Moving Sociology of Race and Ethnicity Forward

Why Is the Time Always Right for White and Wrong For Us? How Racialized Youth Make Sense of Whiteness and Temporal Inequality

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Abstract
Independently, the study of whiteness and the study of time are important interventions in sociology. A solid foundation for any empirical investigation of the relationship between whiteness and the racialized temporalities of racialized youth, however, has yet to be set. Drawing on data from 30 in-person interviews and ethnographic methods, the author explores how racialized youth interpret time in relation to whiteness and the experiences of white youth. The data for this research are based on more than one year of fieldwork at Run-a-Way, a multiservice center for youth. Results show that racialized youth view white youth as having more time to take advantage of educational and employment opportunities. As a result of the perceived temporal advantage held by their white counterparts, racialized youth expressed feelings of temporal inequality and disparate life chances. Forced to work twice as hard to be half as good, youth saw their time horizons as compressed. The author shows how racialized youth lose time through physical, psychic, and emotional labor required to process racialization and racism and illustrates the various structural mechanisms that steal their time. Despite the temporal inequalities between them and their white counterparts, youth at Run-a-Way discovered ways to invert the terms of temporality to ensure that their culture was always most relevant and “up to date.” Although whiteness is linked to modernity and that which is future oriented, racialized youth viewed their white counterparts as behind time, lame, or just plain “wack” (uncool).

Keywords
whiteness, time, inequality, youth

“Whose time is it?” is a seemingly benign question asked to orient a person to time and space. The banality of this question should not excuse what are arguably serious limitations. Rather than using an adjective (i.e., what), it may be more sociologically productive to use a determiner (e.g., whose). Asking “Whose time is it?” alludes to the inherent power relations associated with time that privilege some at the expense of others. In reframing the question, we open possibilities to appreciate the way time is experienced differently between individuals and groups. Investigating the different dimensions of power associated with time also reveals how individuals and groups are rendered legible, illegible, and/or nonexistent within conventional temporal terms. As an application of

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ethnographic and sociological insights, I am in this article to make what is most mundane about time matter.

Independently, the study of whiteness and the study of time are important interventions in sociology. A solid foundation for any empirical investigation of the relationship between whiteness and the “time perspectives” (Coser and Coser [1963] 1990) of racialized youth, however, has yet to be set. The cold, perfunctory, impersonal character of modern or progressive time is conducive to individualism, competition, and capitalism, all key ingredients to a “possessive investment in whiteness” (Lipsitz 2006). Those who refrain from participating in such a competition or who lack the various forms of capital to do so remain at a temporal disadvantage. Temporal disadvantage is not, however, a product of individual decisions or irresponsibility within the temporal economy. A broader assemblage of structural inequalities works to deny, steal, and compress the time of multiply marginalized persons, particularly racialized persons. Previous analyses of the relationship between time and social class (Bourdieu 1997; Marx [1867] 1976; Thompson 1967; Willis 1977) and time and gender (Forman and Sowton 1989; McClintock 1995) illustrate specific sources of temporal inequality. Temporal inequality represents both quantitative and qualitative differences in individual relations to time. I specifically use temporal inequality to illustrate how the relationship between whiteness and time is subtractive for racialized people but additive and profitable for whites. Contrary to popular belief, time is not race neutral. It remains a contested terrain that privileges some and exploits many others along the lines of race, gender, and class (Agathangelou and Killian 2015; Forman and Sowton 1989; Tadiar 2012).

On the basis of ethnographic observation and interview data, I explore how racialized youth interpret time in relation to whiteness and the experiences of white youth. Like race, whiteness is relational. Hence, understanding how racialized youth make sense of time also requires some sense of how they think about the temporalities of their white counterparts. To what extent does whiteness condition the time perspectives of racialized youth in urban space? The effects of whiteness as a “condition” (Lipsitz 2011) does not negate its potential to condition or harm nonwhite people. As whiteness constructs white people as “future oriented,” racialized youth living in poor urban space are depicted as present-oriented, while also cast into anterior time.

Associated with that which is “future oriented” (Ahmed 2007; Goldberg 1993; Holland 2012; Mawani 2014; Mills 1997; Perry 2001), whiteness sets the pace in the proverbial “race against time.” With most racialized youth referencing disparate life chances and temporal inequalities between them and their white counterparts, race itself figured prominently into the race against time. Complementing the iterative connection between theory and data in my research are two central claims: (1) time is racialized, and (2) race is temporalized. Hence, I also ask where racialized youth are positioned and how they position themselves on the temporal spectrum. What strategies do racialized youth use to keep up with time when (the) time is always white? An empirical endeavor of this magnitude initially requires grounding in other critical whiteness work.

**BACKGROUND AND THEORY: THE TEMPORALITY OF WHITENESS**

Among the many privileges whiteness confers, temporal advantage does not usually stand out. However, there is much to be gained by attending to time as a social construct augmenting the “wages of whiteness” (Roediger 1991). The processual character of whiteness makes it open to both material and nonmaterial interpretations. W.E.B. Du Bois’s prescient formulation of whiteness paved the way for critical race theorists, critical whiteness theory and countless sociologists to explore the way whiteness plays out as a set of power relations. In *Black Reconstruction in the United States*, Du Bois (1935) observed that white laborers, by dint of phenotype (and the social value ascribed to such phenotype) benefited from a “public and psychological wage” (p. 700–701). Later in time, scholars conceptualized whiteness as “property” (Harris 1993), explaining white people’s “possessive investment” (Lipsitz 2006) in it. Despite the most valiant attempts to commit treason to whiteness, white people will still receive an inordinate amount of privilege at the expense of nonwhite people. In other words, white people can attempt to control the privileges they receive, but they cannot control the motives of the people who give them, further demonstrating how whiteness is a social construct.

