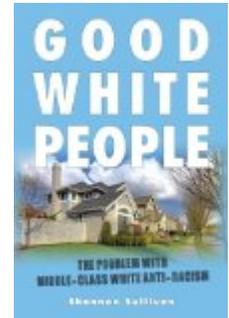


**Shannon Sullivan.** *Good White People: The Problem with Middle-Class White Anti-racism.* SUNY Philosophy and Race Series. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014. 224 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4384-5168-8.



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In answering the main question of this book, “What can white people do to end racial injustice?” (p. 1), Shannon Sullivan takes pains to establish that the primary responsibility of whites is to “clean up their own house” (p. 20). According to Sullivan, to play a positive role in the pursuit of racial justice, whites need to undertake a personal and spiritual transformation that grapples with the whole spectrum of white privilege and white racial oppression. In doing so, whites should not expect blacks to do the healing for them, to teach them, or to assuage them of their guilt or shame. Neither should whites expect that it is their responsibility to lead the charge against racial injustice, because that would put whites at the center of a struggle that needs to be led by blacks and other nonwhites. Instead, Sullivan argues that whites need to pursue self-love, not to celebrate, but to overcome white racial oppression.

The center of Sullivan’s argument is that white liberal anti-racism creates a false sense of righteousness, as the “good whites,” who distance themselves from the “bad whites,” who are to be

condemned as the “racists.” By not accepting that whites as a group are interconnected and together responsible for racial oppression, Sullivan contends that white liberal anti-racists, in other words, the “good whites,” endeavor to escape their own participation in racial oppression, using four strategies: by distancing themselves through intra-white bias and othering from poor whites, the group she calls “white trash”; by similarly distancing themselves from white supremacists both contemporary and from the past (e.g., slave owners); by claiming to be color-blind, thus distancing themselves from race altogether; and by cultivating feelings of guilt and shame to document that they are the “good whites.”

In the first chapter, “Dumping on White Trash: Etiquette, Abjection, and Radical Inclusion,” Sullivan argues that white liberal anti-racists treat poor whites as abject or “other” and assume that they are uneducated, lazy, and dirty. In critical theory and psychoanalysis, abject refers to a taboo part of the self that negates or disturbs one’s identity and is especially associated

with filth or dishonor. Marginalized groups are often treated as abject. In this context, poor whites are characterized as rednecks, hillbillies, and white trash. Racism is associated with poor whites, who fail to conform to the expected etiquette that would signify them as good whites. White liberals similarly treat as abject white supremacists and other whites who have been excluded from the category of good whites. By designating such whites as totally other, white liberal anti-racists attempt to cleanse themselves of the shame and dishonor of racism. Poor whites, though, are threatening to the self-identity of liberal middle-class whites, because poor whites blur the lines between white and black. Sullivan argues that abject white people, including poor whites and white supremacists, have to be given voice and participation in the struggle for racial justice. Liberal solutions, she argues, do not enable abject whites to have voice. Indeed she argues for a radical inclusion in which all otherwise excluded whites have to participate together to achieve racial justice. Her characterization of such inclusion is not that all will necessarily end up agreeing with each other, but that they must find a way to learn to live together, to recognize each other as full persons. Sullivan further endorses “trash crit,”[1] which, in contrast to critical race theory, decenters the middle class from critiques of whiteness.

Sullivan continues the exploration of the strategies by which white liberal anti-racists distance themselves from the history of white domination in order to demonstrate that they are “good whites.” In a chapter titled “Demonizing White Ancestors: Unconscious Histories and Racial Responsibilities,” Sullivan argues that whites need to acknowledge their participation in a racist history, both because that history has continued in various ways into the present and because children are influenced by their ancestors, even many generations removed. Drawing on Jean Laplanche’s (*Essays on Otherness*, 1999) psychoanalytic theory of the unconscious and seduc-

tion, Sullivan maintains that whites have to acknowledge and recognize that their own unconscious messages are the products of white ancestors, both personal and collective, and thus, they are participants in messages that contribute to ongoing white domination. Sullivan contends that the othering of white racist ancestors, including white slaveholders, is similar to the othering of poor whites and white supremacists. It reproduces the kinds of separation and dehumanization that prevent racial justice, in part, by trying to redeem their own goodness by vilifying the past. Sullivan claims that recognizing the humanity and both respecting and trying to understand white slave owners as persons can contribute to a reconciliation of the intra-class biases among whites. She specifically calls attention to the moral justification that white slave owners used for slavery by appealing to an ethics of care of family (i.e., slave owners had an obligation to take care of their slaves by providing for them) that these slave owners contrasted with the “wage slavery” in which the industrial North exploited and refused responsibility for the working class. Sullivan argues that respecting white slave owners as persons is required in order for white liberal anti-racists to reconcile their own relationship with whites that they have externalized, to end the othering that reproduces the same kind of dehumanization of others, and ultimately to contribute to racial justice.

