The Whiteness of Silence: A Critical Autoethnographic Tale of a Strategic Rhetoric

Jennifer E. Potter
Towson University, jpotter@towson.edu

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Abstract

Nakayama and Krizeck's essay, "A Strategic Rhetoric of Whiteness" offers an understanding of Whiteness as cultural praxis operating beyond the narrow understanding of mere skin color. While scholars have added valuable contributions to the study of Whiteness, the discussion of the "strategic rhetoric" still lacks examples of embodiment. This essay seeks to demonstrate the deployment of Whiteness by describing a specific moment in which I was complicit in the deployment of Whiteness using the strategy of silence. This essay enumerates the machinations of Whiteness hidden in a seemingly mundane performance and contributes to an ongoing conversation about problematizing Whiteness.

Keywords

Critical Autoethnography, Whiteness Studies, Race, and Ethnicity Studies

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Jennifer E. Potter
Towson University, Towson, Maryland, USA

Nakayama and Krizeck's essay, "A Strategic Rhetoric of Whiteness" offers an understanding of Whiteness as cultural praxis operating beyond the narrow understanding of mere skin color. While scholars have added valuable contributions to the study of Whiteness, the discussion of the "strategic rhetoric" still lacks examples of embodiment. This essay seeks to demonstrate the deployment of Whiteness by describing a specific moment in which I was complicit in the deployment of Whiteness using the strategy of silence. This essay enumerates the machinations of Whiteness hidden in a seemingly mundane performance and contributes to an ongoing conversation about problematizing Whiteness. Keywords: Critical Autoethnography, Whiteness Studies, Race, and Ethnicity Studies

There is one question that every person has asked him or herself numerous times throughout life's trajectory: who am I? Although we know identity is multifaceted and always changing, there are pieces of our identity that remain relatively static. I have codified my answer to this question since my initial introduction to the academy: I am a woman, feminist, scholar, partner, mother, daughter, and friend. Mostly, though, I am White[1]. As a White woman who earned a PhD at a historically Black university, my identity was constantly a site and sight of contestation. I learned to explore, accept, and piece together a White racial identity that I could never separate from the strategy of Whiteness. Although my attempt is always to claim the identity of an anti-racist White woman, I recognize that the *White* part of that is the most useful analytic tool for the examination of social, political, economic, and sometimes interpersonal relations of power and privilege Understanding, articulating, and evaluating my identity is not the focus of this essay; rather, my identity is a lens through which Whiteness, privilege, and racism manifest themselves in identity development.

Perhaps one of the most important essays in the communication field on the social manifestation of Whiteness comes from Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizeck's (1995), "A Strategic Rhetoric of Whiteness." Nakayama and Krizek offer an understanding of Whiteness that exists beyond the narrow understanding of mere skin color. They uncover six strategies of the discourse of Whiteness: emphasizing a privileged social position based on one's racial identity (White means majority or status); White by default, or due to non-racial or ethnic categorization; using scientific definitions and classifications to articulate Whiteness; grouping Whiteness with nationality; discourses of Whiteness that refuse to use a "label" for Whiteness; and Whiteness as an articulation of European ancestry. In the twenty years since the publication of this essay, numerous scholars have studied Whiteness and privilege from a rhetorical perspective and added valuable contributions to the study of Whiteness. Although some of these scholars have addressed the body through the lens of performance (Butler, 2011; Jackson, 1998; O'Brien, 1994; Warren, 2003; Warren & Kilgard, 2001), the discussion of the "strategic rhetoric" of Whiteness still lacks everyday examples of its embodiment or

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[1] I capitalize "White" and "Black" to emphasize the cultural identities embedded in the physical manifestation of skin color.

definitive iterations of what might constitute this rhetoric in action. . In this essay, I seek to demonstrate concretely the ways in which Whiteness is deployed and redeployed as a rhetorical strategy. To do so, I describe a specific moment during my graduate career in which I, a White woman, was complicit in the deployment of Whiteness using the strategy of silence as a means of fending off perceived attacks from my Black classmates. First, though, I provide a methodological and theoretical framework for my analysis.

