

The Emperor's New Clothes: Exposure and Vulnerability in Academe

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As a white, female, aspiring anti-racist researcher and scholar, issues of power and whiteness are never resolved. I must continually disrupt and be disrupted by the source of my social capital, never finding comfort in the assumption that 'I' know what it means to be a critical white anti-racist scholar. This realization has not been an easy one to come by. In the past, I had trusted my ability to think critically about my own privilege, and that trust betrayed me (Thompson 2003). The heightened awareness of my own ignore-ance came from a reading of Thompson's (2003) 'Tiffany, Friend of People of Color', where she cautions against the dangers of white investments in anti-racism¹. For me, that was a critical uncomfortable, disruptive moment whereby I realized the dangers of my previously felt confidence. This paper, then, is a product of the renewed disruption caused by Thompson's article. In it, I attempt to work through the paralysis I initially felt in my first reading by examining the continued issues of power that are embedded in white anti-racist scholarship and how we may work through them, in spite of their continued existence.

To begin to dismantle these issues, I revisit Thompson's article in greater detail, elaborating on the points that caused me to become disrupted. I then utilize literary symbols from the Hans Christian Andersen fairytale, 'The Emperor's New Clothes,' as a way to aid us in an examination of our white privilege. Through the medium of 'The Emperor's New Clothes', I attempt to critique how white power within academia is maintained. From there, I argue that we must expose regardless, in order to work towards social justice. Once we,

¹ I borrow the play on 'ignore-ance' from Ellsworth (1997, p.259). I like the term because it holds us accountable for what we do not know, or choose not to know. Hence, the emphasis on 'ignore'.

that is, white, anti-racist scholars, are disrupted, it is essential that we continue to stay within the disruption, and to accept being naked and vulnerable as part of our growth as progressive individuals. However, we must first turn to the source of my disruption. The next section introduces the reader to Thompson to uncover what prompted my strong reactions in the first place.

‘Tiffany, Friend of People of Color’: An Investigation into Thompson’s Pinnacle Work

As mentioned in the introduction, the article that primarily caused such intense disruption for me was Thompson’s (2003) ‘Tiffany, Friend of People of Color: White Investments in Antiracism’. In this paper, Thompson examines the different ways in which ‘antiracist whites’ position themselves within the discourses as ‘good’, thereby keeping our authority and whiteness at the center of antiracist studies. According to Thompson, “The desire to be and to be known as a good white person stems from the recognition that our whiteness is problematic, a recognition that we try to escape by being demonstrably different from other, racist whites” (p.9). As a result, white faculty and advanced white graduate students self-aggrandize and self-congratulate themselves on their anti-racist credentials, believing that ‘we know better’. The problem with this outlook, says Thompson, is that it conceals “white academics’ desire for unproblematic solidarity with people of color – people with *other* kinds of anti-racist commitments” (p.10). Instead, ‘academic business as usual’ carries forth, as white academics ‘mine’ the work of scholars of color to appropriate those ideas which will bolster our own, simultaneously bestowing upon us the credit for the work in addition to the superficial appearance of solidarity that we have made with minoritized scholars. In essence, “whiteness theory nevertheless seems to be ‘ours.’ The very acknowledgement of our racism and privilege can be turned to our advantage” (p.12).

According to Thompson, this model is based on helping individuals to “feel good about being white in nonracist ways” (p.15). As a result, white identity theories keep whiteness at the center of antiracism. “White guilt is too paralyzing to be productive, white identity theorists argue. Since whites cannot help being white, they need to find good ways to be white” (ibid.). Thompson argues that in order to effectively pursue social justice, whiteness must be decentered. The maintenance of whiteness at the center of anti-racist research problematizes the way that we as white academics engage with nonwhite others: “We may listen, but how do we listen? What are we listening for when we attend to the situations and experiences of those who are not white?” (p.17).

