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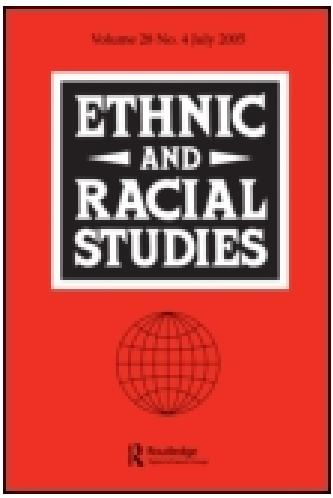

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The invisible weight of whiteness: the racial grammar of everyday life in contemporary America

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The invisible weight of whiteness: the racial grammar of everyday life in contemporary America

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva

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Abstract

Racial domination, like all forms of domination, works best when it becomes hegemonic, that is, when it accomplishes its goal without much fanfare. In this paper, based on the *Ethnic and Racial Studies Annual Lecture* I delivered in May 2011 in London, I argue there is something akin to a grammar – a racial grammar if you will – that structures cognition, vision, and even feelings on all sort of racial matters. This grammar normalizes the standards of white supremacy as the standards for all sort of social events and transactions. Thus, in the USA one can talk about HBCUs (historically black colleges and universities), but not about HWCUs (historically white colleges and universities) or one can refer to black movies and black TV shows but not label movies and TV shows white when in fact most are. I use a variety of data (e.g., abduction of children, school shootings, etc.) to illustrate how this grammar works and highlight what it helps to accomplish. I conclude that racial grammar is as important as all the visible practices and mechanisms of white supremacy and that we must fight its poisonous effects even if, like smog, we cannot see how it works clearly.

Keywords: Grammar; domination; racism; ideology; hegemony; power.

Introduction

I have dedicated most of my professional career to the examination of, as well as struggle against, racial domination in all of its manifestations. I have written on: racial theory; race and methodology; the character of America's post-civil rights racial regime; colour-blind racism; and

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whiteness (Doane and Bonilla-Silva 2003).[1] I have also written on the idea that racial stratification in the USA is becoming Latin America-like which generated a healthy debate chronicled in the journal of *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (Bonilla-Silva 2004; Bonilla-Silva 2009; Sue 2009); on race, human rights, and citizenship (Bonilla-Silva and Mayorga 2009); and on several other matters. Since early in 2008, I have spent a lot of time analysing, explaining, criticizing, and debating *Obamania* and arguing that, at the end of the day, America's political regime works best in black face (see chapter 10 in Bonilla-Silva 2010).

In this paper, however, I address an entirely new aspect of racial domination – new in my work. I discuss some of the ideas and material from a book in progress in which I argue that racial domination necessitates something like a grammar[2] to normalize the standards of white supremacy as *the* standards for all sorts of everyday transactions rendering domination almost invisible. Although racial power is defended in the last instance through coercion and violence – and I have just finished a book on the importance of coercion and violence in the American racial regime (Jung, Costa-Vargas and Bonilla-Silva 2011) – coercion and violence are not the central practices responsible for the reproduction of racial domination in contemporary America (Omi and Winant 1994) and, dare I say, in most racial regimes in the world-system. Instead, I suggest that 'racial domination'[3] generates a grammar that helps reproduce racial order as just the way things are.[4] The racial grammar helps accomplish this task by shaping in significant ways how we see or don't see race in social phenomena, how we frame matters as racial or not race-related, and even how we feel about race matters. Racial grammar, I argue, is a *distillate* of racial ideology and, hence, of white supremacy. Interested parties can read what I have written about racial ideology in general (Bonilla-Silva 2001) and colour-blind racism in particular (Bonilla-Silva 2010).

To facilitate the discussion, I point out three elements to keep in mind about racial grammar – and I am using the notion of grammar as a conceptual metaphor because language composition is but a sliver of what racial grammar shapes in everyday life.[5] First, if racial ideology furnishes the material that is spoken, argued, and transacted, racial grammar provides the 'deep structure', the 'logic' and 'rules' of proper composition of racial statements and, more importantly, of what can be seen, understood, and even felt about racial matters. But these rules, like all rules, are transacted and negotiated so that ideological rule and order are always in tension and conflict.[6] Second, albeit we learn 'proper grammar' in school, grammar is truly acquired, transacted, and changed through social interaction and communication (Crystal 2003). Thus, the notion of grammar I am articulating is more malleable than, for example, Joe Feagin's (2009) notion of the 'white frame'. Third, no racial grammar completely rules a field at any

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point in time and, through 'rebellion' from 'speakers', the grammar may change or collapse altogether.

Before I begin, I must make an introductory caveat about my discussion. All my examples and data are from the USA and refer to the contemporary period of racial domination. Thankfully, because the USA dominates world culture as well as the international news business (McPhail 2010), many of my examples should be familiar to many of you. Regardless, I hope to engage all of you in a way that allows you to appreciate racial grammar as a component of all racial regimes and to think of examples from this country as well as from other countries.

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Am I fat? The story behind the notion of 'racial grammar'

The catalyst for this book was a very pedestrian and somewhat silly incident. I was part of a Weight Watchers group and we were told we had to begin our diet with an accurate assessment of our weight. My wife and I decided to go to the local GNC store (a health food store in the USA) to weigh ourselves because they had what we regarded as a very reliable scale. After I provided my age, sex, and height, the scale printed the following morsel on a tiny piece of paper: 'You weigh 235 pounds and need to lose 50 pounds to reach your ideal weight'. I am a tall, muscular, large framed man so the verdict of the scale seemed inappropriate. I believed I needed to lose *some* weight, but fifty pounds seemed like too much. Yet, the cold, seemingly 'factual' verdict (and it felt more like an indictment) remained. According to this scale, *I was fat* and far off my ideal weight. In fact, my Body Mass Index, or BMI, was 31, which was one unit above the lower range of those classified as 'obese'.

