. ... We flatter ourselves, not out of malice, but out of instinct" (para. 6-7). I believe that is what this essay has shown, something fundamentally human and deeply influenced by culture. McAdams' research intends to find the narrative revelation as a way to heal us, not to reveal these flaws or embarrass others. That is my intention too.

Coates goes on to call for a "muscular empathy," one that eschews the positive assertion in favor of a question. If I were a black woman, and offended by white feminist rhetoric, what realities would make that so? If I were a child in West Philadelphia, and did not get this leg up, why would that be? Surely, raising such questions of ourselves, which only slightly move us off the mark of our shaky story and closer to another's, is no more psychologically harmful than the social harm done by holding on to grand narratives. It may be true that, as Coates says, "The answers are out there. But they will not improve your self-esteem" (para. 15). This is too much for some who benefit from white privilege, but surely not all. For example, hooks (1992) mentions a white man whose relationship with a black woman has repositioned his perspective and notes that he can see "the way whiteness acts to terrorize without seeing himself as bad," (p. 177). These are terministic screens that look beyond dichotomies, where the useless white guilt that often progresses from white privilege is exchanged for an empathy that is muscular because it is rooted in curiosity and, most important, acknowledgment of our own personal limitations, a muscular humility.

To reflexively tell stories about one's own privilege would be a discipline, not an instinct. It would not feel "normal," for white people to look not at how we achieved, or how we are "lucky," but instead how we have benefited in ways that are not available to others, because the color of our skin. That is why it might be useful to think of these stories as "narratives of discomfort," taking a page from de Freitas and McAuley's (2008) "pedagogy of discomfort," in which teachers develop their curricula to confront their own complicity in inequities in the classroom. "Narratives of discomfort" would do much the same, but with a broader purview, looking at any place and time our instinctive stories create a screen that overlooks or denies fundamental injustices. Those with privilege would tell these stories without congratulations or any other benefit to themselves. These life stories would be told because they should be told.

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Appendix 1

Since Elon James White chose to publish and Tweet out portions of our email exchange, I figured I'd post the entire thing here. As it was three emails (the original one I sent to him, his response, and my response to that), I've color-coded the text with my original email in black type italics, [Elon James White's responses in blue](#), [my second response in pink](#).

Keep in mind that, rather than respond to my second email, he chose to post some of what I wrote on his blog, outraged that I'd dare to invoke my ancestors' struggles as Jews during the Holocaust. I guess I'm not allowed to do that.

Hi Elon,

I'm guessing you don't remember me. You've been on my show a few times, and we've met and shared drinks a few other times. We were on the [email] list together, so I thought you knew who I was, which was why I asked you an innocent question about one of your Tweets that showed up in my stream.

[Ma'am.](#)

[Not necessary. My name is Nicole.](#)

[I'm familiar with you who you are and I do recall speaking on your show a few years ago. None of that would change the commentary I made this morning. Out of professional courtesy I will address your email as clearly as I can.](#)

Wasn't sure that you knew who I was as you referred to me as Julianna Forlano's 'friend' and claimed no understanding that she was on my radio show.

I'm a woman and a feminist. I never considered color as part of my being a feminist. I always thought the issues we feminists fought for were inclusive of ALL women.

That's wonderful. For you. But as many WoC have noted, spoken about, written about and constantly deal with regularly, Feminism is not all inclusive. I'm not saying anything here controversial or ground breaking. And whether you consider something to be the case or not does not affect the the reality and experiences of WoC who deal with it directly.

And as I have spoken and written about, I'm not my sister's keeper. I know many, many white women who've done nothing to incur the ugliness and vitriol that I was subject to this morning by simply pointing out what Patricia Arquette said, not what she omitted.

I'm sure you've experienced people projecting their insecurities and biases on you because of who they perceived you to be. Not everyone parses their words so carefully as to offend no one. Imagine having just won the biggest award or recognition of your art possible. Imagine wanting to make a statement about women's rights – using the phrase ALL WOMEN over and over again only to have others assume what you meant.