As per Thompson’s intentions, this article left me jarred, uncomfortable, and self-conscious about my situatedness in anti-racist studies. As the target audience, I identified with a lot of the ‘retreats’ that Thompson discussed. I had grown confident and comfortable in my position as a developing white anti-racist scholar. I was convinced that I knew all of the pitfalls and how to avoid them. Thompson’s article startled me awake and renewed my insecurities. What disrupted me the most from this reading was the discomfoting realization that our power as white scholars was inevitable. No matter how much we as progressive white scholars resist against it, the palpability and influence of our own whiteness is very real. Even after continued re-readings, I struggled with how to prevent this realization from inhibiting me in moving forward. Interestingly enough, I found solace in an unlikely source; Hans Christen Andersen’s fairytale, ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’.

The following sections apply the symbolism of ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’ to our struggles with power as progressive, white academics. Robbins (2003) interestingly notes that the tale remains essentially unexamined by scholars, despite its applicability to current

post-modern quarrels over the nature of truth, speech, nakedness, and disclosure. What I find useful about the text is its potency in undressing crises of power in a productive, non-paralyzing way. This lesson, as well as others to be discussed in the following sections, is useful for anti-racist scholars working to come to terms with their own whiteness.

“Fitness for Office” – An Examination of White Privilege

Robbins (2003) argues that the central ruse of ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’ is based upon the notion of ‘fitness for office’ (p.661). In the story, swindling weavers exploit the vanity and administrative insecurity of both the Emperor and his court by suggesting that those who cannot see the cloth that they are weaving are ‘simpletons’ and are unfit for their positions. Ironically, the Emperor sees this as an opportunity to distinguish between the competent and incompetent of his court, exclaiming “If I wore something like that, I would be able to tell which men were unfit for their posts, and I would also be able to distinguish the smart ones from the stupid ones.”² The tale continues with the Emperor sending his most respected ministers to inspect the cloth and to report on its progress. However, the Ministers are unable to see any cloth and fear the implications that this might have on the security of their positions. Not wanting to appear unfit for office, the Ministers each report to the Emperor that the cloth is magnificent, not letting on that they cannot see anything at all. The Emperor, after hearing such glorious reviews of the cloth, wants to see the weaving for himself. However, upon visiting the swindling weavers, the Emperor realizes that he cannot see anything either: “‘What on earth!’ Thought the Emperor. ‘I can’t see a thing! This is appalling! Am I stupid? Am I unfit to be Emperor? This is the most horrible thing that I can imagine happening to me!’” Nevertheless, the Emperor gives his approval on the

² All excerpts of Andersen’s story are taken from M. Tatar, (Ed.), (2008) *The Annotated Hans Christen Andersen*, New York: W. W. Norton & Co.

cloth, not wanting, like his Ministers, to appear unfit for his post. The Ministers, who had accompanied the Emperor, again give glowing reviews:

They all said exactly what the Emperor had said: ‘Oh, it’s very beautiful!’ They advised [the Emperor] to wear his splendid cloths for the first time in the grand parade that was about to take place. ‘It’s *magnifique!*’ ‘Exquisite!’ ‘Superb!’... Everyone was really pleased with the weaving. The Emperor knighted each of the two swindlers and gave them medals... along with the title Imperial Weaver.

For white anti-racist educators, the story of the Emperor provides insight into how our own investments in our positions as ‘good white people’ and experts on whiteness and racism can get us into trouble. Thompson (2003) cautions that, “As teachers and students, we are seduced by our certainty in our own abilities to think critically and to get it right... We trust profoundly in our ability to think critically and responsibly about things, and it is this very trust that betrays us” (p.19). Part of this certainty, I would argue, stems from our underlying insecurities about being ‘fit’ for our academic ‘offices’, and by extension, our authority as ‘experts’ on anti-racist issues.

As ‘emperors’ of academe, we have our ‘court’ of academic peers to support and bolster our self-congratulatory assumptions that we ‘know’ what it means to be a good white person. However, on an individual basis, we also recognize that our whiteness is problematic. This individual recognition leads to an underlying insecurity about whether or not we are ‘fit for our offices’ as anti-racist authorities. At the same time, we enjoy the benefits that our power as authorities accords us over the rest of the scholarly world. As a result, we are reluctant to admit that we ‘see’ this discrepancy, as we fear what the implications of such an acknowledgement might be. We remain ‘cloistered in our closets’, warm and secure in the shrouds of our own privilege because ultimately, we enjoy it (Robbins 2003 p. 662).