Some scholars place greater emphasis on the unearned privileges associated with whiteness (Du Bois 1903; Lipsitz 2006; McIntosh 1989). Scholars in this tradition also acknowledge the “invisibility”
These conceptions reflect the more psychological and psychic conceptions of whiteness (Roediger 1991). Whiteness also functions as a cognitive frame orienting people to both time and space (Ahmed 2007; Bonilla-Silva 2003; Feagin 2013; Lawler 2012; Phillips 2010). Others stress the hegemonic (Hughey 2009; Lewis 2004) character of whiteness. Still others find utility in studying whiteness as an epistemology itself (Dwyer and Jones 2000; Mills 2007). The vestiges of whiteness in systems of knowledge production allow scholars to provide cogent critiques of both methods and logic (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008). Whiteness, for many of these scholars, represents a harbinger of modernity and the enlightenment (Goldberg 1993; Kelley 1997; Mawani 2014; Mills 1997; Nanibush 2016). My objective is not to provide an exhaustive literature of whiteness. Instead, I highlight specific contributions, while intervening in critical whiteness studies in a different way. My central claim is that whiteness holds a unique and intimate compatibility with time. Time, I argue, is predicated on linearity, quantification, an intolerance for ambiguity, progression, and modernity, all of which undergird “white logic” and “white methods” (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008). Beyond explicating the compatibility between whiteness and time, I illustrate how whiteness acts as a source of temporal inequality for racialized youth. Although implied in critical whiteness scholarship, the temporal orientation of whiteness is not typically centered as a primary site of analysis. It is not enough to ask “what is whiteness?” Like Michelle Wright’s (2015) proposal for studying blackness, we must also ask “when” and “where” whiteness is. In answering the “when” part of this question, critical whiteness scholars have established that whiteness is associated with that which is future oriented and modern (Ahmed 2007; Goldberg 1993; Holland 2012; Mawani 2014; Mills 1997; Perry 2001). The latter part of the question (the “where” of whiteness) is more obvious given the white supremacist context in which ontologies form. Sara Ahmed (2007) examined the “what,” “when,” and “where” of whiteness through a phenomenological lens and viewed it as the “what” that is “around” (p. 151). Where Ahmed was concerned with “how whiteness is ‘real,’ material and lived” (p. 150), I intervene by considering the implications of “lived” whiteness on the temporal perspectives of racialized youth in urban space. I am interested in how whiteness infringes on the time perspectives of racialized youth who are typically cast into a spatiotemporal abyss on the basis of their residency in poor, urban space. The association between whiteness and future orientations facilitates the construction of racialized youth in urban space as preoccupied with the present and living for the moment (Anderson 1999; Burton, Obeidallah, and Allison 1996; Gans 2011; Hanzer 1969; Harding 2010; Liebow 1967; Sharkey 2006; Wilson 1996). However, racialization, racism, and the many faculties racialized youth use to make sense of multiplicative forms of oppression make them more prescient than present oriented. Remaining ahead of time, the youth I studied found ways to invert the temporal terms of whiteness and their own racial-temporalized positions by depicting their white counterparts as cultural appropriators and behind what was most “up to date.” The work of previous ethnographers (MacLeod 2009; Willis 1977; Young 2004) remind us that resistance to systems of power and domination often involves some forms of social reproduction. As youth repurposed time to their benefit, many reinscribed linear conceptions of temporality rooted in whiteness and androcentric thought. “Counter-frames” (Feagin 2013) to the future orientations of whiteness were still couched in what Wright (2015:46) described as “progress narratives” embedded in linear time. Wright critiqued linear progress narratives for endorsing a return to an “origin” or singular point in history when blackness begins, which renders black (queer) women illegible. Despite the rhetorical limitations of linear progress narratives (Ray et al. 2017), racialized youth at Run-a-Way invoke these counter-frames in a spirit of resistance by re-membering a past under continuous threat of evisceration by the future orientations of whiteness. Although their resistance seems situational, the content of these counter-frames illustrates not only how “temporal power” (Bourdieu 1997) of whiteness works but how it is contested.

DATA AND METHODS

This research is based on 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork at Run-a-Way, a multiservice center located in the Twin Cities (Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota) providing support to youth in crisis. Among its many services, Run-a-Way offers access to a 24-hour crisis hotline, an emergency shelter program for youth ages ten to 17 years, a transitional living program for 16- and 17-year-olds, individual and family counseling, drop-in weekly support groups, and community education and outreach.
Although this research is based on my work with more than 100 youth, most data come from formal interviews conducted with just under one third (i.e., 30) of this total population. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to one hour 45 minutes, with most averaging about one hour. With permission from each youth, all interviews were audio-recorded. The interview schedule contained a series of questions related to (1) opportunity structures; (2) perceptions of time; (3) race, racialization, and racism; (4) developmental deadlines; and (5) life expectancy. In return for their participation, I provided each youth a $10 gift card.