You seemed surprised that I didn't know the term "erased intersection" – it sounds like doublespeak to me. I've done shows on the ERA, the fact that the LGBTQ movement and civil rights movement have made huge strides, while the ERA sit unratified. I've suggested that all these groups who came together to help advance the struggles of all those people (yes, even those who fit in more than one category) come together to help ratify the ERA. I guess that makes me worthy of your ire too?

I probably never stopped down to say "that includes the LBGQTQ women and women of color too" – it was implied in all I said.

I've spoken out over the years on a number of issues – some dealing with gender issues, some with religion, some with race, most with inequality and the general unfairness in life.

Never, ever, when speaking on behalf of one group – especially in the heat of the moment or when I've had limited time in which to make a point – did I stop down to say, "The group I'm talking about is struggling, but this sub section of the group has it even worse."

I have to ask ma'am, who asked for that? The issue that I, and many others, pointed out wasn't the need to drill down and speak of each individualized group. The commentary about PoC and LGBTQ folks needing to step up and speak out for Women was the issue. Some PoC are Women. Some LGBTQ are Women. The call for these groups to help "Women" as if they aren't already doing that because they are in fact, women already, is problematic and speaks to a similar theme found through out conversations around feminism. Women defaults to White Cis-Women. I understand you don't think it

does but language, policies, framing all paints this picture which is why so many WoC have spoken out against this and have critiqued Feminism as much as they have. And the idea that LGBTQ and PoC need to step up and help like White Women have helped us? *That's* why we should do that? You don't see how this framing is problematic?

And what's wrong with asking those people to step up in the issue of pay equity and passing an Equal Right Amendment? You're the one drawing the lines of separation. Do you not see that?

I get that African Americans have been persecuted and have had a rough ride through history. I'm of Jewish descent. Shall I tell you the stories my grandparents told me? Do I think that every injustice has to do with the fact that my forebears were targeted by Hitler? Not for a second.

This is incredibly insulting. I'm not even sure what this means. Are you saying Black folks are blaming race too much? Are you saying that we bring up slavery too much? I'm not sure of the point of writing these words at all.

And I've been insulted all day by people on Twitter telling me that women's rights is code for "white women's right". Bullshit. I'm saying we all have our own crosses to bear. You have your struggles and I have mine. Some are because I'm a woman, some are because I'm Jewish. Some are because I'm now 55 years old so "unattractive" and some because I'm overweight.. and some because some people just don't like me and other reasons I'm not privy to.

But to have people who've never even heard of me call me a bigot or tell me what I'm thinking and that I'm motivated by "white privilege" or "White feminism" is not only insulting, but hateful and, yes racist.

I do host a daily radio show. I've been in radio for over 30 years. I was on Air America and moved online when the network went under and have been struggling to keep doing what I do for the past five years. I don't get a free ride because I'm a "white woman". I don't get a free ride at all.

Who said you get a free ride? 2) Are you denying that you benefit from White Privilege? 3) Are you saying that your experience is the same as Black Women, who are dealing at the intersection of race and gender? What about the gay black woman?

- 1) Those who keep pushing "White Privilege" on me. No, you didn't say it, but your mass of followers did.
- 2) I am denying that I benefit from White Privilege. Care to tell me how I benefit from anything right now other than my own hard work, cuz I'm trying really hard to make it through to the end of each day. I could use some of any kind of privilege right about now.

3) My experience is wholly different from black women, and other white women, and men of every color too. My color doesn't control my destiny. Sure it has likely played various roles in my life – but not because I designed it that way.

The attacks I was subject to on Twitter today were completely out of line and uncalled for. I've lived my life in a caring, loving way, and brought none of this nastiness on myself. And for complete strangers to come into my Twitter stream, telling me what I think and how I act – all antithetical to everything I stand for – really sucks.

I invited you on my show to discuss this failure to communicate – because that's what it is.