At least initially, this scale's dictum depressed me as reaching my 'ideal weight' seemed impossible![7] But suddenly, it hit me! Did my African ancestry[8] have anything to do with the whole thing – I am a black man from Puerto Rico? And how does this scale determines one's 'ideal weight'? First, people of African descent in the USA *seem* to be, as African Americans say, 'big boned', that is, their bones are anywhere between 5 to 15 per cent denser than the bones of whites in men and 1 to 7 per cent in women (Ettinger et al. 1997). In the last decade or so, several researchers have consistently found that BMI as well as waist circumference are not good indicators of obesity for blacks. For instance, in 2009, MD Samuel Dagogo-Jack reported in a meeting of endocrinologists that, 'compared to Caucasians, African-Americans of the same age, gender, waist circumference, weight and height may have lower total and abdominal fat mass'. Using more sophisticated techniques for assessing body fat (DEXA bone density scanning and computed tomography), they found that the correlation

between these measures and BMI and waist size was higher for whites than for blacks. Dagogo-Jack (2009) said that their data 'suggest that muscle mass may be higher in blacks, which would explain the dissociation between weight expressed as BMI and measured body fat'. A more recent and seemingly more robust study of the accuracy of BMI and waist circumference to determine obesity by Peter Katzmarzyk and colleagues (2011) found that the thresholds needed to be adjusted upwards by 3 kg/m^2 and 5 cm respectively for black women (no finding for men by race). I understand my commentary here may be seen as reifying or biologizing race, so I will thread the needle carefully. What I am making is a *probability* statement and limiting it to blacks in the USA (the reports I cite here are exclusively for blacks in the USA). In the future, we will have to study the interaction of environmental factors and genetics to explain why the findings for blacks in the USA are the way they are.[9]

Second, and most importantly, the scale made an assessment about my 'ideal weight' based on presumably universal data. However, the 'universe' used as the standard for the original notion of 'ideal weight' was elite white people in Europe. The formula for calculating ideal body weight – known as the 'Broca Index' – was developed in 1871 by the anatomist and father of the French School of Anthropology, Dr. Paul Broca. But what many of the people who use this formula today[10] do not know is that Dr. Broca, like many 'men of science' of his time, was in the business of measuring physical differences between 'nationalities', 'races', and men and women to demonstrate the presumed superiority of elite European men (Hubbard 2002). (It is important to point out that these 'men of science', who, like Broca, were the founding fathers of the 'sciences of men', fudged data and used faulty samples to reach many of their conclusions in part to justify the imperial projects of their countries or to reassure 'scientifically' their dominant position in society.[11]) On his work measuring crania, Broca said:

> In general, the brain is larger in mature adults than in the elderly, in men than in women, in eminent men than in men of mediocre talent, in superior races than in inferior races. ... Other things being equal there is a remarkable relationship between the development of intelligence and the volume of the brain (Gould 1981, p. 83).

This incident, and my quest to understand what shaped it, made me think long and hard about the idea of something like a grammar affecting, if not directing altogether, our cognitions and emotions on all sorts of matters. The concern about how the 'invisible weight of whiteness' affects social transactions seemed extremely important and led me to ponder whether a racial grammar is ultimately as important

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as all the visible structures and practices associated with white supremacy.

Beauty and the beast

Let me offer a few examples of how the racial grammar of contemporary America organizes a racialized field of interpretation and vision. The subject of one of the chapters in the book, entitled 'Beauty and the beast', came to me out of an 'Aha' moment. I was watching the *Nancy Grace* (2008) show one night (a crime show on Headline News, CNN) when she said the following:

> Breaking news tonight! At yet another college campus, a beautiful 22-year-old president of the UNC Chapel Hill student body, double major, biology, poli sci, last seen 1:30 AM doing homework, 5:00 AM, shots fired, 22-year-old Eve Carson found dead out in the intersection near campus, multiple gunshot wounds.

Did you catch the problem with this statement? The problem, as a few of you guessed, is with the adjective 'beautiful'. TV hosts such as Nancy Grace always seem to describe a missing or murdered young white woman as 'beautiful'. We checked transcripts of *Grace*'s and other similar crime shows, such as FOX's *Greta Van Susteren* to see if there was a pattern and found that in cases dealing with the disappearance or murder of young white women, the adjective is often there, but when the victim is a black or Latino woman, they are seldom discussed (and they too are victims of violence)[12] and, when discussed, the adjective is not there.