Youth were classified as “racialized youth” primarily through self-identifying information given during intake processes. The specific racial/ethnic composition of my sample included 21 youth identified as African American or Black, seven youth of mixed race backgrounds, five one Native youth, and one Latino. With a sample composed of 13 girls, 14 boys, two transgender participants, and one youth who identified as gender-non-binary, attending to time’s gendered dimensions (Forman and Sowton 1989; Freeman 2005; Hartman 2007; McClintock 1989; McKittrick 2006) was integral to my analysis. Youth ranged in age from 13 to 18 years. Two youth were in middle school. The majority were enrolled in high school or alternative high school programs. Five youth were not enrolled in any formal education program at the time of the interview. Of the 25 youth enrolled in school, 23 were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

A significant amount of my time at Run-a-Way was spent observing how the youth spent their time. Working with youth during meal times, bedtime, activities within and outside Run-a-Way, “one-on-ones” with other staff members, and intervening in disciplinary issues allowed me to better understand the temporal orientations of youth at Run-a-Way. I paid close attention to youth’s comportment to personal and programmatic schedules. The tension between both schedules were illustrative of the differences between chronos (objective, clock time) and kairos (subjective, existential time) derived from Greek philosophy (Hassard 1990). For example, youth treated morning and evening schedules as highly flexible by sleeping in or staying up past curfew, belying the rigid rules of the program. Jottings helped capture youth’s affect when presented with programmatic benchmarks or deadlines set by staff members for the purposes of accessing specific services (e.g. Job Corps, interviews, public assistance, and housing). I spent approximately three to four hours translating jottings into ethnographic fieldnotes after each shift.

The combination of research methods, procedures, and sampling strategy produced rich findings conducive to a vastly understudied analysis of time. The interviews and analysis presented below not only intervenes in existing literature on the sociology of time, but also complicates existing theories on the temporal perspectives of those said to be “the future”: youth. Which youth are read as “the future” is contingent on their level of coevalness (Fabian 1983) within white-androcentric-modern-linear-progressive-bourgeois time.

**FINDINGS**

**“They Got All the Time in the World”: How Racialized Youth View White Youth’s Temporality**

Without having been fully immersed in a white habitus, racialized youth at Run-a-Way were poised to speak about what they perceived as disparate temporalities between themselves and their white counterparts. Why should credence be given to racialized youth’s perceptions about the time use of their white counterparts? I am not seeking to validate youth’s perceptions according to empirical standards. What I am calling for, though, is an acknowledgment and appreciation of the time and energy exhausted by racialized subjects who must maintain a unique vantage point based on their multiply marginalized status relative to whiteness. In the spirit of Du Bois’s (1903) “double consciousness,” August Wilson (1988) explained why it is imperative for black people to maintain a “second sight”: “Blacks know more about whites in white culture and white life than whites know about blacks. We have to know because our survival depends on it. White people’s survival does not depend on knowing blacks.”

Wilson’s remarks capture the cognitive labor associated with being black in the United States. To assert that black people’s survival depends on their understanding of “white culture and white life” is not hyperbole. The legacy of slavery and its afterlife (Hartman 2007), in the form of contemporary social death (Cacho 2012; Patterson 1982) makes survival paramount for black people. Without making any attempt to quantify oppression, it is important to also acknowledge other racially marginalized groups and Indigenous peoples who must also know and understand white culture, for varying levels of survival. For nonwhite people, though, knowledge of whiteness or white culture does not entail formal study. The oppressive ubiquity of whiteness makes it the most common educational
default that racialized subjects have no other choice but to learn. In this crash course, some nonwhite people choose to appease whiteness. Some inhabit it. Others challenge or resist whiteness. In my research, I observed racialized youth relating to whiteness in all these ways, while also redefining the terms of this relationship. To operationalize this relationship, I explored youth’s perceptions of how their life chances and opportunities differed from those of their white counterparts and how those experiences shaped their perceptions of time. Below is part of my conversation with Tanisha, a 17-year-old girl who identifies as African American and Native. Before I could finish my sentence and ask whether she had more or less time than white youth, Tanisha interjected with this:

Tanisha: Oh, they can sit on they rich behinds.

Author: Ok. So what are some of the things that you think take up your time but don’t take up their time?

Tanisha: Workin’. They don’t have to worry about that because their parents do it. . . . Like, just in case they did wanna get a job, they probably won’t be turned around for a job at an interview. They probably get it on the spot.

Although the extent of Tanisha’s contact with “rich” white youth is unknown, she speaks with confidence about what she envisions their life worlds to look like. With opportunity structures already established in their favor, white youth, according to Tanisha, hold significant levels of privilege. Enhanced life chances were not solely linked to institutional (e.g., employment, education) opportunity structures but also social and familial ones. The intergenerational transmission of wealth led many racialized youth at Run-a-Way to believe that white youth benefited from the luxury of time, while they and others like them remained in a race against time. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that they were also a race against (white) time.

When I asked 16-year-old Dominique about differences in time use between white youth and racialized youth, the presented a picture of disparate schedules for both groups.

