HEGEMONIAL SELF-REFLECTION: CRITICAL WHITENESS AT THE INTERSECTION OF ’RACE’ AND GENDER

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ABSTRACT
At the advent of ‘diversity’ in the field of the social sciences in the 1990s, many feminist scholars and activists expressed concerns about the disempowerment of gender as a category of critical inquiry and political struggle if it was to be subsumed under a range of various differences between people. Many saw ‘sex difference’ respectively ‘sexual difference’ as the master category of discrimination, which apparently concerns ‘all women’ – worldwide. Likewise ‘gender’ had threatened feminism earlier in the 1990s – a feminism that was understood as the field of the study of – and activism against the discrimination of ‘women’. The worry was, that by the deconstruction of the category ‘woman’, all political power of feminism would disappear. By the time of the introduction of the concept of ‘intersectionality’ later on, the field had already gone through a certain transformation. Most of those acting in it had understood that subjects are always identified with more than one category within our societies’ matrix of powerful signifiers and therefore positioned interdependently, and are in some relations or constellations more, in others less, powerful. More importantly, they finally realized, that there were powerful differences between ‘women’ and that ‘white’ ‘women’ were not only victims of patriarchy but also perpetrators of racism. The ‘chorus of victims in feminism had finally fallen silent’ to use a phrase of Christina Thürmer-Rohr (1984). It were racistically marked ‘women’ who had conducted all of these interventions in feminism and they addressed the notorious whiteness as a signifier of dominance in feminism and gender studies. Critical whiteness studies were introduced as a field of inquiry which follows the request of Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Toni Morrison and others, to research the signifying rather than the signified of ‘race’, not the ‘victims’ of racism but its perpetrators and thereby focusing not only on the violent forms of racism but the ‘racism, that does not leave corpses’ (Howitt & Owusu Bempah, 1994, p. 35). Racism, like sexism, is a constitutive element of (Western) societies and not just a phenomenon at their margins, namely right wing extremism and white supremacy groups. This paper will give an insight into critical whiteness studies and its relations with gender. It will focus on the mechanisms of ontologization, which are at the core of both power relations – gender and racism – as body politics. Furthermore the chapter will discuss critical whiteness as a method and didactics of hegemonial self-reflection in the nexus of gender and racism, a nexus where positionings of power switch (for ‘white women’). Given, that “race does not exist but it does kill people” (Guillaumin, 1995, p, 107), its signifier – whiteness – operates mainly in the realm of the unconscious, at least with ‘white’ people. A methodology of hegemonial self-reflection must therefore delve into the realm of the unconscious of racism and gender.

KEYWORDS
Racism; Gender; Critical Whiteness; Intersectionality; Psychoanalysis.

The Production of Difference – Gender and Race’

The perception that ‘women’ are fundamentally different to ‘men’ is a constitutive element of Western societies. The binary construction of ‘men’ and ‘women’ as rational versus emotional, intelligible versus palpable, active versus passive and their association with mind versus body, professional and public life versus domestic life and motherhood puts ‘men’ and ‘women’ not only in a complementary relation but a hierarchical one, too. ‘Men’ are the

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carriers of all appreciated qualities of the Western value system whereas ‘women’s’ qualities are disregarded. It is no coincidence that non-‘white’ people are ascribed the same devalued attributes as ‘white women’ in this value system, leaving non-‘white women’ at the lowest point of the scale. I put gendering as well as racializing terms in single quotation marks in this text in order to direct readers’ attention to the fact that ‘women’ and ‘blacks’ or ‘people of colour’ etc. are effects of signifying practices and not ‘natural’ entities. For the same reason I use the phrasing ‘racistically marked’ or ‘unmarked’, pointing to the fact that it is the act of marking which produces ‘race’ – that racism is the act of marking and ‘race’ the effect of racism, not vice versa. Therefore it would be backward to use the term ‘racial’ and speak of ‘racial marking’ since ‘raciality’ is the effect of the act of marking. In contrast to ‘race’ gender is a post-essentialist term, which deconstructs ‘sex’.

The alleged intrinsic differences between the ‘sexes’ and ‘races’ have never been neutral and purely descriptive in Western cultures. Their meanings always carried an evaluation in worth and value, subordinating ‘the darker races’ and all ‘women’ to ‘white men’. Along with this process of discrimination came the unequal distribution of power and labour: (‘white’) women’s unpaid care work and the exploitation of non-‘whites’ in the course of imperialism and colonialism which found it’s peak in slavery. The powerful effect of this production of differences is the ‘white man’s’ position of hegemony.