The under-representation of minority female victims, by the way, has been discussed by journalists, media critics, and minority victims' group advocates. Roy Peter Clark, vice president and senior scholar at the Poynter Institute, a training centre for journalists in St Petersburg, Florida, said: 'Sex sells, kidnapping sells, but not every kidnapping is equal' (cited in Santos 2007). Sherri Parks, Professor of American Studies at the University of Maryland, calls it the 'missing white woman syndrome' and adds that 'since we can't solve all the problems, since we can't save all the women, this woman becomes a symbol ... and ... for a few days, we're OK'.[13]

The notion of racial grammar helps us understand the structure of this unsavoury racial situation. First, stories about whites become universal stories about all of us. This is how whites frame these stories symbolically but, of course, this is not the case in reality. When Laci Peterson was brutally murdered by her husband in Modesto, California, in 2002, Evelyn Hernandez, a Salvadorean woman also went missing at the same time: her decapitated torso, like Laci's, was

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found in San Francisco Bay. In 2005, Natalee Holloway, a young woman, disappeared while on vacation in Aruba; LaToyia Figueroa, a black pregnant Puerto Rican woman from Chester, Philadelphia, also went missing, like Natalee, in 2005. (Readers of this article are more likely to know Laci's and Natalee's stories as their cases have circulated around the world as newsworthy stories with international, universal appeal.[14]) Second, the beauty component to these stories reflects what Toni Morrison has articulated so well in novels such as *The Bluest Eye*, 'that all modes of representation in our current culture tend to idealize the desire for whiteness and devalue the presence of blackness' (Samuels 2001, p. 8). This social fact remains despite years of symbolic and practical struggle against white supremacy. Normative whiteness is still the not-so-hidden standard – the cultural essence of 500 years of 'racist culture' (Goldberg 1993), a culture that since Kant, Voltaire, Hume, and all the other enlightened white men of Europe and America, has depicted non-whites as ugly and particular and whites as beautiful and universal beings (Sala-Molins 2006).

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Watching whiteness

Now I provide examples from another chapter entitled 'Watching whiteness: white movies and white TV shows'. The idea for this chapter came from a conversation I had fourteen years ago with Tyrone A. Forman, then a student at Michigan and now a professor of sociology at Emory University. He declined to join a group of fellow minority folks to go out to watch a movie because he did not enjoy watching '*white* movies'. I told him, 'Man, you see racism in everything!' Like most whites, I thought, 'This dude is hypersensitive. A movie, after all, is *just* a movie'. I now realize he was right and I was wrong; I now realize how deeply I was affected by the racial grammar which prevented me from appreciating the depth of whiteness in movies. The moment people of colour turn their racial radars off is the moment whiteness seeps through stronger than ever!

In terms of movies, bell hooks (1997, p. 203) has argued that 'to experience the pleasure that cinema [can offer, blacks have] to close down critique, analysis; they [have] to forget racism'. Our visual culture expects (maybe even demands) that people of colour suspend belief and become white-like, otherwise, 'no soup for you' (no pleasure for you).[15] On movies and TV shows, we have plenty of work from scholars such as Hernán Vera (Gordon and Vera 2003), Norman Denzin (2002), Herman Gray (2004), Darnell M. Hunt (2005), and Stephanie Greco Larson (2005). Gordon and Vera, as well Denzin, provide a historical interpretation of the 'cinematic racial order' – an order that evolved from *civilizational racism* (exemplified in movies such as *Birth of the Nation* and *Gone with the Wind*) and almost total

whiteness to the modern-day *cultural racism* in which people of colour appear mostly in secondary, stereotypical roles.

Since many have laboured in this important cultural space, I will not delve into this subject too much. However, I will outline a few general things as they pertain to my notion of racial grammar. First, racial minorities are still under-represented in movies and on TV.[16] Even in movies where they should be included they are not or appear in a twisted way. Take for example the 2008 box office hit *21*. In this movie, the main protagonists (the ubiquitous white guy and white woman) are MIT students 'used' (they receive plenty of benefits from their participation in the scheme) by one of their maths professors (played by Kevin Spacey, another white guy) in a gambling scheme in Vegas. These main characters are surrounded by other white kids and two Asian characters as buffoonish, clumsy sidekicks. So, what is the issue with this movie? The main issue, besides representing Asians in stereotypical fashion,[17] is that the book upon which the movie was based, *Bringing Down the House*, was itself based on a real story involving mostly Asian American youngsters and the main character was an Asian male! The decision to replace the Asian characters with white ones was race-market-driven: a young white couple would help make the movie more appealing to 'audiences' (Hollywood still regards audiences as mostly white and primarily interested in seeing white characters).[18]

Second, when minorities appear in mainstream movies, they still play mostly stereotypical roles (e.g., thugs, buffoons, and angry people). Hollywood folks seem to never get it right so that even in so-called 'progressive' movies such as the blockbuster *Avatar* (2009), depicted as an anti-colonialist film, or *The Blind Side* (2009), portrayed as an anti-racist film, they reproduce the racial order of things. In the former, the colonized are saved by a neo-Tarzan[19] white character (Hollywood never dares to have people of colour in movies liberating themselves), while in the latter, race conflicts are portrayed as simple misunderstandings that can be settled by the 'great white hope' played by Sandra Bullock (similar to the 1988 film, *Mississippi Burning*).

Another stereotypical way in which blacks appear in movies is when they play the role of 'magic negroes' – black people who are given some power and whose job in the plot of a movie is to help whites navigate their lives (Hughey 2009). Examples abound. Will Smith in *Hancock* (2008), where he plays a drunk superhero who helps a white couple deal with their issues; Whoopi Goldberg in *Ghost* (1990), where she plays a psychic helping to reunite a dead white man and his wife; Morgan Freeman in *Bruce Almighty* (2003) and *Evan Almighty* (2007) where he plays God and is still second bananas (only blacks can play God and be second bananas); and Michael Clark Duncan in *The*

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Green Mile (1999) where he plays a mentally challenged huge black man with healing powers who heals the main character and saves the wife of another.