Dominique: Mm, I feel with white youth, stuff is more, like, either planned . . . planned and busy. Like, they . . . they have the resources to stay busy. Like, I rarely go to dinner or we’re going hiking. But for black youth, I feel like those occasions are rare and special and stuff like that. However, there are some routines like Saturday morning cartoons or whatever. . . . Oh, especially like in my house, we didn’t eat dinner until 10:00 at night. While here [Run-a-Way] it’s 6:00 . . .

Author: Why would you say you had dinner later when you were at home?

Dominique: I don’t know, because I guess we got to bed earlier. But with my mom I didn’t have a bedtime, so there’s a lot more, like, awareness of time with white people. . . . They’re more set to the system. I shouldn’t say aware, because . . . time is a manmade system. [Smacks lips] Bam!

Dominique unveils a budding sociological imagination by exposing the social constructedness of time. Dominique also answers an orienting question of this research: whose time is it? According to Dominique, time is “manmade.” In their opinion, time is not only “manmade” but white-manmade.9 White people, according to Dominique, seem to have a better relationship to time and in their words are more “set to the system.” To further explore the racialization of time, I asked Dominique about other differences in time perspectives:

Author: Do you ever think that maybe certain people function on a separate . . . like white people have their own time?

Dominique: Yes. Yes, definitely. Cuz no person of color would dare start school at frickin’ 8:00 in the morning! We do not get up that early! Yes. Okaaaaay.

Author: So would you say time itself, do you feel like time itself is a white people thing?

Dominique: Yes, definitely! Because, you know, like . . . we don’t have enough time to live. . . . I wish everything could be 24 hours because that way the party doesn’t end. You can be nocturnal if you wanted to.

Notice how Dominique immediately links time, when marked as white, to education. This reflects Dominique’s earlier point that time is manmade. White space (Moore 2008) is inextricably linked to white time. Both white space and white time present a threat to Dominique’s identity as black and trans. The temporal constraints of whiteness force Dominique and other black youth into more than a race against time: they are also racing to survive. In imagining the possibility of a “nocturnal” existence, Dominique invokes important connections between time and marginality.
Jack Halberstam’s (2005) *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* details the ways trans people queer time through “nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity” (p. 5). Queer time reflects the heterogeneity of time and serves as a response to what Halberstam conceived of as “family time”: “the normative scheduling of daily life (early to bed, early to rise) that accompanies the practice of child rearing” (p. 5). Multiplicative forms of marginalization make adherence to such “normative scheduling” an anomalous virtue and virtually anomalous to queer and trans nonwhite people. Coping with racial homophobia and transphobia requires an inordinate amount of time that queer and trans nonwhite people do not have. Like racialization and racism, racialized homophobia and transphobia steal time by forcing queer and trans subjects to process multiplicative forms of violence. Healing from cumulative forms of racial and sexual violence sometimes requires new spaces of sociality where, in Dominique’s words, “the party doesn’t end.” This may take the form of actual parties or social gatherings that occur when most people are asleep. Queer racialized subjects also perform various forms of labor that lie outside of the logic of capital accumulation and “bourgeois time.” In a critique of David Harvey’s description of the gender politics of time/space, Halberstam asserted,

... all kinds of people, especially in postmodernity, will and do opt to live outside of reproductive family time as well as on the edges of labor and production. By doing so, they also often live outside the logic of capital accumulation: here we could consider ravers, club kids, HIV-positive barebackers, rent boys, sex workers, homeless people, drug dealers, and the unemployed. Perhaps such people could be productively called ‘queer subjects’ in terms of the ways they live (deliberately, accidentally, or of necessity) during the hours when others sleep and in the spaces (physical, metaphysical, and economic) that others have abandoned, and in terms of the ways they might work in the domains that other people assign to privacy and family. (p. 10)

In marking time as white, Dominique’s provides a racial critique missing from Halberstam’s (2005) work. Living outside of “reproductive family time” is qualitatively different than perceiving time as white and, consequently, a threat to life. Each additional murder of a trans woman of color gives Dominique legitimate reason to feel as though time were robbing them of life.

Where does time go once it is stolen? Racialized youth at Run-a-Way were acutely aware of the benefits conferred by whiteness, including accrued time. When asked whether she has more or less time than her white counterparts, 16-year-old Shanté, who also identifies African American and Native, said,

**Shanté:** Less time. They got all the time in the world.

**Author:** And why do you say that?

**Shanté:** People wait on them like it’s nothin’, like they Jesus or somethin’. . . . It’s just cuz they white. They automatically get more respect just cuz of the color of their skin. They even got a higher credit score than us already. . . . We gotta hustle, we gotta struggle, we gotta work hard to really get what we want. And they don’t have to work hard at all. They can get it just like that.