In “The Dis-ease of Color Blindness: Racial Absences and Invisibilities in the Reproduction of Whiteness,” Sullivan develops an argument that is likely to be more compatible with current research on whiteness. In analyzing the third of the four strategies by which white liberal anti-racists attempt to distance themselves from racism, she describes how color blindness distances whites from race altogether. Sullivan focuses especially on child rearing in order to explore how white children learn to be white. While describing child-rearing strategies of white supremacists, Sullivan claims that they are not so different from the

more unobtrusive strategies used by other white parents who, by making color something that cannot be noticed, create a condition for the unconscious learning of white superiority and communicate as well that being nonwhite is bad. Sullivan also claims that color blindness as a child-rearing strategy harms children of color, because not being able to acknowledge the importance of color in their lives, they have no way to name their oppression. Sullivan advocates that white parents need to teach their children (and other people's children as well) about race in the context of understanding power and white domination, acknowledging that doing so is especially challenging and threatening to white parents. She also calls attention to the problematic lessons that white children learn when their middle-class parents characterize poor whites as the locus of racism, as a means to absolve themselves of responsibility of racism by deflecting it to lower-class whites. Sullivan further reminds parents that body language as well as talking can send messages.

In the final chapter, "The Dangers of White Guilt, Shame, and Betrayal: Toward White Self-Love," Sullivan argues that critical philosophers of race need to rethink the place of white guilt, shame, and betrayal in the struggle for racial justice. According to Sullivan, such emotions do not contribute to racial healing but are destructive of white souls and are harmful to blacks as well. Racial justice, Sullivan states, requires positive affect from whites, rather than the destructive affect of negative emotions. Guilt, for example, can paralyze whites and make them incapable of knowing how to respond to racial injustice. Because shame is supposedly more other-oriented, some have argued that it can spur a sense of responsibility and the need for change, but Sullivan thinks that because it is an emotion that diminishes the self, it can actually lead to more negative outcomes, even violence. Sullivan also argues that although white shame and guilt have been prominent in critical race theory, they are resources for

the white middle class to prove that they are "good whites," a strategy that is not available to poor or working-class whites, who are assumed to be "white trash." Sullivan makes the same argument with regard to whites claiming to be race traitors. She argues that betrayal is similarly a destructive emotion and, therefore, not a pathway to racial justice. Sullivan ultimately states that whites can only contribute to racial justice from a place of emotional and spiritual health and that to achieve that state requires that they come to terms with the full spectrum of whiteness without the interclass biases against poor whites and others.

The core of Sullivan's argument is that whites need to develop a spiritually healthy self-love. She argues that white people must live their whiteness in ways that challenge white domination. White self-love, though, will not lead to the healthy spiritual state, according to Sullivan, by either oppositional (love of sameness and rejection of difference) or multicultural (love of difference) types of love. In making this argument, she makes a distinction between the search by whites for health and for goodness. Sullivan believes that developing a healthy self-love needs to incorporate a critical understanding of whiteness without "abjection of white trash, the othering of white ancestors, the distancing strategy of color blindness, and the dominance of white guilt, shame, and betrayal" (p. 162).

Sullivan's book is an extension of critical feminist theory and critical race theory. Her analysis develops an argument about personal, spiritual, and psychoanalytic healing of the white self through critical self-love. In the development of her argument, she takes great pains to tell the reader what this type of self-love is not, but does not articulate clearly what it actually is or how it can be pursued. And, although there is some mention of the importance of addressing material and structural inequalities, there is no specific attention to how economic, political, social, and institu-

tional inequalities contribute to the reproduction of white dominance. Sullivan is clear that whites cannot contribute to racial justice through or by means of people of color and cannot do so by endeavoring to separate themselves from those whites who have borne the blame for racism, but she is not at all clear about how whites learn from and respect, but also critically challenge, white domination in the healthy self-love that she claims is necessary. She alludes to this endeavor as a process, as a hard and challenging task, which includes the risk of being misunderstood, but she never actually does that hard, challenging, and risky work in the context of this book. She also does not link this personal work of self-transformation to political outcomes that recognize the need for collective solutions to overcoming the existing state of inequality, racial and otherwise.