(Critical) Autoethnography

While autoethnographic research is still a relatively new form of qualitative ethnography, it is an obvious methodological choice when attempting to theorize about one's own identity, the social position that it delineates, and the structural violence operationalized therein. Ellis and Bochner (2000) define autoethnography as an "autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (p. 739). They describe the "findings" of autoethnographic research as "evocative stories" that a researcher presents about his or her own experiences (p. 744). Jones (2009) extends the explanation of evocative stories by describing them as stories that "long to be used rather than analyzed; to be told and retold rather than theorized and settled; to offer lessons for further conversation rather than undebatable conclusions; and to substitute the companionship of intimate detail for the loneliness of abstracted facts" (p. 292).

Autoethnography engages in life stories as a technique of producing some theoretical understanding of highly personal events. Ellis and Bochner (2006) explain:

> Autoethnography shows struggle, passion, embodied life, and other collaborative creation of sense-making in situations in which people have to cope with dire circumstances and loss of meaning. Autoethnography wants the reader to care, to feel, to empathize, and to do something, to act. It needs the researcher to be vulnerable and intimate. (p. 433)

The focus on evocative stories makes autoethnographic research particularly important for studying "human relations in multicultural settings" because it allows researchers to pry into the self as the self relates to others (Chang, 2008, p. 52). The focus on the relationships between the self and others make autoethnography particularly potent for what Chang describes as its use to transform people into cross-cultural coalition building.

Although evocative stories certainly create an important opportunity for cross-cultural coalition building and self-exploration, using autoethnography in the academy has faced severe criticism. Two common critiques of autoethnography are often discussed: autoethnographic research is narcissist and autoethnography lacks rigor (Coffey, 1999; Krisek, 2003). Despite these criticisms, Ellis (1997) reminds us that rather than view autoethnography as an act of self-absorption, researchers should be reminiscent of the adage used by many feminist researchers—the personal is political. Chang (2008) concludes that scholars should not focus on themselves in isolation from others, but rather should use the personal experience as a means of unpacking the larger cultural context wherein personal experience lies.

Bochner (2007) addresses the notion that autoethnography is not rigorous by arguing that there is nothing as theoretical as a good story. It is this intersection (or lack thereof) that Bochner speaks to when he says:

> The sad truth is that the academic self frequently is cut off from the ordinary, experience self. A life of theory can remove one from experience, make one

feel unconnected. All of us inhabit multiple worlds. When we live in the world of theory, we usually assume that we are inhabiting an objective world. There, in the objective world, we are expected to play the role of spectator. It is a hard world for a human being to feel comfortable in, so we try to get rid of the distinctively human characteristics that distort the mythological beauty of objectivity. We are taught to master methods that exclude the capriciousness of immediate experience. When we do, we find ourselves in a world devoid of spirituality, emotion, and poetry—a scientific, world in which, a[s] Galileo insisted, there is no place for human feelings, motives, or consciousness. (p. 434)

This disconnect between theory and human emotion is especially important to the study of identity exploration. Theorizing about identity without exploring the lived experience of one's own identity does not engage the heart of the issue, nor does it add theoretical insight. Theorizing through self-exploration and reflexivity, however, creates the potential for a much more nuanced and complex approach to explaining the contextualization of individuals within a larger social construct. Its utility in reflecting upon and theorizing about issues of cultural difference makes it particularly well-suited for essays, such as this one, that explore individual reflections about manifestations of racism, privilege, and Whiteness.

At first glance, adding the term "critical" to autoethnography may seem redundant. The addition is a crucial one, though, as it connotes an explicit focus on how power intersects with one's personal experience and the structural forces that helped to create those experiences. Naming an autoethnographic project "critical" does something else, as well. In the spirit of critical theory, a critical autoethnography attempts to do more than just reveal how one fits into the power structure—it attempts to deconstruct the very power structure that gets exposed. Autoethnographic projects related to identity and power offer an excellent opportunity for critical theorists to move beyond discussing the forces of power in the sociopolitical landscape—they give us the tools to dismantle the very system that has created the power structure. It is in light of this that I chose to frame this research within the larger context of critical autoethnography.

Autoethnography operates as both theory and method, and the focus on this essay is on understanding how Whiteness is deployed in everyday interactions. Because the identity issues I explore are directly tied to power and structural violence, I use a method of critical autoethnography. This essay's focus is on an event that occurred in the fall of 2006 during my first year as a PhD student. After the experience happened, I had conversations with my colleagues, friends, and professors to try to process the event. And a few months later, I wrote my first reflection on the event, recalling the details as best I could. Several years later, I began to work on this essay as a means of taking my experience and linking it back to what I knew theoretically. Methodologically speaking, my data is my experience, my memory of the experience, and my reflection and understanding of the experience. I focus my analysis on the written reflection from 2006, as that is the most concrete form of data I have from the events, but I certainly draw from my recollections as I situate the data into the larger theoretical picture. Overall, while my written data is not lengthy, it does constitute an evocative story and offers theoretical insight, thus making this autoethnographic account a worthy one to report. Before describing how my experience fits into the larger theoretical picture of Whiteness research, let me first detail some of the most important work in the field.