Shanté’s response helps answer Erykah Badu’s question when she sings, “Time to save the world / Where in the world is all the time?” Like Tanisha and Dominique, Shanté views white youth as endowed with proprietary rights over time. Shanté identifies several structured advantages characteristic of a “possessive investment in whiteness” (Lipsitz 2006), while extending Lipsitz’s conceptualization by showing how an investment in whiteness subsidizes *temporal capital*. In other words, a “possessive investment in whiteness” reflects a possessive investment in time. Among the many privileges conferred by whiteness, time may be conceived of as material and immaterial capital maintaining the “settled expectations” (Harris 1993) of whites. Shanté reveals how these “settled expectations” mutually reinforce the unsettled and tormented experiences of her and other black youth. In other words, white youth “got all the time in the world” because white people have *taken* all the time in the world (Marx [1867] 1976) by amassing tremendous amounts of wealth through global capitalism, slavery, conquest, genocide, displacement, dispossession, and environmental degradation, leaving many others at a temporal deficit. Shanté’s allusion to whites’ having higher credit scores suggests that she and many of her counterparts are beginning their journey to adulthood from unequal starting points.
Less Time to Work Twice as Hard to be Half as Good: Temporal Inequalities and Life Chances

A familiar aphorism to many African Americans is “You have to work twice as hard to be half as good.” If this saying is accurate and black people must work twice as hard as their white counterparts, does this mean that they have half the time to accomplish the same goal? Most youth I interviewed expressed feeling greater temporal constraints compared with what they saw as relaxed timetables for development among white youth. Loss of time was explained as a product of increased labor, both physical and mental/emotional.

How did perceived temporal inequalities linked to whiteness inform youth’s calculations for success? Youth’s protracted estimates for accomplishing conventional benchmarks for success suggest that they were aware that the paths toward such life-course transitions were filled with roadblocks and detours that limited their life chances. Remy is a 16-year-old “gender-non-binary” youth who identifies as African American, Native, and queer. Having not yet attended college, Remy is still able to project what they believe to be a likely length of time based on the experiences of relatives.

**Author:** How long do you think it takes someone to complete college from your community?

**Remy:** Um, I know it took my Auntie like ten years cuz she kept dropping out and then she would go back and she would have to finish.

**Author:** Why do you think it took her a little longer?

**Remy:** She told me that she personally felt like she had to work hard . . . like, harder than the other kids, but what she meant by that was she felt like it was a race . . . she said she felt like a field slave. So like maybe if you work this hard you can get close to the master, you can get close to the teacher. So maybe if you do this right then you’ll get this in return even though everyone else is doing it but you’ve just gotta work harder for it cuz I want you to show me the difference. . . . It just gave her a lot of anxiety and she wasn’t comfortable with that.

**Author:** Yeah. Do you feel like you and even maybe your auntie usually have to work twice as hard as white people to get certain things?

**Remy:** Most definitely. Most definitely. . . . Yes, cuz I feel like I’m doing extra stuff and I can do what somebody else is told to do. I can . . . I don’t wanna do their job cuz I feel like I’m doing two jobs at once. I don’t wanna do extra stuff cuz then that’s taking up time. It takes time to do extra stuff. If we both got the same amount of time but we got two different things to do and that one person has one thing to do, then that means that I have less time.

According to strict conceptions of linear and progressive time, a ten-year college career makes Remy’s aunt a “nontraditional” student. However, it should not be assumed that the Remy’s aunt’s intermittent education reflects a lack of effort or academic preparedness. Instead, Remy describes several contextual factors that consumed so much of her aunt’s time, including anxiety induced by whiteness and white privilege. This anxiety led Remy’s aunt to describe her educational experience as a “race.” In other conversations with Remy, they expressed similar anxiety about school because of a heightened self-awareness in relation to whiteness and white students, in particular. Having to constantly think in such relational terms is, according to Remy, like “doing two jobs at once” and hence a waste of time. The thought of working twice as hard to achieve goals similar to those of white youth is so appalling that Remy likens it to slavery. A sense of enslavement can only exist in relation to the beneficiaries of this “peculiar institution.” In the following narrative, 16-year-old Rahim explains why he feels he has to do more with less (time):

**Author:** So how much harder do you feel you have to work compared to white kids your age to achieve the same goal?

**Rahim:** One hundred percent. You really gotta work just to get to where they at because their moms and dads, they got companies so they just pass down. . . . You know what I’m sayin’? And it’s gonna be super hard for me to . . . come from the bottom to the top . . .

**Author:** So that’s like . . . twice as hard?

**Rahim:** Yeah, twice. Yeah.

**Author:** If you have to work twice as hard does that mean you have less time to do it?

**Rahim:** Well, yeah. You could say that. I have less time to do more. Cuz, like, they’re always ahead. It’s always gonna be a point in time they’re gonna be ahead of you so, you know what I’m sayin’. Just to catch up . . . it’s one times harder [harder the first
Rahim feels forced to work 100 percent harder to achieve some sort of parity with white youth. Working 100 percent harder may not always mean that you are working twice as hard as another. In some cases, youth like Rahim may already be working significantly harder than his white counterparts. Hence, when he works 100 percent harder, he may be working at least twice as hard as his white counterparts to achieve similar goals. In claiming that white youth are “always ahead,” Rahim is describing how race is temporalized or positioned within time (Fabian 1983; Freeman 2005; Holland 2012). In this case, he positions white youth ahead of him and other black youth in time. According to Rahim, he has “less time to do more,” which suggests a need to compensate for material deficits produced by structural inequalities. Speaking with Miguel, a 17-year-old boy identifying as “Hispanic,” we see how these material deficits manifest and the implications on youth’s time use:

Author: When you think about what you have to accomplish on a day-to-day basis, do you feel you have more or less time than white kids?