In this instance, the warning that we must heed as progressive white anti-racist academics is that social discretion can engender solidarity. If we cloister around other academics worried about the maintenance of their power in their field, the milieu can become one where the underlying social conventions that support us go unquestioned. We remain so fixated on appearing qualified for our position as academic authorities that we overlook and fail to trouble the obvious; the complexities and contradictions inherent in our white privilege. In the next section, I argue for the necessity for exposing and problematizing our identities despite the initial, potentially disabling, realization that our power still remains intact.

“But he’s not wearing anything at all!” – Exposure in Academe

The Emperor marched in the parade under the lovely canopy, and everyone in the streets and at the windows said: ‘Goodness! The Emperor’s new clothes are the finest he has fit!’ People were not willing to let on that there was nothing at all to see, because that would have meant they were either unfit for their posts or very stupid. Never had the Emperor’s clothes made such a great impression.

‘But he isn’t wearing anything at all!’ a little child declared.

‘Goodness gracious! Did you hear the voice of that innocent child!’ cried the father. And the child’s remark was whispered from one person to the next.

‘Yes, he isn’t wearing anything at all!’ the crowd shouted at last.

For critical and lay readers alike, the figure of the child symbolizes the ability to see through the trappings of power to reveal the underlying truth of the Emperor’s vanity (Robbins 2003). As Emperors of academe, we are often ‘called out’ by minoritized groups to acknowledge and scrutinize the very power that we as white scholars find solace in³. Robbins asserts that by calling out the Emperor, the child disrupts the invisible social

³ The association of minoritized peoples to the figure of the child has uncomfortable patronizing undertones. However, I make the association, not to suggest that minoritized peoples are childlike, but rather to illustrate the unequal power relations tangible in both academe and society at large.

conventions through which differences are constructed and maintained between ruler and ruled.

While the figure of the child in Andersen's fairytale can be taken to represent the voice of the subaltern calling for the accountability and recognition of our white privilege, s/he can also stand for our inner self-reflexive voice, which recognizes our own power and spurs us to do something about it. Burack elaborates on this further in her breakdown of coalition politics to differentiate between three levels of analysis or type of conflict: conflict within the self, conflict within the group, and conflict between groups. These coalitional frames are mutually constitutive and can result in diverse interests, perspectives, and frictions. And although all three frames have implications for the reparativeness of group dynamics, the third coalitional frame – coalitions across differences between groups – is usually given the most attention (Burack 2004). Yet as Burack (2004) points out, "Even at the individual level, conflict within the self is a consequence of relations with others" (p.145). As echoed by Patricia Williams (1991 p.93),

I also believe that the personal is not the same as 'private': the personal is often merely the highly particular. I think the personal has fallen into disrepute as sloppy because we have lost the courage and the vocabulary to describe it in the face of the enormous social pressure to 'keep to ourselves' – but this is where our most idealistic and our deadliest politics are lodged, and are revealed.

Thus, while it is of the utmost importance to take heed of others when they openly expose our invisible privilege, it is also important to tend to the contradictions and complexities of whiteness that we as white scholars must acknowledge within ourselves, despite the discomfort that may arise. The final section elaborates on this notion of exposure further, suggesting that it is necessary to stay open, vulnerable, and naked, if we are to move forward as progressive, anti-racist scholars in meaningful ways.

Staying Naked – Getting used to our New Clothes

The Emperor felt most uncomfortable, for it seemed to him that the people were right. But somehow he thought to himself: 'I must go through with it now, procession and all.' And he drew himself up still more proudly, while the lords of the bedchamber walked after him carrying the train that wasn't there (Andersen in Robbins 2003 p. 67).

Although the Emperor felt uncomfortable being exposed, he continued to march forward. As Emperors within academe, we must, like the Emperor in Andersen's fairytale, not allow ourselves to become paralyzed once our invisible privilege is recognized for what it really is. When we open ourselves up for critique, we must allow ourselves and others to point out the inconsistencies, no matter what discomfort may arise. According to Ellsworth, academics become paralyzed when they are either unwilling or unable "to leave the field, or point out the contradiction" (1997 p.264). To counteract this, we need to question white academic attempts to define whiteness in the name of anti-racism and to hold on to 'the last word' (ibid.).