Whiteness and White Identity Development

Beverly Tatum (2003) acknowledges, "there is a lot of silence about race in White communities, and as a consequence Whites tend to think of racial identity as something that other people have, not something that is salient for them" (p. 94). Tatum utilizes Janet Helms' model for understanding White identity development in the United States and argues that, based on the research conducted by Helms, White people typically progress through six stages of identity development (although the process is not necessarily linear nor is it always complete). The first stage is contact, in which individuals do not recognize differences or see those differences on a hierarchical scale. Members of the majority internalize and accept that the majority group is superior to other groups, although this acceptance may be either conscious or unconscious. The second stage is disintegration, where White people demonstrate an awareness of racism and their own White privilege. This tends to happen when White people come into contact with a person of color and develop a relationship that requires acknowledgement of race and racism. The third stage is reintegration, at which point, "the previous feelings of guilt or denial may be transformed into fear and anger directed toward people of color" (p. 101). The fourth stage is pseudo-independence, where majority group members make an attempt to unlearn their racism. The fifth stage is immersion/emersion, wherein White people attempt to understand the dominant ideology while also redefining themselves and their group in nonracist terms. The final stage of Tatum's model is autonomy, in which majority group members integrate their cultural identity into all facets of their identity through cultural awareness and appreciation.

Members of both the majority and the minority find themselves in situations that require them to negotiate their identity. Although people of color tend to be in a persistent state of identity negotiation due to the constant interactions with members of the majority, White people are much less likely to feel compelled to negotiate their identity on a regular basis. When identity negotiation among White people does occur, it tends to take place when members of the majority are placed in a situation that temporarily makes them part of the minority. In his study of European American students attending a historically Black university, Ronald Jackson (1999) argues, "an identity shift from *I* to the *other* is unproductive for White students who suddenly find themselves in the racial minority" (p. 5). His work attempts to explain why the identity negotiation process does not seem to exist for White students in this situation and finds that European American students commented that they do not need to negotiate their identity because Whites are the dominant culture and their mainstream status makes cultural negotiation unnecessary.

Jackson's study is not surprising given the way in which the strategy of Whiteness embeds itself in the psyche of White people. Peggy McIntosh (1997) argues that White people are taught that everything about their existence is normative. When individuals attempt to defy this normativity and change their attitude into an anti-racist one, they can make small changes, but not systemic change. Ruth Frankenberg (1993) discusses privilege in terms of Whiteness, and argues that Whiteness comprises three primary characteristics. First, Whiteness encompasses a structural advantage. Second, it is a "*standpoint*, a place from which White people look at ourselves, at others, and at society" (p. 1). Third, Whiteness includes unmarked normativity of cultural practices. Frankenberg (1993) explores the way in which Whiteness is affected by and affects relations across individuals by arguing:

> Whiteness changes over time and space and is in no way a transhistorical essence….Thus, the range of possible ways of living whiteness, for an individual white woman in a particular time and place, is delimited by the relations of racism *at that moment and in that place*. And if whiteness varies

spatially and temporally, it is also a relational category, one that is coconstructed with a range of other racial and cultural categories, with class and gender. This coconstruction, is, however, fundamentally asymmetrical, for the term "whiteness" signals the production and reproduction of dominance rather than subordination, normativity rather than marginality, and privilege rather than disadvantage. (pp. 236-237)

Of course, it is this focus on normativity rather than marginality that is important in the context of White identity development and the potential for White identity negotiation.

Although Frankenberg describes Whiteness as a spatially and temporally evolving category, the construct comes out of a very specific history. Labor historian David Roediger (2006) has written the most complete analysis on the origins of the social construction of Whiteness. He argues that eighteenth and early nineteenth century workers shared an important relationship with one another. White servants and laborers worked alongside Black slaves and had some sense of camaraderie across racial lines. As wealthy White landowners began to expand their own wealth, they realized that an alliance between White and Black workers threatened wealthy White owners. The easiest avenue for eliminating the possibility of such a labor alliance was to draw racial distinctions between the workers and make one group of workers superior to the other group. And it was in this configuration that Whiteness was born. Matthew Jacobson (1998) makes a similar argument by explaining how the Irish (and Jews and Italians, for that matter) *became* White; he focuses on the fact that people with different skin colors were brought into the fold of the White category as a way of keeping Black slaves at a severe disadvantage.