Third, the storylines in films and TV shows tend to: (1) reinforce racial boundaries; (2) bolster the racial status quo; and (3) present a felicitous view of racial affairs. Examples of TV shows reinforcing racial boundaries are sitcoms such as *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, *Cheers*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, and many others: minority characters seldom appear and, when they do, last but a few episodes.[20] The same is true in movies such as *Hitch* (2005), with Will Smith and Eva Mendes as protagonists, which shows that (a) white-black romance is still not acceptable (see Cole 2006) and (b) that black-on-black romance is still regarded as a black movie (e.g., *Why did I get married, too?* (2010)), which implies that whites will not see the movie thus their choice of a black man and light-skinned but still dark Latina in this movie. (Thought experiment for readers: What was the last interracial romance popular movie you remember watching and how did it do at the box office?) Examples of these cultural productions bolstering the racial order are shows like *America's Most Wanted*, *COPS* (Prosise and Johnson 2004), and the local news (Dixon 2008), all of which distort the reality of crime and the 'criminals', or in reality TV shows where people of colour are hard to find and, when there, are usually portrayed as pushy and hard-to-get-along-with folks like in the case of Omarosa in *The Apprentice* or as how most minorities are portrayed in *Big Brother* (Escoffery 2006). Lastly, examples of movies presenting a simple-minded view of racial affairs[21] are the interracial 'buddy movies' such as *48 Hours*, *Lethal Weapon*, *I Spy*, *White Men Can't Jump*, and almost all Jackie Chan movies. These films create the impression that if we just get to know one another, we can become friends because 'racism' is simply a matter of not knowing one another well and, more problematically, a property we all have (e.g., this is what the so-called anti-racist movie *Crash* suggested). As an aside, if you want to know why interracial buddy movies are made by the dozen, the answer is money! Movie critic Jamie Malanowski (2002) wrote that 'the average gross of black-and-white buddy movies is $103 million, while the average gross for all buddy movies is $67 million'. (Whites want to feel good about themselves by imagining they can have friends across the racial divide. But those imaginary friends are depicted in a one-sided, stereotypical, and ultimately accommodating fashion. For a discussion on the realities of interracial friendships and whites' fantasies about these relationships, see chapter 4 in my *Racism Without Racists* (2010).)

Before I move on, I confess I am addicted to movies and watch about three every month! But the racial grammar that makes white movies universal (for everyone) and black movies particular (for black

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folks only) is getting to me. Whites do not watch average black movies such as *Obsessed* (2009), *Why Did I Get Married Too?* (2010), *For Colored Girls* (2010), or *The Heart Specialist* (2011).[22] Instead, they watch buffoon movies with black protagonists such as the *Big Momma's House* trilogy (2000, 2006, 2010) or movies that reinforce racial stereotypes such as *Precious* (2009). Maybe it is time for people of colour to follow Tyrone Forman's advice and stop watching white movies and white TV shows as they ultimately poison their soul and it may be a formidable way of raising the issue and forcing the hand of filmmakers and TV producers.

All of our children

Now I discuss material from a chapter entitled 'All of our children', in which I address the matter of child abductions. Most of us probably recognize the names Elizabeth Smart, from Utah, or the 'adorable'[23] Kyron Horman from Oregon. But who recognizes the names Alexis Patterson, Laura Ayala, or Anthony Thomas? The latter are names of minority children abducted in the last few years and only Alexis' case, the Milwaukee girl abducted seven years ago, received any serious media attention. But the abduction of Elizabeth Smart, which happened at the same time as Alexis', received six times more news coverage (Johnson and Johnson 2002).

Is this because minority children are not likely to be kidnapped? Actually, data from the National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART) suggests that at least 36 per cent of all missing children are black or Latino (Sedlak, Finkelhor and Hammer 2005).[24] Therefore, one would expect that at least a third of all reports on missing children would involve minority children. To sum up the issue here, I cite Alexis Patterson's stepfather who stated in an interview with *The Denver Post* (Schrager 2002) the following:

> She's been shortchanged period, like she's not important, but she is. She's just as important to us as the Smarts' daughter is to them. We feel the same way about our daughter as they do about their daughter. We love her and we miss her, and it's painful going on day to day without having her.

But the racial angle in the coverage of these stories is not viewed as a serious issue by leaders in the (white) missing children advocate community.[25] For example, when asked about a report by Scripps Howard News Service on disproportional coverage by the media of white versus minority missing children, sociologist David Finkelhor (Sedlak, Finkelhor and Hammer 2005), director of the Crimes Against

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Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire, said 'I think there are explanations other than that black kids and Hispanic kids are not objects of concern or compassion'. Nevertheless, Finkelhor acknowledged that missing minority children are regarded by the police as runaway cases and said that 'minority families probably have a harder time overcoming this runaway hypothesis'. Ernie Allen, president of the federally-funded National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, after acknowledging that he has to work hard to convince television stations and newspapers to carry accounts of missing minority children, said that 'the cause isn't racism by news directors' and attributed the disparity to 'subtle factors like geography and whether a story makes people think "that could be my child"' (Scripps Howard News Service 2005). Both Finkelhor and Allen explain the disparity in coverage using the 'anything but racism' strategy (Bonilla-Silva 2001) by attributing it to class, geography, and age of the children and both provide explanations in line with the racial grammar of contemporary America. Allen's argument about people (whites) being able to identify with the story ('that could be my child') is a clear indication of the assumption that only white children's abduction stories are deemed universal by the media and Finkelhor's acknowledgment that missing minority children are viewed as runaway suggests that the (white) police assume no one is interested in abducting minority children.