Interestingly, these productions of differences took place at the same time when Europe went through a period of emancipation with the development of the Enlightenment thought and its ideals of freedom and equality. Nobel Prize winning Afro-American literary critic Toni Morrison (1993) remarks in recourse to sociologist Orlando Patterson, that we should not be surprised about this apparent contradiction in Enlightenment’s thought because:

Nothing highlighted freedom – if it did not in fact create it – like slavery ... For in that construction of blackness and enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me. (p. 38)

While European ‘men’ struggled to overcome institutional authority as in the church and monarchy with their belief systems by distinguishing reason, freedom, analysis and individualism for themselves, they used this very reason – science – to deprive the majority of the world’s population of freedom and individualism. All women and non-‘white’ ‘men’ became the field of projection for the qualities, which were split off in the process of creating the ideal subject of Enlightenment. Thereby arose interdependence. Femininity and non-whiteness became a ‘before’-in-the-service-of-an-‘after’ – ‘white masculinity’. The scientific study of ‘women’ and non-‘whites’ became instrumental for the subordination of these groups under the ‘class’ of ‘white males’. Biology was the ground on which the Enlightenment philosophers’ ideas about the differences in ‘sex’ and ‘race’ manifested.

Biologically based classificatory sciences sought to define ‘natural’ differences through empirical studies of bodies – in particular of skulls. Both white women and women and men of colour were said to possess smaller brains than white men, a factor taken to signify their lesser powers of reasoning. (Weedon, 1999, p. 9)
The term ‘primitivity’ was introduced and coded by ‘female’ as well as ‘non-white’, codes, which became key elements in the epistemic violence (Spivak, 1988) of many Western sciences as we shall see later on in this text.

The scientific disciplines involved in the study of ‘sex’ and ‘race’ differences were biology, medicine and what was to become psychology. In the 18th and 19th century, when these theories of ‘race’ and ‘sex’ differences were developed, psychological research was undertaken within the disciplines of philosophy, biology and the life sciences, respectively. A popular protagonist of this research “for example, [was] psychologist Gustave Le Bon, who is regarded as the founder of social psychology and who was part of Paul Broca’s French school of craniometry” (Weedon 1999, p. 9). He writes: “All psychologists who have studied the intelligence of women, as well as poets and novelists, recognize today that they represent the most inferior forms of human evolution and that they are closer to children and savages than to an adult civilized man” (Le Bon, 1897, cited in Weedon, 1999, p. 8). The few ‘exceptional’ distinguished women of his time were to Le Bon monstrous like “a gorilla with two heads” (ibid.).

Proofs for the claimed parallels between (‘white’) ‘women’, all ‘blacks’, children and animals were produced through the measurement of body, brain size or facial angle in the scientific fields phrenology, craniology and sociobiology. The inferiority of ‘women’ and non-‘whites’ legitimated their deprivation from (higher) education, suffrage and civil rights. Drawing on the pseudo scientific race theory of Carl von Linné, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, Immanuel Kant, Georges Cuvier, Jean Baptiste Bory de Saint-Vincent, Arthur de Gobineau, Francis Galton, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck or Ernst Haeckel it was argued that African people were biologically suited to slavery and the brutality against non-‘whites’ in the course of colonialism, slavery and segregation was declared a necessary measure.

While those brute forms of racist science no longer exist, many of its principles live on in contemporary scientific work. For example the principle of setting a norm according to the Enlightenment ideal of the human subject and describing everything which differs from that as deviation or lack – not quite/not white, to use Homi Bhabha’s term. Likewise, the principle of identifying differences between people and cultures and grounding them in biology is a practice, which is still widespread in the social and life sciences. Many of the principles, which were developed in racial sciences have become part of – and are hidden in – an epistemology, which is still very alive. The founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud, for example, has adopted Ernst Haeckel’s recapitulation theory for his theory of psychosexual development, which, again, has been incorporated in many other psychological theories that do not relate to psychoanalysis and are still widely applied. Psychoanalytic theory, even though never established in formal academia, is the psychological theory which has spread most widely – in the social sciences as well as in everyday thought. Many of its theoretical aspects have become common sense. Following Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck (ontogenesis recapitulates phylogenesis) and Charles Darwin (origin of species), the concept of recapitulationism claims that a human being recapitulates in its individual development (ontogenesis) the evolution of the human species (phylogenesis) – from primitivity to civilization. 19th century cultural anthropology has translated Darwins theory of the evolution of physical marks onto mental and cultural phenomena (Brickman, 2003, p. 58). According to Darwin, all species originate in one primordial form and due to natural selection the fittest survive. In its translation into social theory the
term species of Darwin’s evolution theory was sometimes replaced with the term ‘race’. Generations of embryology and morphology were organized by this theory (ibid.).