This history of the systematization of White privilege contextualizes contemporary understandings of race, and Whiteness in particular, in the United States. Marilyn Frye (1995) argues that, "if one is white, one is a member of a continuously and politically constituted group that holds itself together by rituals of unity and exclusion" (p. 115). As Tim Wise (2005) notes, though, White people only think about their Whiteness when confronted with representations of non-White people. In many ways, the fact that Whiteness is unmarked and only obvious in the face of difference creates the constant need for an Other to exist. George Yancy (2008) contends, "The construction of one's white identity *merely* through negating, disliking, and hating the dark other creates an identity that is constantly on the precipice of undergoing complete ontological evisceration" (p. 49). This marking of others while remaining unmarked is the essential nature of Whiteness; it makes working through racism and un-working the strategic nature of Whiteness nearly impossible.

The most common solution to this problem is for White people to place acts of racism on a hierarchical scale and to differentiate between "good Whites" and "bad Whites" (Yancy, 2008). White people tend to deny their own complacent racism and privilege by arguing that they are not members of the Ku Klux Klan, part of a White Supremacy organization, and/or because they do not engage in violent or nonviolent racist behavior. This hierarchy, however, is inappropriate for understanding one's own relationship to the strategy of Whiteness. One need not commit an actual racist act in order to both benefit from White privilege and normalize others' racist acts. Frances Rains (1998) reminds us that White people lack mindfulness "from that which [they] are exempt. The complicity in racism that privilege provides remains nameless and unnoticed. The responsibility that comes with the location and role of white privilege can be denied" (p. 81). This complicity manifests itself in a particular way, according to Yancy, who reasons, "Whites see themselves as having achieved their status in society independently of race. Their success is due to ingenuity, wise choices, or even good luck, but not because throughout their lives they have been invested, even if unconsciously, in whiteness" (p. 53).

This investment in Whiteness often makes itself known through one's performance in menial and ritualistic tasks. Judith Butler (2011) articulates how Whiteness as an identity is reproduced through our everyday actions. She argues that Whiteness is constantly constructed and reconstructed through the performative choices we make as individuals in our daily lives. Building on Butler's work, Warren and Fassett (2004) detail the role performance plays in unhinging Whiteness. They explain:

> [W]e look outward from these spectacular instances of violence and examine the minute and mundane processes that make these acts possible…. [W]e examine how instances of racism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression are generated through everyday communicative/performative acts—that is, both aesthetic and reiterative. Thus, we seek to understand difference (specifically race) as a performative construct that is always already aesthetic (that is, constructed for an audience or public) and reiterative (that is, repeated and ongoing). By focusing on race as one form of oppression, we examine whiteness as a systematic production of power—as a normative social process based upon a history of domination, recreating itself through naturalized everyday acts—much like heteronormativity or misogyny…. [S]uch an exploration helps mark the unmarked (Phelan)—making visible the workings of a number of oppressive social relationships. To render whiteness visible requires careful analysis and constant critique of our taken-for-granted norms. (p. 411)

It is in the spirit of marking the unmarked and making visible the invisible that this essay seeks to enumerate the machinations of Whiteness hidden in a seemingly mundane performance such that it contributes to an ongoing and essential conversation about the confrontation and contestation of White identity.

The Moment

Upon deciding to focus on rhetoric and intercultural communication in my PhD program, I applied to a historically Black university. My decision to matriculate at an HBCU was not an easy one. On one hand, I imagined that immersion into a culture that was not my own would be a difficult and rewarding experience and one that was best suited to my chosen area of study. On the other hand, I was terrified that my professors, colleagues, and undergraduate students I would teach would resent me, reject my ideas, or even react with hostility toward what must have seemed to them as a parasitic interloper whose pursuit of a PhD was worth a stint of cultural tourism. In the end, I decided that the risks associated with such intense vulnerability were outweighed by the potential for personal and professional growth and I began my PhD program ready to explore—for the first time in my life, being an Other.