Miguel: Less time. . . . Because I’m usually working to help my mom.

Author: So what are some things that you think take up your time every day, but may not take up time for white kids?

Miguel: School. . . . It’s just I have to work harder than them cuz I usually [have] 30 minutes before school ends to go to work, so I always be asking for all the notes teachers and doing the homework on the bus, focusing on schoolwork on the bus until I get to the bus stop to work, then go home, change real fast, leave the backpack, and go directly to work. . . . They usually don’t cuz their parents either pick them up or give them a bike to go home.

In addition to school, Miguel is one of many students who holds down a part-time job while still earning a high school degree. Compared with depictions of racialized youth in urban space as incapable of planning or thinking long term, Miguel has a well-structured routine built around his school-work life. Miguel sees his circumstances as unique compared with most of his white counterparts. Instead of taking public transportation, white youth, according to Miguel, have the luxury of private modes of transportation. Miguel also alludes to an intergenerational transmission of privilege and among the privileges bequeathed to white youth is time itself.

“White People—Do You Believe in Black Privilege?”: Interrogating Whiteness and White Time

To youth at Run-a-Way, whiteness, white identity, and white culture were synonymous. In some cases, youth found ways to resist whiteness, white identity, white culture, and white time simultaneously. Take for example an exchange during a shift-change meeting in the Emergency Shelter Program. Around 3:30 p.m. every day, staff members and youth gather in the program’s living room to recount the day’s events and run down the evening agenda. Staff members usually begin the discussion with the “question of the day,” such as “What is your favorite color?” or “If you had a superpower, what would it be?” As youth begrudgingly answer the questions, most staff members awkwardly wait for the ordeal to end. After one particular shift change, Remy immediately asked, “Can we talk about race?” The three staff members looked sheepishly at one another, not knowing what to say. Eventually, one halfheartedly said, “Yeah, let’s do it.” Remy proceeded by asking, “White people—Do you believe in black privilege?” The looks on the faces of the white staff person conveyed regret for their invitation. Their best defense was to ask, “What do you mean by black privilege?” Remy then explained the problem of whites’ claims of “reverse racism” in the wake of accomplishments by an “exceptional” group of black people. They went on to disabuse any believers in black privilege of the absurdity of such claims by reminding them of systems of institutionalized racism keeping many black people locked into the criminal legal system and locked out of educational and employment opportunities. Remy concluded by describing “black privilege” is a contradiction in terms when violence against black people is not contingent on any transgression, but it is gratuitous (Wilderson 2014:7).

Although not explicitly naming it, Remy was conceptualizing whiteness as a normalizing orientation of the world and its way of functioning. If whiteness is, as Lipsitz (2011:37) asserted, “a
condition,” then Remy was questioning what they believe is a symptom of that condition: the entertainment of “black privilege.” The question was not simply an attempt to disabuse whites of “black privilege” but also an acknowledgment that some white people still subscribe to such absurdity. This illustrates Remy’s use of their “double consciousness” or, more precisely, their “multiple consciousness” (King 1988).

What seems most instructive about Remy’s conceptualizations of whiteness is that they are interrogating its egocentric character, allowing many whites to use white culture and white identity as a reference category for all social life. Remy also makes an important rhetorical move, by questioning the links between whiteness, modernity/ modern time, rationality, and enlightenment. In their opinion, claims of “black privilege” are utterly absurd and backward. In my research, I looked at how other racialized youth made similar moves to invert terms and conditions that determined who was capable of keeping pace with time.

The Wackness of Whiteness: Youth Resistance Strategies for Making White Time “Late”

“But what on earth is whiteness that one should desire it? Then always, somehow, some way, silently but clearly, I am given to understand that whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!”


W.E.B. Du Bois was one of many black scholars who used the power of inversion to creatively mock systems of oppression and individual oppressors. By turning the fundamental principles of whiteness on their head, black scholars reconfigured the terms and conditions of modernity. Although not new, I am interested in how this trend has evolved over time and how it has been repurposed within youth culture, particularly the tastes, styles, and sensibilities of racialized youth in urban space. As youth revise the terms and conditions that grant people access to modernity and progressive time, they also reposition themselves on the temporal spectrum. In this section I highlight some of the strategies racialized youth use to not only “keep up with the times” but also ensure that no matter what they do, they are always “on time” or “up to date” and that their sociality is never late.

Although whiteness has historically been linked to modernity (Alexander 2005; Bhabha 2009; Fanon 1963; Ferguson 2004; Halberstam 2005; Lawler 2012; Mawani 2014; McClintock 1995; Nanibush 2016; Said 1979) and future orientations (De Vos 1975; Perry 2001), racialized youth at Run-a-Way found a way to invert whose culture was “up to date.” Youth viewed their white counterparts as well as white culture as behind time, lame,12 or just plain “wack” (uncool).13 Fashion trends, musical tastes, social media content (e.g., Twitter trends, memes, Vinez) were (temporal) status symbols, with time and temporality inscribed on material and immaterial culture (Pugh 2009).