Risk and vulnerability are part of the process of exposure. As Deavere Smith aptly points out "Speaking... calls for risk.' It 'calls for a sense of what one has to lose'" (2000 p.39 in Thompson 2003 p. 23). Thompson echoes this sentiment by declaring that we need to give up the desire to define ourselves unproblematically as good whites with the supposition that we authoritatively know what it means to be white and anti-racist: "We need to trouble the expectation that we can know exactly what will count as antiracist in every situation and thus can always act blamelessly" (2003 p.23). Therefore, we need to be tentative in our processes of political awakening, accepting that there will be stops, stalls, and starts, and that the notion of linear progress towards a foreseeable end is hubris (Martin & Mohanty 1986). We must never sacrifice our search for meaning for searches of security,

as “‘there is an irreconcilable tension between the search for a secure place from which to speak’ and ‘the price at which secure places are bought’” (Martin & Mohanty 1986, p.206). In these instances, we must problematize what the limits of our knowing are, as they will vary according to different subject positions (Razack 1993). As Lugones and Spelman (1990) observe, growth in understanding is not a guarantee for an enhanced, better integrated sense of self. We cannot count on coming out of the ‘unlearning-of-white privilege’ task with intact identities, “with a self that is not as fragile as the selves of those who have been the victims of racism” (p.32). Yet just because we are not guaranteed emotional security does not mean that we should not push forward.

In her discussion of emergent approaches to change, Thompson (2003) points out that we have a “tendency to think that we know antiracism when we see it, suggesting that we too have definite ideas about desirable outcomes” (p.20). However, it is arrogant to think that the journey towards antiracist understanding is one with a foreseeable endpoint. Moreover, once we start congratulating ourselves on how far we have come on that journey, it is easy to think that we have already arrived at our final destination. Thompson importantly observes that anti-racism is temporally and spatially contextualized, and that the criteria for what it means to be anti-racist will continually change. The important thing is to be able to respond to these changes as they arise using the tools at our disposal: “Performatively trying on new assumptions about what is appropriate, reasonable, and fair makes it possible for us to develop new embodied values; in time, these temporary, working values may give place to values that we cannot yet imagine” (Thompson 2003 p.21).

Drawing on Achebe, Cheryl Harris (1997) suggests that it is the task of academics to stay ‘in trouble with the king’, “to take risks, point out contradictions, raise consciousness,

and develop an oppositional role – not for its own sake, but for the sake of those of us who remain under the burden of inequities and injustice in the social order” (p.105). If we are to truly be progressive academics, then we must learn to be comfortable in our nakedness with all of our impediments exposed for all to see. In order to effectively coalesce with others in troubling the king (the rigid structures of society), we must be first willing to be in trouble with our internal king by scrutinizing the power that resides in our identities as privileged whites. As alluded to by Martin and Mohandy, (1986) above, there is no guarantee that this will be an easy process, and that we will not be tempted to put own clothes back on at the first sign of critique. However, this tentativeness is alright and even expected. As Harris (1997) maintains, it is always crucial for us to analyze our failures. Yet we must not let these failures inhibit us from moving forward in meaningful ways.

(In)Conclusion⁴

In this paper, I have attempted to undress the benefits of our white privilege and to argue for internal disruption and subsequent exposure and vulnerability. The wealth of literary symbols found in Hans Christian Andersen’s ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’ have served as useful allegories in our examination of our white privilege. I have further highlighted the potential paralysis of exposure – that we must come to terms with the fact that we remain Emperors of academe despite being ‘called out’, either by ourselves or others. It follows from there that we must expose regardless, recognizing the power differential and working towards social justice in spite of it. I further asserted that once we are disrupted and our power laid bare, it is essential that we continue to stay within the disruption, and to accept being naked and vulnerable as part of our growth as progressive, white anti-racist scholars.

⁴ Coined by Thompson (2003 p.23).

Harris (1997) asserts that although there are inherent risks in confronting power, the central task of social transformation is to assume those risks (p.101). To ‘trouble the king’ without, we must first ‘trouble the king’ within. We must expose our white privilege for what it is; we must march naked before our white academic peers and our minoritized colleagues with our impediments laid bare. As the Emperor in Andersen’s fairytale, we must draw ourselves up proudly, and follow through with it, procession and all.

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