Prior to starting my coursework, I extensively researched the prevalent theories in the fields of intercultural communication, African American communication, Whiteness, and privilege. My theoretical understanding of these subjects was ample but could never have prepared me for one of my earliest and most revelatory classroom experiences On an October evening in my African American Communication course my very perspective, the views I held of the world, myself, and my role within the academy, was irrevocably—paradigmatically—altered. What started as a typical and engaging academic conversation about the role of Whiteness on African American communication and identity turned into a personal and vehement indictment of White people and especially of White people in Black

settings such as the one I was currently in. My best recollection of the classroom experience is this:

> African American Communication was the one class I had my first semester that presented problems for me academically because these problems centered around the fact that I felt I had nothing to contribute to the conversation. I could discuss the assigned material, but did not have the same first-hand knowledge and experiences to bring to the table. Nevertheless, I felt like I was learning a great deal in the class and really growing as an individual. However, on one late fall evening, my individual growth experienced a severe growing pain. As class began, nothing was out of the ordinary. Throughout the semester, discussions had often centered on Black and White race relations. This evening of class, though, something new came into the picture. I do not remember a single phrase from that night, but I vividly remember the facial expressions of those providing commentary. And I remember, as if it was yesterday, my own emotional journey of survival through this discussion. The conversation started innocently enough but quickly moved into an exploration of White people. Needless to say, the words being spoken were not positive…they were filled with hatred and rage and blame. I was sitting near the front of the room, like always, and the three students primarily engaged in the conversation were at the back of the room. I turned to look initially and then realized it was too painful to recognize and acknowledge the words. I sat in my seat and refused to let myself become emotional. As I listened to them talk in heated voices about White people, I felt like they were talking directly to me, at me, trying to provoke me. I sat there thinking, *I agree with every word you're saying…these things are true for many White people…but I'm not one of them…why does it feel like you mean me? You do mean me, don't you? You're happy that you can now tell me, in this classroom setting, how you feel about me being here at* [*this HBCU*]. The discussion would not die and at times it felt like the professor was encouraging it to continue, just testing me. I told myself over and over, like a mantra: *I knew it was going to be hard…that there were going to be times like this, that this is what I had said I had wanted and was prepared for.* But suddenly being faced with it made it all too real and all I wanted was to go back into the culture where I felt safe and free from attack and scrutiny. Although I wanted to cry and scream and proclaim my solidarity with those Black students, instead I sat motionless, expressionless, as invisible as possible in that classroom. And I said nothing. (Potter, 2006)

After class I awkwardly looked for the only other White student in the classroom, a fellow female whom I had avoided since the start of the semester; from the beginning, I thought the only thing worse than being a White cultural tourist in this setting was spending my time interacting with another White cultural tourist. Nevertheless, she and I talked and shared our intense feelings of the evening. We talked about how we were good people who felt we were being judged negatively without receiving the benefit of the doubt that our scholarly and personal intentions were pure; we talked about our struggle to feel comfortable and valued in an environment where we weren't always welcome.[2]

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[2] My conversations and interactions with this fellow female student are likely worthy of their own study, in terms of acknowledging and identifying additional ways in which the two of us further deployed strategic rhetorics of Whiteness, but are not the focus of this essay.

Although my fellow White colleague and I talked about this moment extensively, I did not write about it for several months. I had started journaling about my experiences in this environment from my first day of orientation, but this night marked the moment when I stopped writing about my experiences. Ironically, the impetus to end my writing was because I did not want to feel like an exploiter; I wanted to fit in, I wanted to feel like a legitimate member of my student cohort. Several months later, my professor of African American Communication asked my White colleague and I to share our experiences from that evening with our classmates and to explain how those experiences affected our identity. To prepare for our presentation, I wrote the above passage on March 27, 2006.

Critical Reflections

Ten years of emotional temporal and intellectual distance from the experience of that night has helped me realize that my "saying nothing" was the clearest illustration imaginable of the privilege afforded me in part by a strategic rhetoric of Whiteness. It is likely that every Black student in that classroom knew that I, a White student, could afford to actually say nothing and leave that classroom relatively unscathed. At the time my ignorance shielded me from seeing the ever apparent dynamic that is always at play and painfully obvious to much of the Black community. As a White student surrounded by a classroom of Black students, I sat in a position of inherited dominance afforded me by a centuries-long legacy of inequality. Other students in the classroom, exasperated, could bloviate and verbally attack me, but a reciprocal or proportional response was not required of me because when I left that classroom (or even while I am still in it, for that matter), I remained White. The history of Whiteness is one of privilege wherein the ruling elite jettisoned poor people with White skin with the leverage of material wealth in exchange for loyalty, and in so doing, the elite class ensured that a class-based struggle was impossible (Jacobson, 1998; Roediger, 2006). That strategic maneuver created Whiteness and continues to ensure that no amount of personal or racial attacks can undo the de facto inheritance of White privilege. In fact, in that moment of a perceived attack, I deployed my privilege because the strategic function of my silence relied on Whiteness for efficacy. The phalanx of privilege surrounded me; it reminded my Black classmates that no matter what they say to or about me, history has endowed Whiteness with unassailable status that, at least in the space of that classroom, is beyond reproach and as such, my position of inherited injustice lies beyond scrutiny or accountability.