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Bad boys, bad boys: school shootings in white, black, and brown

I now discuss examples from a chapter entitled 'Bad boys, bad boys: school shootings in white, black, and brown'. Although nine out of ten children killed in schools die in urban schools[26] and violent acts are eleven and a half times more likely in urban relative to rural and suburban schools, white America is morally distraught by tragedies such as the one at Columbine.[27] Why is this the case? Eugene Kane, a writer for the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, said it best in a 2006 piece after a shooting in Cazenovia, Wisconsin, and an alleged plot in Green Bay:

> When tragedy hits a small town or city, the sympathy swells up for all involved. When young people die in Milwaukee's central city, too often the reaction from outsiders is to point fingers and blame residents for tolerating the violence.

He then added:

> Suburban and rural white students caught in gunfire get immediate grief counselors dispatched to the scene. Black and brown city kids

surrounded by violence have to resolve their emotional issues all by themselves.

But are these shootings distinct events which, consequently, ought to be treated differently? Menifield et al. (2001) document that even when similar types of school-shootings are compared, the media coverage is disproportional toward white schools. More significantly, the authors find that the tone of the coverage is different: articles dealing with shootings in white schools report the news in ways which elicit the sympathy of their readers, whereas articles dealing with shootings in urban schools portray these shootings as examples 'of the usual violence in urban America' and betray a concern with accountability. And if a white colour-blind angel is whispering to you, 'You are not a racist, but aren't minority kids more likely to be involved in drugs, alcohol abuse, and in bringing weapons to schools than white children, so...', you are in for a surprise. Antiracist activist Tim Wise (2001), who is white, citing data from the Center of Disease Control, stated:

> white high school students are seven times more likely than blacks to have used cocaine; eight times more likely to have smoked crack; ten times more likely to have used LSD and seven times more likely to have used heroin. ... What's more, white youth ages 12–17 are more likely to sell drugs: 34% more likely, in fact than their black counterparts. And it is white youth who are twice as likely to binge drink, and nearly twice as likely as blacks to drive drunk. And white males are twice as likely to bring a weapon to school as are black males.

These facts led Wise to say bluntly: 'I can think of no other way to say this, so here goes: white people need to pull our heads out of our collective ass'. Although this makes for a very cute statement, it is sociologically flawed. 'Facts' matter very little on the things I have been discussing today. What ultimately counts in the real world weaved by race is whites' *perceptions* about blacks – specifically, their perception of black men as criminal black men to use Katheryn Russell-Brown's term (1998). And the same racial grammar blinds whites from accepting the fact that little Susan and adorable Johnny are the ones in trouble, rather than Tyrone and Latasha.

HWCUs

I now discuss a more dangerous example as it is closer to home: the case of HWCUs or historically white colleges and universities. The 'racial' character of HBCUs is tattooed in their very name. These

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colleges are seen as all-black institutions (non-black faculty accounted for 40 per cent of faculty at HBCUs in 2001: see Provasnik and Shafer 2004) with a black agenda (as white creations, their black agenda is quite narrow: see Brown, Ricard and Donahoo 2004). (Yet, HBCUs are important as close to 30 per cent of all blacks who receive a BA do so in an HBCUs: cited in Al-Hadid 2004). However, we never ponder about the whiteness of these places; we rarely question the history and practices that create and maintain these institutions as white. Instead, we conceive of them in universalistic terms as just colleges and universities. These colleges, however, have a history, demography, curriculum, climate, and symbols and traditions that embody, signify, and reproduce whiteness. For example, most traditions in HWCUs pre-date their so-called 'integration' and, thus, are exclusionary such as homecoming.[28] While some traditions are almost innocently exclusionary, such as Friday afternoon tea at Smith College or yearbooks, some are highly racialized as with offensive 'Indian' mascots (see Fenelon 1999).

The demography of these places is such that a black student interviewed by Feagin, Vera and Imani (1996, p. 5) in their book *The Agony of Education* stated, after visiting a private college in the northeast, that 'I was only there for two days, and after one day I wanted to leave. And I mean, really, it just reeked everywhere I went, reeked of old white men, just lily whiteness, oozing from the corners!' The demography and symbols in HWCUs create an oppressive racial ecology where just walking on campus is unhealthy; where minority students and faculty feel, as one observer commented, as 'guests [who] have no history in the house they occupy. There are no photographs on the wall that reflect their image. Their paraphernalia, paintings, scents, and sounds do not appear in the house' (Turner 1994, p. 356).

This oppressive ecology is worst in college towns as the businesses in the area reproduce and reinforce the whiteness of HWCUs. Hence, local businesses and even local people cater to mostly-white interests – a practice that leads to a turf-defending mentality. For example, in 2005 an employee at *Ed' Express*, a fast food place in a university housing at the University of Wisconsin, approached a group of black students eating dinner and told them, 'I'm sick of you people leaving piles of shit all over our tables,' and added, 'I want you to leave the premises. I don't want you here.'[29]

On campuses themselves, one has to deal with statues of white heroes with problematic backgrounds. At Texas A&M, where I laboured for seven years, every morning I had to walk by the statue of Sul Ross, the first president of the university, and a man who fought for the confederacy and served in the infamous Texas Rangers. At Wisconsin, where I received my PhD, every day I walked by the statue of Lincoln and dealt with white students' pride at having the effigy of

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the so-called Emancipator.[30] At Duke, the new HWCU I labour in, the campus feels like an old plantation, a feeling reinforced by the pictures, paintings, and statues of (mostly) white men sprinkled throughout the campus.