Psychoanalysis situates sexual difference in the body, too, even though Freud was innovative for his time, arguing that gender and desire were acquired in the process of psychosexual development. The baby was ‘polymorph perverse’ to Freud. According to this, its entire body surface was identified as an erotic zone. During the oedipal complex, however, the children discover that there are some, who have a penis and others who lack it and Freud claims, that this induces boys to fear castration and girls to feel castrated, ever suffering from penis envy thereafter. The male becomes the norm, the female stands for deviation, lack and inferiority. Freud (1927) calls the clitoris a primitive organ, the inferior little penis of women (Studienausgabe, Bd. III, S. 388). Female sexuality is termed a dark continent (1926, Studienausgabe, Ergänzungsband, S. 303), thus allegorized as Africa in Freud. Antisemitic discourse in Freud’s fin de siècle Vienna called the clitoris ‘Jew’ and female masturbation ‘playing with the Jew’, but that is another story. The psychoanalysis of Little Hans, which brought Freud to develop the Oedipus complex – the theory of castration – contains a footnote in which Freud explains that little Jewish Hans learns in Kindergarten that Jews are castrated (circumcised) (Boyarin, 1998, p. 224, in recourse to Gilman and Freud). In his attempt to argue against anti-semitism Freud – a Jew himself – shifted the discriminating connotations of anti-semitism into sexism and colonial racism instead of deconstructing the discriminating epistemology of both, racism and sexism. I chose the example of psychoanalysis because nowhere become the intersections of ‘race’, gender and sexuality as virulent as in psychoanalysis and nowhere can it be observed better, how discourses of a time enchroach on scientific theory (see Tißberger, 2013).

The idea of the primitive as the beginning of all – individual and humanity – repeated European medieval philosophy’s presumption that the ‘savages’ lived in the childhood of the human development and that ‘civilized’ children recapitulate the human wilderness (Brickman, 2003, p. 58). According to Brickman, Darwin believed that the defeat in the ‘survival of the fittest’ lead to infertility, that military and economic strength were a proof for biological strength and he thereby produced a theory, which allowed naturalizing the subjection and extermination of the colonized. Those who were on the wrong side of the imperial battlefield simply had the poorer biological cards and were naturally determined to die out. Their extinction placed the conquered simply “back into the dead prehistoric world where they belonged” (Stocking, cited in Brickman, 2003, p. 48). Civilization and colonization were soon to be understood as biologically constituted capacities of a distinct ‘race’, which was due to natural superiority destined to win the survival of the fittest ‘race’ and to conquer other ‘races’.

Contemporary body politics of racism and sexism are grounded in this evolutionism. The evolutionist axis with the poles of primitivity and civilization has a racist and sexist inscription, which parallels darkness and femininity with primitivity and lightness and masculinity with civilization and positions dark skinned and female phenotypes close to the beginning of human development and in kinship with apes, and light skinned and male phenotypes close to civilization, progress, development and success. The darker a person appears, the more primitive it is represented, the lighter, the more civilized. Stereotypes of non-‘white’ people and in particular ‘black’ people – both negative and celebratory – as being more physical, more sexual, more intuitive, more spiritual, as having a lesser sense of justice and being more
criminal, less rational and less sophisticated than ‘whites’ (Weedon 1999, p. 153) are the effect of the transfer of biology – the association of physical markers – onto cognition and psychology – mind and psyche. Even though these theories are obsolete, they are still practiced widely in everyday racism. This process of ontologization is what often goes unrecognized in contemporary racism and sexism.

**Dark Continents – Ontologization and the Unconscious**

Sigmund Freud’s allegorization of ‘white women’s’ sexuality as dark continent – Africa – at a time when the colonial plundering and exploitation of this continent’s natural and human resources was at its peak, is remarkable. It discloses the confluence of gender, ‘race’ and sexuality not only in colonial fantasy but also in its various manifestations in contemporary post/neo/colonial politics. Freud distinguished two kinds of the unconscious, the topological and the dynamic. The dynamic unconscious carries the revolutionary potential of psychoanalysis. It explains the mechanisms of transference, defence and other aspects of the psyche, which are not only helpful but also indispensable in understanding power relations for example. The topological unconscious – and the dark continent refers to this – is developed out of the evolutionist thought as described above. Herein lies the reactionary potential of psychoanalysis.

