

# No Truth and Reconciliation Without Justice: A Call for Abolitionist Praxis<sup>1</sup>

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Before I begin, I must confess that I do not self-identify as *white* and eschew the collective *white* ‘we’ so often employed by *reconstructionists*. I do however acknowledge that I am recognized as *white* and share in the material and psychological benefits which come from that social recognition. I identify here, then, as ~~white~~, *sous rature*, or the state of being socially recognized as *white* while at the same time resisting *whiteness*. When I use the collective ‘we’, I do so as a practical intervention to better a ~~white~~ praxis. ~~White~~ will be deployed, at times, almost interchangeably with *white solidarity*, the primary difference being that ~~white~~ *solidarity* is *anti-race*<sup>2</sup>, in an *abolitionist* sense, rather than *anti-racist*, in a *reconstructionist* sense.

In this paper I hope to engage three concepts—*solidarity*, *relation* and *justice*—a better understanding of which, I believe, will help to advance ~~white~~ praxis. I do not aspire to completeness, but rather, to critique and trouble the ways these concepts operate in discourses of *white solidarity*.

## Solidarity.

My colleague, Cecilia Lucas, is working with the framework of reparations, a concept of *justice*, as a way to engage *anti-racist white solidarity*. ‘Preparations’ as she cleverly calls it. At the Critical Ethnic Studies Conference, I asked about practical considerations that might arise from her findings. I think the question went something like this: ‘Considering that the *black liberation movement* is currently factionalized, what would *white* support for reparations look like in practice? If some organizations choose to work with *white* supporters while others do not, how can the involvement of these *white solidarity activists* avoid the familiar pattern of divide and conquer?’ In the current historical moment, there is no clear consensus on the basic forms of justice. Differing conceptions of justice shape antimonious relations in the present moment. *White solidarity* is aligned with certain individuals and small organizations rather than a strong cohesive movement. In this climate, *white solidarity* dangerously intervenes in social conversations between survivors. Without a cohesive movement to align with nor a clear conception of justice, the power and privileges of *white solidarity* have a significant affect in shaping the outcome of interfactional conflict. *White* interventions—even when invited, or undertaken with the best intentions—open the vulnerable space of intrapositional struggle that people of color are engaging in to the age-old “duty of white Europe to divide up the darker world and administer it for Europe’s good” (W.E.B. Du Bois, 1920, p. 459). We can see this pattern of ‘divide and conquer’ in *white solidarity*’s historical relation to national liberation movements. For example, *white solidarity* played a major role in determining that the ANC would liberate *south africa*, or conversely, that the PAC or BC organizations would not liberate *azania*. We also see that *white solidarity* played a major role in ensuring that the *civil rights movement* would survive to be today’s *african* leadership in *america* while the ‘Black Power’ movement would be pursued, persecuted, and prosecuted. This relationship between *white solidarity* and the factions of the *black liberation movement*—whether intimate, discursive, or institutional—is a praxical question of utmost concern.

## Relation.

On November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2010, Dr. Warren stopped at Cal while on tour to promote his book Fire in the Heart. He was billed as “a sociologist concerned with the revitalization of American democratic and community life.” The basic finding of Fire in the Heart, and let me know if I am correct in my

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<sup>2</sup> “In our view, any “anti-racist” work that does not entail opposition to the state reinforces the authority of the state, which is the most important agency in maintaining racial oppression” (Ignatiev, 1997, p. 2).

characterization, is that “white activists learn to care about racism through caring about real people of color” (75). “[D]irect experiences” create a “moral impulse to act” for “racial justice” and the resultant action within a ‘Beloved Community’ helps *white solidarity activists* to “[find] a meaningful and purposeful life in anti-racism.” Mainstream *white racism* is theorized as a problem of *america’s* racial segregation, and the solution proposed is therefore integrated collaboration under the leadership of *people of color*. His findings illustrate the well-worn Ann Bradenite model of *positive, anti-racist, reconstructionist, white* identity.

In an interview with Joseph Cuomo, W.G. Sebald discusses how, as a young Bavarian, the racialization of the *jews* was abstract. Sebald attributes this abstraction to segregation (exile): “you never bumped into a Jewish person, so you didn’t know who they were” (quoted in Cuomo, 2007 [2001], p. 105). After emigrating to Manchester and settling amongst a population of exiled *jews*, Sebald learns his landlord is from Munich. Through conversation, Sebald discovers that his landlord “was skiing in the same places where I went skiing. That somehow then sets you thinking” (quoted in Cuomo, 2007 [2001], p. 106). For Sebald, to know is to have an affective relationship. The knowledge of a *jew* (with whom he related) propelled him to take seriously the racialization of *jews*. As Theodor Adorno reasons, “surely one may assume that there is a relation between the attitude of “not having known anything about it” and an impassive and apprehensive indifference” (Adorno, 2003 [1960], p. 4). If ‘not having known’ means apathy, then an affective relation generates action.