White logic, white methods: the racial grammar of sociology

The last example is about a chapter describing how the racial grammar works in academia, specifically, in the discipline I know best: sociology. Some of the material for this chapter will come from my book with Tukufu Zuberi entitled *White Logic, White Methods: Racism and Methodology* (2008). In the book we argue that the logic and methods social scientists use to examine race matters are *partially* white, by which we mean they reflect and reinforce white supremacy. Before defining these terms in the book, we provide personal vignettes that embody what we mean by white logic and white methods. The examples I furnish in the book show how the racial grammar blinds sociologists about the way race colours (pun intended) our business. For instance, I narrate how when I was working on the material for my book *Racism Without Racists* (2009), colleagues at Michigan and elsewhere asked me in a sharp and sometimes aggressive manner about methodological matters such as 'Who coded your data? Were the coders black or white?' and 'What was the inter-coder reliability index?' My answers to these questions were: I had black and white coders, the inter-coder reliability index[31] was 85 per cent, and do you ask these questions across the board or just to analysts who say that race matters? In one particular exchange I raised the issue of why it is that whites always see anyone black and minority as potentially 'biasing' data, analysis, and interpretation of social phenomena, but never contemplate the same for whites. 'White logic [and by extension, the racial grammar, too],' as we state in the book, 'assumes a historical posture that grants eternal objectivity to the views of elite whites and condemns the views of nonwhites to perpetual subjectivity' (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008, p. 17).

I was also accused of not taking seriously the ambivalence of white respondents on racial matters. Specifically, after I interpreted a respondent's answer to a question on interracial marriage as problematic, a colleague told me: 'But isn't she right? If the children of interracial couples suffer, then it is you who are making this respondent look "racist"?' I told my colleague that we did not have systematic data to assess if the children of interracial couples suffer more in life than other children, but that if they did, this fact did not fit whites' notion of America as a colour-blind nation. If America is indeed a colour-blind nation, I told my colleague, who are the colour-blind people making racially insensitive comments to colour-blind

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children from interracial colour-blind couples living a colour-blind life? I then pondered aloud why it is that so many white sociologists, as well as so many 'regular whites', choose to believe the most naïve interpretation of racial matters. Charles W. Mills (2007) refers to this phenomenon as the 'epistemology of ignorance' or whites' will to *mis*interpret the world of race. This structured ignorance is evident in our simplistic reading of whites' racial attitudes or by how giddy white sociologists become when researchers argue that race is declining in significance, that assimilation is happening for most minorities, and that 'white flight' is not racially motivated, but due to whites' concerns about schools, property values, and safety as Harris (1999) argued in a paper in the *American Sociological Review* a while back.[32]

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Conclusion: why should we care about 'racial grammar'?

In the book I will write about other things,[33] but for now let me articulate why examining the racial grammar of any racial order is so important and suggest what we can do to fight this grammar which 'weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living' (McLellan 1982, p. 300). Racial grammar must be challenged because, like air pollution, it is hard to see clearly yet it is out there poisoning us all. It affects people of colour deeply. It affects their cognitive map, their sense of self (Are we beautiful?), and what they do to their bodies – hair straightening, skin bleaching, contact lenses to have lighter colour eyes, and cosmetic surgery to make certain features less African-, Asian-, or Latino-looking.

Needless to say, the racial grammar shapes whites' racial cognitions too, and more deeply than it does folks of colour. More importantly, the racial grammar prevents whites from truly empathizing with people of colour. Otherwise, when elections are stolen through voter suppression and political chicanery as in the 2000 election (Parenti 2007), or when the death penalty is applied to people of colour at unbelievably high rates (Alexander 2010), or when minority children are abducted and their stories are not mentioned by the media, whites would be up in arms as they would regard 'an injury to one, is an injury to all'. This human solidarity, unfortunately, does not happen because these horrid things are not processed by whites in the same way as folks of colour. In short, these things are, for whites, ungrammatical!

But all forms of domination generate contestation and racial domination is no exception (Bonilla-Silva 1997). First, as I pointed out at the outset, the racial grammar has not completely ruled the grammatical field of the nation. Segregation has always provided what historian Lawrence Levine (1978) has labelled the 'necessary

space' – the schoolyard for people of colour to see the racial world differently than whites. And within this space, people of colour have been able to develop a partial alternative racial grammar that has prevented them from absolute 'mental slavery'. Through that partial alternative grammar, people of colour have posed challenges to things such as the white normative beauty standard and provided counter-standards such as 'Black is beautiful'.[34] They have made movies such as the *The Great Debaters* (2007), produced by Oprah Winfrey and directed by Denzel Washington, in which unlike classic so-called anti-racist movies (e.g., *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *American X* (1988), or *Crash* (2004)), the heroes are not whites but blacks themselves. Even the recent B-movie, *Machete* (2010), directed by Richard Rodriguez with Danny Trejo as the leading man, provided an important counter-narrative to the contemporary discourse on immigration; and on TV, shows such as *In Living Color* (1990–1994), the short-lived *Chapelle's Show* (2003–2006), and the five seasons of HBO's *The Wire* (2002–2008). Albeit all of these efforts have had serious limitations (for example, *In Living Color* rampant sexism [but see Gray's (2004) balanced analysis of this show]), they all provided frontal challenges to the dominant racial common sense. On the importance of challenging ruling racial dogmas, David Simon (2008), *The Wire*'s creator and writer, said in his farewell letter:

> We tried to be entertaining, but in no way did we want to be mistaken for entertainment. We tried to provoke, to critique and debate and rant a bit. We wanted an argument. We think a few good arguments are needed still, that there is much more to be said and it is entirely likely that there are better ideas than the ones we offered. But nothing happens unless the shit is stirred. That, for us, was job one.