In “Totem and Tabu” (1912) Freud explains that in the beginning of culture and civilization was the primal horde – an adapted fantasy of his contemporary anthropologist James George Frazer (1854-1941). The primal horde was headed by the primal father who ‘owned’ all women and thereby, so goes the story, deprived all the other ‘men’ of the horde (the ‘brothers’) of sexuality. The brothers united one day and killed the father. But that posed another problem because all of them wanted to replace the father and ‘own’ the women now. Therefore the taboo of incest and killing was established and Freud sees that as the beginning of civilization – the capacity to renounce of one’s ‘drives’ – love and death drive. According to Freud, this phylogenetic ‘incidence’ (in fact a fantasy) is sedimented in every individual psyche and recapitulated in the Oedipus complex when the little boy – desiring his mother – understands that the mother is ‘owned’ by the father. Consequently, he has to renounce of his desires, to love and sexually own his mother and kill his father, and wait until another ‘woman’ is ‘given’ to him. French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan develops this theory further. The manifest – penis – gets replaced by the symbolic – phallus – in the process of Oedipal desire, castration threat and renunciation, etc. With the ‘cut of the signifier’ – the phallus – determination (satisfaction) is replaced by an undetermined desire. The phallus stands for lack, ‘woman’ for phallus. Lacan’s famous phrase ‘La femme n’ existe pas’ – the ‘woman’ does not exist – means that she is lack in the symbolic.

The subject, as becomes obvious here, is male in psychoanalysis. Freud is lost in explaining what happens to the girl and develops ideas such as dark continent and penis envy. We can already observe how femininity and non-whiteness, both associated with primitivity (the qualities of the savage primal horde), come to serve as constitutive outside (Derrida) – the other – in the creation of a subject ideal which is ‘white’ and ‘male’ – the phallus not just refers to the masculine penis (see Butler, 1993, p.124) but also to whiteness, the phallus is ‘white’ (see Tißberger, 2013). The ‘other’, coded by femininity and non-‘whiteness’ serves as
a before-or-outside of the subject to become; in Judith Butler’s theory, this is referred to as the ‘other’ as object becoming ‘abject’ (Butler, 2006).

Gender theory has shown that gender is produced through habitual and performative means and that heterosexuality is constructed and produced as a dominant norm and is not ‘natural’. These poststructuralist theories have overcome the essentialism which had characterized some earlier feminist theories. The same holds for constructions of ‘cultural’ and ‘race’ differences. Critical race theory, postcolonial critique and the cultural studies have shown that essentialisms might be useful strategically, at the most (Spivak, 1988). Poststructuralist thought has replaced identity politics and cultural essentialism, the idea that there is an essence of femininity in ‘women’, of masculinity in ‘men’, of blackness in Africans or European-Africans etc.

One dimension in the process of ontologization is science and the scientific discourse as described above. The other part is the level of the individual – as part of society but also in individual psychological terms. Scientific discourse would mean nothing if people did not believe in it. Key to ontologization is the individual, which believes that ‘women’ are the better care takers and that ‘blacks’ are less intelligent than ‘whites’. Key to ontologization is in fact that those who are subjectivated as ‘women’ believe that they are the better care taker than their male partners and that those who are subjectivated as ‘black’ believe that they are less intelligent than their ‘white’ classmates and therefore aspire manual work. Much of this individual process – identification, desire etc. is unconscious and this is where the work of a counterhegemonial subjectivation begins.

Critical Whiteness as Hegemonial Self-Reflection

‘Black’ scholars and activists, as has been mentioned above, initiated the critical studies of whiteness. Sojourner Truth (1798–1883), an African-American ‘woman’ who was active in both, the abolitionist and the ‘women’s’ rights movement – a former slave herself – might be mentioned as one of the first who named whiteness as a blank spot at the intersection of gender and racism in her famous speech of 1851: “Ain’t I a Woman?”2. She pointed to the racism in feminism and to the fact that non-’white women’s’ situation was not considered in the movement. Remarkably, the first ‘women’s’ movement in the U.S. arose in connection with abolitionism and thereby at the intersection of racism and feminism. Until this day the connection between feminism and anti-racism is important, the critical studies of whiteness as an academic field started through the debates about racism in feminism/gender studies. However, African-American sociologist W.E.B. DuBois must be named here, too as somebody who published his scholarly work on racism as early as 1896 and analysed carefully the workings of whiteness. DuBois coined the phrase Wages of Whiteness, pointing to the surplus that racism creates for ‘whites’ and therefore the intersection of racism and class/economy3.