You and your followers who've been attacking me on Twitter all day have just assumed that Patricia Arquette was consciously excluding women of color and/or LGBTQ is ridiculous.

I've assumed nothing. I responded to the words she actually said. I didn't call her names, imply what she meant or any of that. The issue seems to be that many folks believe the benefit of the doubt should be given because obviously Arquette means well. That she should be above critique. That's ridiculous. You've inserted words like "consciously" when a lot of the points made here is that it ISNT conscious and that's the problem. This line of thought is normal and this framing considered reasonable. As opposed to simply reading and absorbing those explaining exactly what the issue is in great detail you wanted it explained to you. This is not the responsibility of PoC. Just like I don't believe it is your responsibility as a woman to explain things to me if my male privilege is blocking me from understanding the argument you're making. If you were kind enough to explain it to me I'd appreciate it, because many Women have taken that time with me. But it's not owed to me. It is not their responsibility.

She didn't say those groups were mutually exclusive and, sorry, it's our role as reasonable people to consider intent. I know how badly I'm feeling today after all the hatred thrown my way. She just had her biggest career-high of her life, and she's being excoriated for thought crimes. How about trying to reach out for clarification?

No, instead, you throw out terms like "erased intersection". How about speaking in plain English.

Yes I'm disappointed – as a fan and somewhat colleague – that you seem more intent on escalating the nastiness rather than engaging in dialogue. That's what I'm trying to do. Imani Gandy is coming on my show tomorrow.

She and I have had differences in the past. But I have no doubt we can try to hear each other out tomorrow and understand that we're on the same side.

How about, instead of crucifying her because she said what she was trying to say clumsily, you try to help her say it more eloquently?

Maybe that doesn't fit in This Week in Blackness? Are we not black enough? (And yes, that was meant to be incendiary, because I know that's not who you are....)

If you think I'm wrong, then come on my show and say so.

Appendix 2

President Obama gave an excellent speech last week in Kansas about inequality in America.

“This is the defining issue of our time.” He said. “This is a make-or-break moment for the middle class, and for all those who are fighting to get into the middle class. Because what’s at stake is whether this will be a country where working people can earn enough to raise a family, build a modest savings, own a home, secure their retirement.”

He’s right. The spread between rich and poor has gotten wider over the decades. And the opportunities for the 99% have become harder to realize.

The President’s speech got me thinking. My kids are no smarter than similar kids their age from the inner city. My kids have it much easier than their counterparts from West Philadelphia. The world is not fair to those kids mainly because they had the misfortune of being born two miles away into a more difficult part of the world and with a skin color that makes realizing the opportunities that the President spoke about that much harder. This is a fact. In 2011.

I am not a poor black kid. I am a middle aged white guy who comes from a middle class white background. So life was easier for me. But that doesn’t mean that the prospects are impossible for those kids from the inner city. It doesn’t mean that there are no opportunities for them. Or that the 1% control the world and the rest of us have to fight over the scraps left behind. I don’t believe that. I believe that everyone in this country has a chance to succeed. Still. In 2011. Even a poor black kid in West Philadelphia.

It takes brains. It takes hard work. It takes a little luck. And a little help from others. It takes the ability and the know-how to use the resources that are available. Like technology. As a person who sells and has worked with technology all my life I also know this.

If I was a poor black kid I would first and most importantly work to make sure I got the best grades possible. I would make it my #1 priority to be able to read sufficiently. I wouldn’t care if I was a student at the worst public middle school in the worst inner city. Even the worst have their best. And the very best students, even at the worst schools, have more opportunities. Getting good grades is the key to having more options. With good grades you can choose different, better paths. If you do poorly in school, particularly in a lousy school, you’re severely limiting the limited opportunities you have.’

And I would use the technology available to me as a student. I know a few school teachers and they tell me that many inner city parents usually have or can afford cheap

computers and internet service nowadays. That because (and sadly) it's oftentimes a necessary thing to keep their kids safe at home than on the streets. And libraries and schools have computers available too. Computers can be purchased cheaply at outlets like TigerDirect and Dell's Outlet. Professional organizations like accountants and architects often offer used computers from their members, sometimes at no cost at all.