The following fieldnotes help illustrate the wackiness of whiteness:

While in the case management office with Steve, a white male in his late forties to early fifties, Melissa, 16-year old black girl, stops by and asks, “When are you going to stop wearing those sandals?” Steve is wearing a pair of black Birkenstock sandals with white socks. “I wear these from April ’til October” he replied. “[Uugghhhh!]” Melissa replies with exasperation. (Fieldnote from July 16, 2015)

After dinner, we return to the floor. Steve informs the youth that they can participate in one of two activities: (1) mini-golf (2) trip to the park to play ultimate Frisbee. When the youth ask Steve if he was coming, they mentioned that he can’t leave wearing his Birkenstock sandals, implying the potential for being embarrassed by his attire. (Fieldnote from July 24, 2015)

Attending to the minutiae of youth sociality helped me interpret what they deemed most relevant and up to date. Racialized youth tend to know the latest fashion trends, and according to their footwear index, Steve’s Birkenstocks were not up to date. Birkenstocks are not typically sold in or marketed to poor communities of color, and despite their expensive cost, the sandals hold little weight in the consumer culture of racialized youth. Similar to the way nonwhite people are relegated to anterior time when in predominantly white institutions, Steve and his footwear are rendered illegible within the spacetime of racialized youth at Run-a-Way. Whiteness was tantamount to wackness in other space racialized youth inhabited at Run-a-Way, including the “dance floor” of the basement conference room.

We gather in the basement conference room for the evening activity. Youth are expected to play Nintendo Wii Fit as their physical activity for
the day. Among the many games to choose from, the most popular seemed to be “Dance, Dance Revolution.” Before beginning the game, Lisa, a middle-aged white staff person, tells youth she has been warned not to participate. When someone asks why, Gerard [16-year-old who identifies as Native and African American] interjects saying, “White people can’t dance.”
(Fieldnote from July 28, 2015)

The stereotype that “white people can’t dance” is reminiscent of the 1992 film White Men Can’t Jump. It is an allusion to stereotypical representations of white people as having less physical prowess than nonwhites generally and black people in particular. Gerard’s comments could be easily interpreted as simply mocking white people and whiteness, though such interpretations diminish the importance of understanding when and where whiteness is (Ahmed 2007; Wright 2004). Although Gerard may acknowledge that white people occupy the same dimensions of time and space, he also locates them outside a realm of what is most relevant and up to date. In mocking the white people’s inability to keep pace with the latest dance trends, Gerard is also temporalizing whiteness behind what he considers most modern. Placing Gerard’s comments within the context of the racialization of black people reveals an interesting racial-temporal inversion. Black people and many racialized persons are typically seen as behind time or “premodern” (Alexander 2005; Bhabha 2009; Ferguson 2004; Glassner 1982; Halberstam 2005; McClintock 1995; Said 1979; Wright 2004). However, both Melissa and Gerard undermine the connections between whiteness and modernity, by describing white people’s difficulty keeping up with the latest and timeliest trends as a product of white ineptitude.

Inverting the relationship between whiteness and modernity, 14-year-old Shanice suggests what is most inept is for white people to emulate those they view as “stupid”:

Author: How important is the past to you?
Shanice: It’s important because it’s talkin’ about our generation, it’s talkin’ about our color, the things that happened back in the day. For one, we really need to learn about that . . . because we still got white people constantly talkin’ about us, constantly tryin’ to be better than us but also tryin’ to be like us! You know. It doesn’t make sense to me. You’re talkin’ about us but tryin’ to be like us, you know. We make up stuff, they wanna take that and make it as their own! You know. But at the same time I still don’t get it because they say black people are stupid, you know, worthless, but also you’re tryin’ to take what we have made into your own.

Shanice takes immense pride in her cultural past while also resisting what Joe Feagin (2013) described as the “white racial frame.” Resistance to whiteness came in multiple forms, including what Feagin called “counter-framing.” According to Feagin, counter-frames “were initially developed for survival purposes, and over time they have added critical elements that have strengthened their understandings of institutionalized racism and the strategies of everyday resistance to that racism” (p. 21). Shanice presents a counter-frame to whiteness by exposing the buffoonery coopting culture that is consistently debased. The tactics of blackness and those used by other nonwhite youth made clear the wackness of whiteness.

CONCLUSION
In this article, I centered racialized youth’s perceptions of white youth’s relationship to time to highlight the role of whiteness in perpetuating temporal inequalities. Racialized youth viewed existing opportunity structures, such as education and employment, as supportive of the leisurely timetables of their white counterparts. In the race against time, racialized youth at Run-a-Way see themselves as beginning from delayed starting points compared with white youth. Perceiving their starts as delayed left many racialized youth at Run-a-Way also feeling as though their time was compressed. They saw their white peers as being the owners of a progressive time that they could not invest in.

With time being money, the intergenerational transmission of wealth was also understood as an intergenerational transmission of (available or free) time. Coming from mostly poor and working-class backgrounds, the lineage of most youth at Run-a-Way meant that they were also temporally bankrupt. Temporal bankruptcy must be understood in relation to temporal privilege, which is ultimately linked to racial privilege. As a concept that uses white bodies as physical markers of modernity and future orientations, whiteness is an integral part of my analysis.

A “phenomenology of whiteness” (Ahmed 2007) forces racialized subjects perform an inordinate amount of physical, emotional, and psychic labor as a means of survival. This labor consumes a
significant amount of modern/progressive time but also constitutes an incalculable time—incalculable because the time required to process experiences with racism, racialization, and discrimination, literally and figuratively, don’t count. To racialized persons, however, their experiences with systems of racial oppression will always count, in large part because they are countless.