Accordingly, we need to get busy to get job one done. We must develop an epistemology of racial emancipation as the necessary corrective to the racial grammar that fosters and reflects the 'moral economy of whiteness', to use the apt term coined by Garner (2007). But please know that epistemology and counter-ideological struggles alone have not liberated anyone in history! Thus the task at hand for us in this peculiar and strangely contradictory moment in America's racial history is to organize a movement of racial liberation; to work towards change we can truly believe in. Dominant grammars collapse when the oppressed fight back. Then, and only then, will the grammar of America be multicultural, democratic, and express the views, interests, and feelings of all of us in our America.

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Notes

1. Readers interested in these references can find them in my page at Duke University (http://fds.duke.edu/db/aas/Sociology/faculty/silva) or can email me a note at ebs@soc.duke.edu.
2. I am using the notion of grammar as theoretical inspiration, but not buying completely into the linguistic term. Hence, as I use it, racial grammar influences vision, emotion, and our sense of aesthetics in addition to the way we talk about and frame racial matters.
3. Some analysts see 'racial domination' as institutional racism plus interpersonal racism (see Desmond and Emirbayer 2009). My problem with this conceptualization is that it avoids the fundamental question of 'racial interests', that is, if there is racial domination, it must be because someone *benefits* from it. For my general critique of the institutional and interpersonal view on racism, see Bonilla-Silva 1997.
4. I do not subscribe to the strong stance on 'hegemony' as it implies that people are totally brainwashed and have no clue as to what is going on. This does not occur in terms of class domination (Scott 1990) and perhaps it is less so in terms of racial domination. Therefore, racial hegemony exists, but it is a never-ending process in need of constant revision to deal with the challenges the racially subaltern pose and to co-opt new ways of dealing with racial issues (e.g., multiculturalism, which was a challenge from people of colour to white supremacy, has been watered down to the point of that it is now advocated by almost everyone in the racial polity).
5. In developing the concept of racial grammar, I contemplated several other options. Initially I thought of using the notion of 'racial unconscious' (Sullivan 2006) but decided against it because of its intrinsic connection to sexuality and to Freud's ideas, things that were not central to what I was theoretically interested in capturing. I also explored Michel De Certeau and colleagues' work on practices (1998) and Kenneth Burke's *A Grammar of Motives* (1969). De Certeau's work was helpful in driving home the importance of routine behaviour and everyday practices and Burke's book, although basically useless for my purposes, helped me to think about grammar and language. In searching for more theoretical inspiration on race, grammar, and language, I came across the important book by Caroline Knowles, *Race and Social Analysis* (2003), where I found the notion of 'racial grammar'. Although I agree with much of what Knowles says in her book and use the same notion, my elaboration, as readers will see, is very different from hers. For Knowles (2003, p. 18), racial grammar is 'the social practices to which race/ethnicity give rise'. For me, racial grammar is the hidden racial ideological substratum or residue which like the oil in a car, allows the engine to operate somewhat smoothly in any racial order. This oil lubricates not just our race talk, but our race vision, racial cognition, and racial aesthetics and emotions. Without this oil, the car of race would run rough for a while and, ultimately, would cease to operate.
6. On this, the work of Raymond Williams is very useful. His classic essay, 'Base and superstructure in Marxist cultural theory', originally published in 1973 in *New Left Review*, is still among the best on this matter (see Higgins 2001). In that essay, Williams insisted not only on the necessity of having 'a very complex account of hegemony', but also on the importance of recognizing that no regime controls the totality of the cultural and ideological fields. Williams highlighted the existence of alternative senses, attitudes, and values (Higgins 2001, pp. 67–70).
7. Bodyweight is not the reason for poor health outcomes despite the tremendous amount of nonsense pushed by those who profit from the fat scare. See Campos (2004), particularly chapters 1 and 2 on the section titled 'Fat Science'.
8. Although race is a 'social construct' and we are all of the same species – thus, we are all racially 'mixed', one can look at multiple (rather than single) genetic *loci* to determine the geographical ancestry of individuals. This ancestry, however, is not the same as the notion of 'biological race' or even 'population groups' as our genetic variation is small, trivial in terms

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of fundamental things, and not related in any way to things such as morality, intelligence, and the like. For a smart discussion on these matters, see Graves (2001).

9. An interesting discussion on this matter appears in Graves (2006). Discussing BiDil, the so-called 'race pill' that presumably will lower hypertension for blacks, Graves points out the following: 'BiDil may work for African American patients because they have greater oxidative damage in their cells, due to chronic stress. This would mean that the drug is acting on an environmentally induced difference, not a genetically based one. If the drug were used in Western Africa, where Africans face less racialized stress and a variety of environmental factors differ, we may not observe any ''race-specific'' effect'.