Besides the afore mentioned scholars and activists Audre Lorde (1984), bell hooks (1984; 1994; 1996), Toni Morrison (1993) but also Patricia Hill Collins (1991) who refused their collection into a ’universal sisterhood’ of ,white’ feminism, the volume of the editors Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (1981) „This Bridge Called My Back“ as well as the volume „

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2 See also bell hooks (1986).
3 See also Gilroy (2002).
Making Face, Making Soul – Haciendo Caras” edited by Anzaldúa in 1990 were influential works for the development of the critical whiteness studies. In the English speaking academic realm critical whiteness studies were established in the 1990s, beginning with Ruth Franken­berg’s „White Women, Race Matters“ published in 1993 and of course Toni Morrison’s „Playing in the Dark. Whiteness and the Literary Imagination“ from 1993. Richard Dyer’s monography „White“ from 1997 was the next influential work and too many followed to be listed here.

The critical studies of whiteness mark a paradigm shift in the research on racism. In­spired by those who were the ‘objects’ of racism and it’s gaze, the gaze got returned and di­rected towards the subjects of racism, namely ‘white’ people and not just right wing extremists or neo­nazis but the unsuspicious well meaning liberal in the center of society who is perpetuating racism often despite better knowledge and against their will. The starting point of change, respectively the overcoming of racism, must be the subject itself – and I am not following an individualistic idea with this thought. As long as those who profit from racism do not get full consciousness of their involvement – the fact that they are the perpetrators of racism – racism will always be the problem of ,others’. Violent racism is terrible but much more wide spread than this form is the subtle everyday racism. Colette Guillaumin’s (1998) afore mentioned as­certainment that „race does not exist but it does kill people“ (p. 107) points to the social construction of the term and violent forms of racism but it also refers to the fact that racism leads to the social death of racistically marked people through the regime of whiteness. Being „white‘ in a society, which is characterized by a racist power structure – what Birgit Rommelspacher (1998) called a „dominance culture“ – in which ‘whites’ are automatical­ly superior and privileged, makes everybody in this society who profits from racism a racist. In other words, „the racist is the normal individual in a racist society“ (Dolan et al., 1991, p. 71, cited in Howitt & Owusu Bempah 1994, p. 85).

Critical whiteness studies approach racism as constitutive of Western societies with whiteness as the signifier of ‘race’, which works primarily on a symbolic and epistemological level and disseminates from there into every pore of society and its individuals. I have shown how evolutionist thought and ‘race’ theories in the 18th and 19th century built a structure in which the ‘white male’ subject stands for the ideal and everybody else is some sort of devia­tion – lack, less, inferior. While ‘race’ theories and social evolutionism are no longer ac­cepted, ‘whiteness’ has remained as the de-thematised, unconscious and disavowed but all the more powerful signifier of ‘white’ supremacy.

George Yancy (2004) writes that whiteness is guilty as long as it constitutes an ensemble of power relations, in which ‘whites’ are invested with power and advantages compared to non-‘whites’ (p. 6). These very power relations are mostly ignored by those who profit from them. Only when those who are de-marked in racism acknowledge their whiteness as a marker, will they be able to develop consciousness about whiteness and that is the pre­condition for the capacity to act – provided that they want to. We must not forget that there are still many people who believe in ‘white’ supremacy and openly admit to it. That is why the ‘critical’ is important in the studies of whiteness. Racism, of course, is not limited to the personal level, but works on the epistemic and institutional level as well. The subjects, respectively the personal, is not prior to the epistemic and institutional. Poststructuralist sub­ject theories, following Foucault and Butler, have shown how subject­ivation is an entangled
process between the individual, the symbolic, the institutional, the epistemic and other dimensions. It requires awareness for these subjectivation processes, for racist knowledge and the racist institutional structures in order to interfere — performatively, habitually and discursively — and shift relations of racism, destabilize them and ultimately, at least theoretically, overcome them.

References