While I do not wish to speculate or generalize how the students in that classroom were feeling, in hindsight I can say that it must have been apparent that my White body carried with it the signifier of White dominance and that no matter what my Black classmates said about White people, they still had no ability to change the positionality afforded me by my White skin. It also signified that my presence was a needling reminder of their lack of presence—that this world was a White one even in the storied halls of an HBCU. Their verbal and emotional aggression could only ever bruise the singular ego of this one White woman but, try as it did, lacked any ability to affect the circumstance which held my White body in an always already assumed position of dominance. The screaming, ranting, and exasperated verbal gyrations would exhaust their progenitor long before it exhausted the ability of Whiteness to recuperate itself by absorbing all culture into its lack thereof.

Despite my positionality (both physical and socio-cultural) in the classroom, my reflections on the event demonstrate how oblivious I was to my own presence. John T. Warren (2003) reminds us that, "the desire for bodily absence works to secure the maximum amount of privilege for whiteness through the continual marking and disciplining of bodies of color…" (p. 47). Toward the end of the my reflection entry, I wrote, "I want[] to go back to the culture where I felt safe and free from attack and scrutiny"; it was impossible for me to

see how Whiteness operated. I *was* safe—history had made me the center of the universe and would keep me there provided I never realized where I was. The strategy of Whiteness requires that only those marked by it—the "Others"—experience it and those left unmarked—White people—must stay that way. The great lie that Whiteness tells White people about themselves requires that its essence and operation, above all else, go unnoticed. In that classroom during this experience, my silence, my non-acknowledgement of not only my indignant aggressor but of my own positionality was, in my head, all that I could do as there is no argument against what my colleagues were saying. What I failed to see at that time was that my silence was a tacit acceptance of those facts and a demonstrated unwillingness to do anything about it. Truth is I did not know what I could have done about it and felt as if anything I did was going to be the wrong thing. I think now that perhaps I should have yelled back, let it bubble over, acknowledged my privilege and made an earnest attempt to transform the dynamic in that room by marking myself not as "one of the good ones" but as someone who is fighting complicity in the strategy of Whiteness that history has forced into that room in the form of one white body and many black ones and do all that without making it look like I was not willing to be held accountable; in short the only just way of operating in that room was to attempt the always impossible task of un-working the strategic rhetoric of Whiteness.

I felt stuck, as if there was nothing I could do that would not solidify my inherited dominance. I feared that indulging the attacks in an attempt to demonstrate" solidarity" with my Black classmates would have seemed at the very least patronizing and disingenuous and at worst provincialist and paternalistic. Toward the end of my journal entry, I claim that I "wanted to cry and scream and proclaim my solidarity with those Black students" but White solidarity with people of color is not a matter of proclamations or singular instantiations of revolutionary fervor but an arduous introspection and daily demonstration of one's commitment to un-working Whiteness. Too many White people claim they are *different* from other White people—that they somehow have confronted their Whiteness and have acknowledged their privilege thereby relinquishing them of any responsibility for it. During class that evening, I was one of those people. I knew that I could not "walk in the shoes" of the other, but I was absolutely convinced that I was one of the "good" White people who could somehow aid in the fight against racism. What I didn't understand is that allyship is not just about proclamations and sympathy; it requires bold, sometimes lonely, sometimes terrifying work.