Perhaps it is because I am a sociologist and not a philosopher, but Sullivan's analysis seems to me to be very ideational, while avoiding the difficult issues of what racial inequality and white dominance actually entail. Do white people have to give up anything in their transformational self-love? Do they need to support specific kinds of social policies, such as redistribution? Once they clean up their own house, need they endeavor to join with nonwhites in political movements? If so, how can they do that without reinserting white dominance or asking people of color to take on the burden of white redemption? Is the process that she puts forth one that is sequential in its goals, in other words, first take care of whiteness and then from the new state of spiritual health, join others in the search for racial justice? Or is racial justice an outcome of white spiritual health that will transform the world, as she claims, by the white project itself? To me the fight for racial justice necessitates not only personal and spiritual transformation but also organizational and societal levers of change and certainly intergroup engagement and collaboration. I do not understand from what Sullivan includes in her book

how she expects to get from the individual level to the organizational and societal outcomes. Does social transformation emerge out of the aggregation of transformed individuals, of groups, of policies? Are there steps to take, visions to propose, and lobbying to do? What are the markers that would help those involved know if they are making progress? Do we need to measure outcomes? Do surveys? What are the signs of health versus goodness?

In my own work on racial inequality, I make an argument that is related to the one that Sullivan is trying to put forth, but even having read through this book twice, I cannot see how to use her analysis to help me take the next step in explaining how whites can contribute to racial justice. For example, do transformed whites who critically reach a state of self-love concern themselves with segregation, with exploitation, with oppression, and if so, how?

In my book (*The American Non-dilemma: Racial Inequality without Racism*, 2013), I argue that racial inequality in the post-civil rights period is reproduced more by whites helping other whites than by whites doing bad things to black people and other nonwhites. I focus my analysis especially on how whites hoard opportunities, to use Charles Tilly's (*Durable Inequality*, 1998) concept, to search for jobs that pay a living wage, provide benefits, and provide some kind of security so that whites can have a decent life in the United States. Importantly, I argue that whites of all classes hoard opportunities in the search for decent jobs, but that whites differ in their politics depending on their position in the structure of inequality that makes them more or less vulnerable to market competition for jobs. Those who feel that the civil rights policies undermine their ability to hoard opportunities for their family, friends, and other people like them are more conservative politically, while those who feel that civil rights policies primarily affect others can afford politically to be generous.

In this regard, I discuss the tensions in post-civil rights politics between civil rights and labor rights in the efforts of different groups of whites to pursue and protect their own well-being, and I discuss the competition for different groups of whites by the Democratic and Republican Parties in their efforts to form a permanent political majority. Whites, in general, claim to believe in civil rights and affirm equal opportunity as the solution to racial inequality, but in their search for jobs, they pursue strategies of unequal opportunity in which they hoard opportunities for other whites. All groups believe that if there is racism it is because of “those racists,” who are others, but not themselves, thus, as Sullivan suggests, they distance themselves from blameworthiness when it comes to racism. But more specifically, the group I call “rich white liberals” believe that it is especially the white working class who are the racists, while the white working class believe that it is liberal elites who foster policies that undermine their interests. While my analysis is consistent with the argument being made by Sullivan, I deal more explicitly with the structure of intergroup relations and the economic, social, and political dimensions of inequality in the post-civil rights period. While my analysis endeavors to understand the structural bases of both the anti-black and anti-civil rights declarations of the white working class as well as the pro-civil rights and inclusive declarations of the upper-middle class and the antagonism that exists politically between these different groups of whites, I also discuss the need to understand how long-term racial inequality is legitimated and the importance of political and social movements to bring about meaningful change toward greater equality.

To be fair, Sullivan notes that she plans to focus on a personal and spiritual analysis of racial injustice, leaving the structural and political analysis to others. But it isn’t clear to me that one can make such a distinction without more attention to where the connections exist. For example, the research on status construction theory argues that

the overlap between economic resources and categorical distinctions contributes to cognitive interpretations of who is deemed worthy, competent, and likable. As long as whites are disproportionately in the best jobs, have the highest incomes, have substantially more wealth, and live segregated lives from blacks and other nonwhites, then it seems hard to understand how better self-understanding can lead to a more racially just world. Similarly, as long as opportunities for jobs, education, housing, and civility from the police and others depend on who can help whom, then changes need to be made not only in personal outlooks but also in organizational and public policies that create the foundations for the distribution of life chances. Critical theories of feminism have been powerful because they have been incorporated into social movements that have pressed for better educational opportunities for women, for access to jobs previously held primarily by men, for more equal pay, and for protections from violence in personal and private spheres. The same is likely as well for the contributions of critical race theories. They need to have an impact on the outcomes in people’s lives, not just in their understanding of themselves or others.

Note

[1]. John Preston, *Whiteness and Class in Education* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009).

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