*Whiteness* is relational already, dialectical already. *American whiteness*, due to its basis in chattel slavery, even more horrifically so. The relationality of *whiteness* in *america* is both discursive (deployed from afar) and real (physically intimate, existing in the same space with). The ‘problem’ of segregation seems to speak to one racial epoch (Capitalist), rather than another (Feudal). In the Feudal epoch, chattel slavery was intensely physically intimate, particularly on the small plantations where many *african* abductees were owned as property. This intimate relation included physical punishment and sexual abuse. *Race*, then, is an unwanted obsessional relation which directs behavior through fear. The small plantation owner became the ‘king of his castle’, a patriarch of a small fiefdom that mirrored the larger patriarchal settler-colonial confederation. *Black* subjects in this sick relation were “like one of the American family” (Collins, 2006, p. 45); the compliant *black* subject endearingly “salutes like one of our own boys” (Barthes, 1972 [1957], p. 124). There were no borders to ownership, unless of course you believe in soul. Technologies of chattel slavery enabled the *white* patriarch to leave on occasion, or for military service; to have more distance from the zone of the “living dead” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 40). This distance was enabled by a discursivization of fear. Following ‘emancipation’, distance allowed for segregation and the development of ‘internal colonialism’ (Blauner, 1972) This discursive distance, however, retains the intimate relation of chattel slavery through ‘double consciousness’ (W.E. Burghardt Du Bois, 1903), as Fanon’s frequent conversations with his ever present *white* specter attest: “not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man” (Fanon, 1967 [1952], p. 110). Conversely, *whiteness* in the Capitalist epoch cannot be ignorant of the *black* subject. It discursively constructs the *black* subject in order to rule from afar. We see this in the form of minstrelsy (Roediger, 2000).

Saidiya Hartman posits that *white* empathy with a *people-of-color* is rooted in imaginations of their *white* body in the place of a *black* body. This type of empathy, this “phantasmic slipping into captivity” (Hartman, 1997, p. 21) deletes the *black* subject/object; or in an *anthropological* sense, relates to the *black* subject “in contrast to his own” (Evans-Pritchard, 1976, p. 242) *white* subjectivity. The act of study itself, the identification of the not-white subject as a source of racial knowledge, results in objectification. Indeed, so long as the *white* subject occupies the position of humanity, i.e. it exists, “there can be no positive White identity without commensurately negative minority identities. Elaborating a positive White racial identity runs the high risk of concomitantly fostering deleterious images of non-Whites” (López, 1996, p. 30).

In light of this relationality, the proposition that an intimate, affective, relationship with people-of-color is ‘necessary’ to know right from wrong is troubling; knowledge of the *black* subject, and the ‘boarder crossing’ (Giroux, 1998, p. 71) necessary to develop this affective relationship teeter dangerously on conquest that forces the objectified *black* subject “back into this relationship to [the *white* subject] as the normative realm” (Heidegger, 1977, p. 131). Rather than an affective relationship, “[a]n acquisitive relation is established between the world and [the white subject]” (Fanon, 1967 [1952], p. 128). By their very presence in *black* community spaces, *white anti-racists* inevitably shape the space’s agenda and goals, even if these *white anti-racists* are not in positions of official leadership (Ware, 1967).

From an *abolitionist* perspective, the institutions of *whiteness* must be dismantled before there can be a reconciliation between *black* and *white* subjects. Until then, I propose that instead of ‘crossing borders’ in order to know, *white* solidarity should consider an ethic of *guestness*, allowing the relation to be guided by the host, accepting a priori that one might overstay their welcome. Indeed, “a free union is a lying phrase without right to secession” (Lenin, 1916).

Justice.

In the summer of 2003, I had the opportunity to converse indepth with Yitzhak Frankenthal—founder, and then chairman—of the Parents Circle, a cross-community network of *israeli* and *palestinian* parents who have lost children to the colonial war in Palestine. He asked me if I thought *israel/palestine* could benefit from a Truth and Reconciliation Commission like that in *south africa*. Like in *south africa*, I said, there needed to be a political solution before any process of truth and/or reconciliation could be meaningful. By political solution, of course, I meant an end to Zionism in historic Palestine. By recognizing the striking similarity between Zionism and Apartheid in the past decade, many have come to embrace the idea of a ‘one-state solution’. At the time of our conversation, and perhaps even now, Yitzhak defined himself as a Zionist and favored a ‘two-state’ solution based on the 1967 borders.

The recognition of a politics of ‘truth’ and ‘reconciliation’ were tied to differing visions of a political solution, differing views of ‘justice’—from my own, and by proxy a Palestinian vision for ‘justice’ which I was representing through *solidarity*. What is ‘justice’? What is our assessment of history? Who has the right to define ‘justice’? Can *white* legal institutions deliver anything resembling ‘justice’ when they have justified it for almost the entirety of their existence (López, 1996, p. 148)? *Reconstructionists* seem to define ‘justice’ in relation to the preservation of the *white* subject. But “without a coherent theory of social justice” (Apple, 1990, pp. 160-161), *abolition's* dis-identification encourages individualism, evasion of culpability and acts of martyrdom. We must work to find a definition that abandons our “particular needs” (Collins, 2000, p. 22).

As projects of *whiteness* are implemented, *white* subjects are working to “disidentify with whiteness” (Leonardo, 2002, p. 32) through struggle against *white* institutions. In the present analysis, however, “Whites might become genuine Africans; but since they benefited from the existing social order, they [can] not yet identify with the African cause” (Robert Sobukwe quoted in Thompson, 2001, p. 210). The current and post-revolutionary relation must be left to *people-of-color*, as a community of survivors, to determine. Through study and *guestness*, *abolitionists* must work to develop broad principles of *justice* that can guide resistance autonomously. Central to what I am tentatively calling an *epistemic treaty*, is an immediate epistemic break with *whiteness*, an immediate declaration of intention to treasonous acts against the *white nation* (Mills, 1997) and its ‘sub-contractors’ (Mills, 2007). Among these treasons, the arrogant entitlement of *whiteness* to properties (intellectual and material) taken through its vicious conquests will be ideologically relinquished in preparation for their ultimate material relinquishment through the dismantling of *white* institutions.

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