The dangers of White spaces

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In visual design, white space is negative space.

It is empty.

It is blank.

It is unmarked.

A judicious use of white space makes important items pop out. Consider Google's white background, which focuses attention on the search box and the multicolored logo. While we typically ignore the white space, its presence plays a critical role in keeping the design simple, useable, and content focused. Here, whiteness is understood exclusively in terms of color, but something similar holds when we turn to Whiteness understood as racializing ideology.

Consider the design of cities and the structure of social space. The inhabitants of White spaces, spaces constructed around White bodies and White ideologies, often view their neighborhoods as clean, safe, and familiar; and they often assume that people who are racialized in other ways live in neighborhoods that are dirty, dangerous, and strange (Watt & Stenson 1988). In White spaces, the Whiteness of one's neighbors is unremarkable, so it is easily ignored. And when Whiteness becomes invisible, racial differences to 'pop out'. Since deviations from Whiteness are more easily noticed, the inhabitants of White spaces often overestimate the number of non-White people in their communities; and they often assume that people who are racialized in other ways pose a threat to the safety, cleanliness, and familiarity of their White spaces. The invisibility of Whiteness can also trigger feelings of anxiousness when passing through multiracial or non-White spaces (Garner 2007, 44-45), as well as increased hostility toward people who are not White

(Garner 2007, 148-149; 160-161). Importantly, this can also happen on a smaller scale, as it does when a racially diverse shopping space is perceived as dirty, disorderly, and ugly, rather than as a space that has been adapted to the local needs of a diverse population (Campkin forthcoming).

These phenomena are familiar, and so is their explanation. Many people who inhabit White spaces never interact with people who are racialized in other ways; and often those who do, still continue to assume that the Whiteness of their space makes it safe and clean. In part, this is because their experience of race is filtered through the distorting lens of mainstream media, or through encounters that are easily categorized as interactions with 'co-workers' or 'acquaintances' (not as encounters with Blacks, Colombians, or Aboriginal Australians). For the denizens of White spaces, Whiteness is hegemonic: the images they consume, the knowledge they produce, and the institutions that structure their social world are shaped by White values and White ideology. Racist representations foster initial forms of biased thinking; and biases solidify as subsequent judgments are calibrated against distorted stereotypes and interpersonal interactions that occur in a narrow range of social situations (e.g., only in the context of service work). Over time, stereotypes and biases come to dominate everyday thinking about race for the inhabitants of White spaces; and as the hegemony of White ideology infuses the structure of White spaces, it becomes difficult to their inhabitants to see Whiteness as anything but a necessary background against which to frame their thoughts.

There are ways of mitigating the effects of hegemonic White ideology (Anderson 2010). They are not decisive, but they can provide a foundation from thinking more critically about race. White people who live in diverse communities, and who interact with the members of other racial groups in a diverse range of situations, tend to be less racially biased, and they tend to have more egalitarian attitudes (Dasgupta & Rivera 2008). Inhabiting such neighborhoods can sometimes create and reinforce positive implicit associations, which can counteract the biases that are cultivated through media exposure (Dasgupta 2013, 247). Living in such neighborhoods can also mitigate the effect of colorblind ideologies, heightening the awareness of forms of structural racism that go beyond explicitly racist attitudes (Dasgupta 2013; cf., Garner 2007, 45-46). Such attitudes can help people who would otherwise see the hegemonic structure of White ideology as a necessary conceptual framework to see that White ideology is contingent, distorting, and dispensable. Of course, power is never given up easily, and there are many opportunities to abandon anti-racist attitudes in favor of the comfort of White ideology. But diverse cities,

structured around diverse goals and values, may provide a place for anti-racist ideologies, and critical approaches to Whiteness to develop.

Unfortunately, there is also a potential downside to these sorts of data, which to the best of my knowledge remains unexplored (at least in my home discipline of philosophy): the impact of gentrification on racial cognition. The denizens of White spaces rarely consider the decisions they make in creating and sustaining their White spaces. This too is a result of the invisibility of their Whiteness. But since we attune to the racial structure of our neighborhoods, actions that decrease racial diversity may lead to an increase in racial bias for the inhabitants on newly Whitewashed spaces. In my own city, Washington DC, formerly Black neighborhoods, and neighborhoods that were once more racially diverse, are rapidly becoming White spaces, both in terms of color and in terms of ideology. As these neighborhoods gentrify, the interactions that might have mitigated the effects of White racism are disappearing; and without such encounters, it is likely that stereotypical assumptions will come to dominate the thinking of the people who inhabit these newly gentrified spaces. I maintain that these factors are likely to play a powerful role in shaping the psychologies of those who inhabit the Whitewashed spaces. As a result of their encounters with with the world, the denizens of these gentrified spaces are likely to find it easier to ignore the effects of structural racism; without a diverse lived environment, their Whiteness may become an invisible and purportedly neutral background against which others are categorized and interpreted.

Focusing on these considerations helps to clarify the fact that the decision to move into a gentrifying neighborhood can be part of a socially distributed decision to take part in the production of White space. It may be hard for White people to see that White spaces as dangerous. But they can foster racist attitudes and assumptions, and can they threaten our ability to enact anti-racist practices, even if we have found other ways to begin to cultivate the desire to think critically about Whiteness. This is why White people who want to avoid complicity in the production of racist practices should think carefully about how their actions and decision might contribute to the production and maintenance of White spaces.

Works cited

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