10. In the US, Broca's work was relayed to the population at large via height/weight tables developed by the insurance company METLIFE in the 1940s. The tables were used as guides for height/weight at which mortality is lowest and longevity highest. Albeit these tables have been adjusted over the years, they are still used by many people as 'standards' despite the growing medical advice that our main concern should be about general health and the focus on diet and exercise (see Lentini 1995).

11. A good book documenting the case of racism, imperialism, and science is Briggs (2002).

12. The most recent victimization survey shows that black women endure a rate of 23.3 per 100,000 compared to white women's rate of 16.7. See Table 6 in Bureau of Justice Statistics (2011).

13. This quote comes from an interview Professor Parks gave to CNN which aired on their *Showbiz Tonight* on 17 March 2006. See transcript at http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0603/17/sbt.01.html

14. These days, post-colonial and post-modern analysts on media systems claim to have superseded 'narrow' cultural imperialism views on the media. This view is overstated given media conglomeration and the reorganization of empire through the 'globalization' project. For a more balanced approach, see Hardy (2008).

15. This is a famous line from the *Seinfeld* sitcom from their episode entitled 'The Soup Nazi' which originally aired in 1995. This line has become part of the cultural repertoire of Americans and is used to signify that you do not deserve to get something. Needless to say, *Seinfeld*, like most TV shows in the US, was a white show.

16. Hollywood directors and producers follow the money, as well as the racial grammar, and do not cast too many minorities in their movies for fear that white audiences will not identify with the characters. For empirical validation of this perception, see Weaver (in press).

17. For a good critique of the representations of Asians in films, see Locke (2009).

18. Debates on the racism of this movie abound on the internet. For a useful review of how Asian Americans are treated in American films, see chapter 6 in Benshoff (2009).

19. For a succinct analysis of racism, sexism, and colonialism in Tarzan's stories, see Newsinger (1986).

20. Avid TV watchers know that things *seem* to be changing and quite rapidly. In the last decade, it has become standard for almost all shows to have at least one minority character. And shows such as *Glee*, *30 Rock*, *The Office*, and many others have several minority characters. However, all these shows are still *white* shows as the drama revolves around white characters, and their racial politics are not much better. For an examination of race matters in *The Office*, see Mayorga and Ashe (2011).

21. This belief that racism is an individual-level problem is normal among whites. Not surprisingly, 'the producers and writers [who are overwhelmingly white, tell] stories that make sense to them from the position they occupy in society' (Greco-Larson 2006, p. 14). Almost all TV shows and movies follow this pattern as presenting a structural or institutional rather than an individual-level view on racism, which would not attract the attention and interest of white audiences.

22. There is no systematic data on movies and the race of attendees. But the 'target marketing of movies' (Petty et al. 2003) and my inspection in cinemas when I go to so-called

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black, Latino, or Asian-themed movies, suggest audiences in these movies are overwhelmingly minority.

23. In almost every report on the disappearance of Kyron, he was described as 'adorable', despite his average looks.

24. I pause here to point out that we know that the significance of kidnappings by strangers, which are the cases most likely to be deemed 'newsworthy', is greatly inflated. Since the 1980s we know that stranger abduction cases are a small fraction of missing children cases and that the overwhelming majority are family abductions. An early paper on this was Joel Best's (1988) 'Missing children, misleading statistics'.

25. Because of the disparities in coverage and the seeming disinterest of the authorities, people of colour have created their own organizations such as the Black and Missing Foundation, Inc. and Black and Missing But Not Forgotten.

26. I must point out that, in general terms, there is little violence in schools and that in urban areas, the safest place to be for minority youth is schools. For a robust study on school shootings, see Katherine S. Newman et al. (2004).

27. The events in Columbine and other similar suburban schools seem to be explained by 'organizational deviance' (see Fox and Harding 2005).

28. Racial incidents abound in homecoming weekends in so-called integrated campuses. For example, in 2008 at Elon University in North Carolina, the festivities included a 'Phoenix Phiesta' and booklets with 'pictures of sombreros, maracas, donkeys and what appears to be a mariachi burrito strumming a guitar'. The homecoming celebration included a 'skit night' and skits 'were awarded extra points when they included a sombrero, a donkey and/or Enrique Iglesias'. See The Pendulum, 'Homecoming theme is racially insensitive' at http://www.elon.edu/pendulum/Story.aspx?id=1265.

29. This incident is addressed in Michael Gendall's 'Protesters rally at Ed's Express', *available at* http://badgerherald.com/news/2005/03/16/protesters_rally_at_.php.

30. On Lincoln's racial views and pragmatic reasons for signing the Emancipation Proclamation, see DuBois 2007.

31. Intercoder reliability is the widely used term for the extent to which independent coders evaluate a characteristic of a message or artefact and reach the same conclusion.

32. Professor Harris' work ignores the twenty years of work that suggests 'race talk' in post-civil rights America is oblique and coded. Researchers have amply documented that most whites express their racial concerns in discussion on safety, taxes, crime, property values, schools, and the like. Accordingly, one has to be mindful of this when attempting to properly assess the 'race effect' on whites' decisions about neighbourhoods. For a good survey-based analysis of whites' decisions and views on neighbourhoods, see Zubrinsky-Charles (2006).

33. I will address matters such as race and commercial representations (focusing on advertisement), race and post-racial politics (on the Obama phenomenon), race and adoptions, race and the criminal justice system, and race and citizenship.

34. The 'Black is beautiful' slogan emerged out of the 1960s liberation struggle of blacks in the United States and became a symbol for black liberation the world over.

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