If I was a poor black kid I'd use the free technology available to help me study. I'd become expert at Google Scholar. I'd visit study sites like SparkNotes and CliffsNotes to help me understand books. I'd watch relevant teachings on Academic Earth, TED and the Khan Academy. (I say relevant because some of these lectures may not be related to my work or too advanced for my age. But there are plenty of videos on these sites that are suitable to my studies and would help me stand out.) I would also, when possible, get my books for free at Project Gutenberg and learn how to do research at the CIA World Factbook and Wikipedia to help me with my studies.

I would use homework tools like Backpack, and Diigo to help me store and share my work with other classmates. I would use Skypeto study with other students who also want to do well in my school. I would take advantage of study websites like Evernote, Study Rails, Flashcard Machine, Quizlet, and free online calculators.

Is this easy? No it's not. It's hard. It takes a special kind of kid to succeed. And to succeed even with these tools is much harder for a black kid from West Philadelphia than a white kid from the suburbs. But it's not impossible. The tools are there. The technology is there. And the opportunities there.

In Philadelphia, there are nationally recognized magnet schools like Central, Girls High and Masterman. These schools are free. But they are hard to get in to. You need good grades and good test scores. And there are also other good magnet and charter schools in the city. You also need good grades to get into those. In a school system that is so broken these are bright spots. Getting into one of these schools opens up a world of opportunities. More than 90% of the kids that go to Central go on to college. I would use the internet to research each one of these schools so I could find out how I could be admitted. I would find out the names of the admissions people and go to meet with them. If I was a poor black kid I would make it my goal to get into one of these schools.

Or even a private school. Most private schools I know are filled to the brim with the 1%. That's because these schools are exclusive and expensive, costing anywhere between \$20 and \$50k per year. But there's a secret about them. Most have scholarship programs. Most have boards of trustees that want to give opportunities to kids that can't afford the tuition. Many would provide funding for not only tuition but also for transportation or even boarding. Trust me, they want to show diversity. They want to show smiling, smart kids of many different colors and races on their fundraising brochures. If I was a poor black kid I'd be using technology to research these schools on the internet, too, and making them know that I exist and that I get good grades and want to go to their school.

And once admitted to one of these schools the first person I'd introduce myself to would be the school's guidance counselor. This is the person who will one day help me go to a college. This is the person who knows everything there is to know about financial aid, grants, minority programs and the like. This is the person who may also know of job programs and co-op learning opportunities that I could participate in. This is the person who could help me get summer employment at a law firm or a business owned by the 1% where I could meet people and show off my stuff.

If I was a poor black kid I would get technical. I would learn software. I would learn how to write code. I would seek out courses in my high school that teaches these skills or figure out where to learn more online. I would study on my own. I would make sure my writing and communication skills stay polished.

Because a poor black kid who gets good grades, has a part time job and becomes proficient with a technical skill will go to college. There is financial aid available. There are programs available. And no matter what he or she majors in that person will have opportunities. They will find jobs in a country of business owners like me who are starved for smart, skilled people. They will succeed.

President Obama was right in his speech last week. The division between rich and poor is a national problem. But the biggest challenge we face isn't inequality. It's ignorance. So many kids from West Philadelphia don't even know these opportunities exist for them. Many come from single-parent families whose mom or dad (or in many cases their grand mom) is working two jobs to survive and are just (understandably) too plain tired to do anything else in the few short hours they're home. Many have teachers who are overburdened and too stressed to find the time to help every kid that needs it. Many of these kids don't have the brains to figure this out themselves – like my kids. Except that my kids are just lucky enough to have parents and a well-funded school system around to push them in the right direction.

Technology can help these kids. But only if the kids want to be helped. Yes, there is much inequality. But the opportunity is still there in this country for those that are smart enough to go for it.