While I still have some optimism in my ability to fight racism, I no longer conceive of doing it to help people of color. Whiteness interrupts the free association of subjects by inserting itself between White people, who are historically, if arbitrarily, endowed with social status, dominance, and legitimacy, and people of color who are denied those privileges. I have since come to understand that because a strategic rhetoric of Whiteness colonizes the definition of humanity, solidarity with the Black community is co-requisite to solidarity with humanity. And while I recognize that my humanity must be rescued from the confines of dominant White identity I understand that attempting to change the "relations of representation" is not a task to be taken lightly but requires constant vigilance and is in essence the work of rearticulating the elements of identity to reconfigure their individual and relational meanings. In that moment I thought I was being made the Other and immediately after that moment I ruminated upon this incident as a lesson in what it must feel like to be an Other. Now I understand that in order to truly stand in solidarity with the world of difference I find myself in, it is not a enough to occasionally feel uncomfortable or aware of my own feelings of differentness when confronted with difference, but instead I must become an Other pragmatically; I must occupy the very critique in which I am implicated, must exist in that tension without attempting to seek a solution beyond to the problem of racial oppression

of which I myself am a beneficiary. The process of un-working Whiteness requires being willing to engage in real and sometimes lively conversations about Blackness, Whiteness, oppression, and difference that require both deep introspection and unflinching bravery. In essence, my showing solidarity was dependent on a dialog that I was nowhere near ready to have.

Instead of fumbling my way through a conversation that might have continued to rise in intensity and would have likely provoked multiple instances of "saying the wrong thing," I chose a different approach. I failed to acknowledge my Black classmates and recreated the circumstance that members of the Black community routinely encounter when they find themselves face-to-face with White privilege. When I literally denied that the voices of the students had an effect in the real world, I denied the legitimacy of their claims and, in essence, denied the legitimacy of their humanity. While such a statement seems almost hyperbolic, it is clear that in that moment I *demonstrated* their inability to assert enough power to affect the circumstance of White privilege because I was the living embodiment of that privilege and I was ostensibly unaffected by it. If the situation were reversed and I been a person of color whose racial legitimacy was being questioned and attacked, my "saying nothing" would likely not have been an option at all. In other words, my privilege allowed me to deploy a strategic rhetoric of Whiteness through my silence—I remained silent, back turned to those speaking, eyes staring straight ahead.

George Yancy (2008) discusses the impact of White silence on issues of race in the classroom that resonate perfectly with my experience. Yancy writes about a moment in his own classroom when White students and students of color were discussing African American literature. He explains:

> [White students'] selective silences, whether conscious or unconscious, allowed them to talk about racism as it was performed within the body of the texts without any attention paid to their own white privilege, which in this context, signified the very real power to "remove" themselves from the complicity involved in maintaining the normative structure of whiteness. In this case, what *was not* said was far more revealing than what *was* said. What "was not said" held the group behind a protective racial barrier, so to speak. From behind this barrier, the white students' shared self-understandings, interests, and conceptions of what was/was not appropriate territory for interrogation, shaped the classroom dynamics in a specifically racist fashion. This was not a mere symbolic show of power. Their silence controlled the discursive direction of the class…
>
> Not naming their whiteness, not identifying their whiteness, had the impact of interpellating Blackness (as exemplified in the texts) as marked, as the "real" object of their gaze. Their whiteness remained unmarked, effectively providing them with the needed latitude to distance themselves from the texts' white racists. They continued to establish racialized meaning within the classroom through the (white) communicative strategy of silence. Whiteness, as normative, legitimated their silence; indeed, guaranteed their whiteness as *absence*. (p. 44)

Because I did not have a set of texts to hide behind and a group of White racists to scapegoat, my silence in the classroom was perhaps even more pronounced.

The ability to remain silent, which I argue is only afforded to people of privilege, aligns quite perfectly with Nakayama and Krizek's use of Michel de Certeau's (1988) explication of the difference between strategies and tactics:

> I call a *strategy* the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated. It postulates a *place* that can be delimited as its *own* and serve as the base from which relations with an *exteriority* composed of targets or threats (customers or competitors, enemies, the country surrounding the city, objectives and objects of research, etc.) can be managed…By contrast with a strategy…a *tactic* is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus….The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power. (pp. 35-37)

This articulation makes it clear that my use of silence was effective in maintaining and reinforcing White privilege precisely because Whiteness is a strategy and I was the very "subject with will and power" that the passage describes. My silence was a calculated decision that attempted to "manage" the situation operationalizing the always apparent to people of color but simultaneously invisible to its possessors position of privilege that my Whiteness allowed me to occupy. Even though in that classroom I may have felt as if I were an Other, I still occupied the space of privilege and thus had the ability to make calculated decisions. As a result, I could use any number of strategies to help me handle every threat I might face. On the other hand, although the classroom was dominated by Black students, those students were still relegated to act on the grounds established by a strategic rhetoric of Whiteness; Black students could only deploy counter tactics in their attempt to respond to the constraints afforded by the always already successful strategy which my very presence exemplified.