Racialized youth constantly cogitate over multiplicative forms of oppression that leave them behind in the race against time. Compared with the abundance of time they believed white youth possess, racialized youth at Run-a-Way saw their time-tables for achieving conventional benchmarks (e.g., school) as compressed. These narratives reveal several time-consuming experiences obscured within mainstream studies of youth time use (Huebner and Mancini 2003; Wright et al. 2009). Within these studies, researchers are effective in controlling for race but not racism. Previous time-use studies relied on data collected in the form of time diaries to document and quantify the amount of time youth spent on everyday activities (Gauthier and Furstenberg 2005; Mahoney and Vest 2012; Zick 2010). However, it remains unclear whether time diaries can capture the experiences that do not fit neatly into the margins of printed time intervals. How does a time diary calculate the time Rahim spends working (at least) twice as hard to be half as good? How do time diaries accurately detail Miguel’s time use when his travel time by bus is also his study time? Can a time diary capture the time Remy spends disabusing white staff of the absurdity of “black privilege”?

Although processing acts of racial violence (i.e., racialization and racism), including whiteness, offers little financial return for those performing such labor, this work is highly generative for systems of power and domination. Profits gained through such forms of racial violence are both material and immaterial. By “profit,” I mean the way white people gain material and immaterial advantages and thus remain ahead race against time by forcing nonwhite people to work physically and psychically (i.e., “double consciousness” and “multiple consciousness”). In other words, racist systems and individuals have the luxury of time precisely because they have stolen time from an exploitable class of youth.

When in a race against white time that offers less time to be half as good as the winners, finding a way to “run your own race” is a challenge. Rather than running their own race, racialized youth at Run-a-Way redefined the (and their) race by transgressing time and creating what J. Brendan Shaw (2015) described as “radical ruptures in contemporary scripts of progress” (p. 63). In this race, the equation of white with wack aided in the defeat of a culture seen as incapable of keeping pace with the tastes, flavor, and general sociality of racialized youth, mostly black youth. Although the spacetime in which youth constructed whiteness as wack presents a negligible threat to the larger temporal order, “resistance is revelatory” (Kelley 2014) and the existence of these counter-frames (Feagin 2013) show that racialized youth recognized being most up to date was more a matter of being off white time than on it.

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NOTES

1. I decided to only study the temporal perspectives of racialized youth because this remains an uncharted terrain in social research. Explorations of developmental timetables and future orientations are well documented in the life-course perspective and youth development studies that historically privilege the experiences of middle-class youth, especially whites (Elder 1985; Furstenberg et al. 1999; Gauthier and Furstenberg 2005; Kirkpatrick Johnson 2002).


3. All names, including names of youth, are pseudonyms.

4. Youth come to Run-a-Way under a variety of circumstances, including homelessness, family disputes, and diversion from the juvenile justice system. Some youth came in because they “needed a break” from their parents. Others were brought by their social workers and allowed to stay as an interim placement between moves to other systems of care (e.g., foster home, group home). However, most youth came in because of some problems with family that were worked through during their time in the program. In such cases, the goal was for the
youth to return home by the end of their stay in the program.
5. In some cases, parents, guardians, social workers, and/or Run-a-Way staff members also ascribed the racial/ethnic identities of youth.
6. Most mixed-race youth reported having one black and one white parent.
7. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2010) defined white habitus as “a racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates whites’ racial taste, perceptions, feelings and emotions and their views on racial matters” (p. 104).
8. From a 1988 interview with Bill Moyers, cited in Nadel (1994). Although I agree with Wilson’s concluding point that “white people’s survival does not depend on knowing blacks,” this does not stop white people from believing that they do know black people and all racialized subjects. The incessant quest to know the “other” is an integral dimension of whiteness (Fabian 1983; Rosaldo 1993; Said 1978).
9. As a “gender-fluid” and “trans” person, Dominique’s critique can also be interpreted as an attempt to speak to the heteronormativity of time. The daily schedule Dominique describes revolves around heteronormative constructions of time itself. According to Jack Halberstam (2005), “Family time refers to the normative scheduling of daily life (early to bed, early to rise) that accompanies the practice of child rearing” (p. 5). In queering time, Halberstam is also answering the question “Whose time is it?” For Dominique and other queer and trans youth at Run-a-Way, time was interpreted as being of a greater benefit to those whose identities were privileged along the same lines of which they were marginalized and multiply marginalized (i.e., race, gender, sexuality, class, ability).
10. From the song “Didn’t Cha Know” off Badu’s album Mama’s Gun (2000).
11. Beyond its reference to not being on (clock) time, “late” is also an expression used to describe how people may be slow to pick up on the latest trends.
12. The colloquial use of the word lame is widespread but is also problematic from a disability studies and disability politics perspective.
13. Jiménez and Horowitz (2013:858) found that whiteness is not synonymous with success but reflects “scholastic mediocrity” among certain immigrant groups. This research effectively flattens the differences between whiteness and nonwhiteness, while homogenizing Asian American identity and making a highly socioeconomically advantaged sample a reference category for all nonwhite people.

REFERENCES


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