My silence in that one moment was a strategic rhetoric to maintain my privilege and retain my ability to participate in passivity and silent racism. My silence also afforded me the opportunity to delay an open confrontation with my own guilt, fear, and anger produced by White supremacy. Robert Jensen (2005) explains these three emotions as the primary emotions that constrain White individuals from seriously considering and attempting to move beyond their Whiteness and the privileges that it holds. As a student of intercultural communication and Whiteness studies, I had read and written about feelings of White guilt, fear, and anger on some abstract and academic level. However, in this moment in the classroom, my colleagues were asking me (perhaps challenging me) to grapple with *my* feelings on a very personal level. Articulating such thoughts and feelings was not something I was prepared to do; thus, instead of making the hard decision and participating in a difficult conversation, I chose silence and passivity. And in doing so, I denied my colleagues the opportunity to have a dialogue with me, which ultimately denied progress. That moment was what every White person seeking to navigate in and through communities of color seeks to avoid. Much of the rhetoric deployed by liberal academic communities espouses the virtues of equality and solidarity but almost always glosses over or completely ignores what the path to such a future might look like and very few even hint at the fact that such a path is often rife with unpleasantness. The un-working of Whiteness and the abolition of the strategic rhetoric this paper describes requires that those seeking to do this work endure hundreds if not thousands of moments wherein history's poisonous earth is ploughed through conflict and confrontation in route to community.

Un-working Whiteness by Un-working Silence

This essay consistently argues that an effective gesture toward racial justice in the United States would be for White people to attempt the seemingly impossible task and

engage in difficult conversations and actions that will often generate discomfort, anger, fear, guilt, and numerous feelings and actions one cannot even anticipate. Doing the impossible, however, also highlights an additional strategic rhetoric that White people could utilize: the strategy of doing something to un-work Whiteness. When I found myself in a moment that necessitated a response, I chose a strategy of silence; my writing this essay, though, acknowledges that choice and attempts to provide a framework for utilizing different strategies in future encounters and reinforces the utility and necessity of autoethnographic methods when studying cultural identity, oppression, and privilege.

Nakayama and Krisek opened the door for studying Whiteness as a strategic rhetoric. Their purpose, of course, was to "expose the rhetoric of logic of whiteness" because "[i]t is only upon critically examining this strategic rhetoric that we can begin to understand the influences it has on our everyday lives and, by extension, our research and teaching" (p. 297). This essay further advances Whiteness as a strategic rhetoric by examining the deployment of the specific strategy of silence. Although my silence was in response to a heated debate about race and Whiteness, I maintain that White individuals have the ability and opportunity to use silence as a coping mechanism in denying one's privilege in numerous situations. If one looks at the sociopolitical landscape in the United States and specifically at the conversations occurring around race, racial violence, and racial intolerance through the Black Lives Matter movement, it is easy to see numerous examples of White people employing silence as a strategy to deny privilege and oppression; new strategies are beginning, though, with organizations like Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ), which is asking White citizens to join the Black Lives Matter movement by strategically using Whiteness in new ways that expose and undermine White privilege. One of the primary lessons from this movement and the inclusion of White people in it is that Black leaders are asking White people to help in dramatic ways—one of which is to just *listen*. To listen to the voices and experiences and ideas of Black people. To support behind the scenes rather than stand on the front lines. To spend our time talking about Whiteness with other White people. I want to be clear that, while this may look like the very silence I shared above, it is quite different. For my silence was strategic to save myself from pain; this White silence is strategic to lift up Black voices. It is because of this stark difference in the use of the strategy of silence that I believe this essay is important—White people can choose silence to comfort themselves or they can choose silence (and a variety of other strategies) to un-work Whiteness. It also takes Ladislaus Semali's (1998) words to heart: "white people cannot declare themselves indifferent to racial politics. It is too easy for a *sympathetic* self-effacement to become another trick of quiet dominance" (p. 189).

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Author Note

Jennifer E. Potter is an Associate Professor in the Mass Communication and Communication Studies Department at Towson University specializing in intercultural communication, gender and communication, and rhetorical theory and criticism. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: Jennifer E. Potter at 8000 York Road, Towson, MD 21252 or e-mail at jpotter@towson.edu.

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