

DOING THE LYNCH TANGO: WHITE WOMEN, BLACK MEN, AND RACIAL PRIVILEGE

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Contentious and distrustful interactions among black men and white women are not inevitably the product of the independent actions and intentions of the persons involved. Cultural narratives, which have long ascribed savage and bestial characteristics to black men, and passive and chaste characteristics to white women, shape modern-day interactions among the two groups and influence attitudes held in the wider society. Examination of cultural narratives offers an opportunity to better understand the sociological mechanisms that support racism and racial privilege, and to recast relationships that often have been rendered toxic by a potent but usually invisible ideology.

A String of Firecrackers

Some ideas are better expressed through poetry. Writing an article about white women, black men, and the interplay of racial privilege among them is a topic so burdened with taboos, stereotypes, and historical tragedies that it is difficult to find a good place to start. More than other racial topics, this one requires a careful understanding of the shared history that white women and black men have had in the United States, and a thoughtful understanding of the ideology that has shaped that history. Otherwise, any exploration of the ways the two groups have affected each other disintegrates into the very misconceptions that scholarly writing seeks to allay. I am not a poet, but I have found that telling a story sometimes creates a good place to begin a discussion when other devices fail. So, I will start with one of my own.

I am a black man. About 15 years ago I worked as a deputy attorney general and director of New Jersey's Office of Bias Crime and Community Relations. One of my responsibilities included offering anti-racism ("diversity") training to individuals and organizations throughout the state; indeed, I not only ensured that the training was available, I also taught many of the training sessions with colleagues from my office and with trusted volunteers. Anti-racism training was a new venture for me—I'm a lawyer by profession—so during the first years of this undertaking, I was especially nervous about my teaching skills

and worried about the ways anti-racism training could go wrong. I knew that talking about race could be a profound and transformational topic, but I had also been a participant in many training sessions that went awry because they were badly taught. The problem was particularly acute for me because the courses we offered on race addressed the "tough" issues, such as racial privilege and internalized oppression, and did not shy away from talking about how participants were different because of their uncommon racial experiences, not just talking about how participants all held so much in common.

One fall weekend, I was teaching our "Basic Anti-Racism" course with a colleague. The training was a lively one, and was going well: the participants were engaging, and the group was willing to share their experiences with one another. Among the approximately 20 participants was Mary (not her real name), a white woman in her forties, who was an accomplished educator. During one of the discussions, Mary began to interrupt another participant, a common occurrence when people get excited about a topic. Mary was seated directly across from me (everyone was seated in a large circle), about 15 feet away, so I said, "Hold on a second, let's let Anne finish," and simultaneously held up my hand in a "stop" gesture. Mary did not stop, but went on to finish her thought in another few sentences. The group's discussion then continued unremarkably.

A few minutes later, we took a scheduled afternoon break for fifteen minutes. During those breaks, participants usually relax, use the restrooms, and get refreshments. I went outside the building to get some fresh air and after a few minutes walked back toward our training room. As I emerged from an elevator and walked into the hallway, I saw that some of the participants were crowded around one of the hallway benches and were apparently consoling someone who was crying. As I neared the group, I could see that it was Mary who was in distress. I asked her what was wrong. She looked at me without answering and just shook her head. "Can anyone tell me what's going on?" I asked the group. No one would answer, but just looked at me with a sense of apprehension.

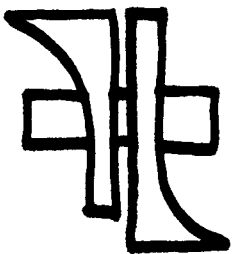
I told Mary I was concerned and wanted to help, and I asked her again to tell me what was happening. "I just don't know whether I can go on," she said. "When you put your hand up and said 'stop,' it made me feel—like really threatened and unsafe." She then melted into the bench and continued to cry for about 10 minutes until my fellow trainer was able to convince her that it was worthwhile to continue. She stayed for the remainder of the training that day and the next, but appeared visibly wounded and quite wary of me.

I avoided making a further issue of the incident during the training, but I was shocked by what had happened. I spent months trying to figure out what I had done wrong, and how I could have handled the situation better. I spoke with other trainers whom I trusted to get some dispassionate assessments of the situation; I questioned how my own male privilege might have been at work; and I tried to allow the incident to be an opportunity for my own learning. Ultimately, I would have construed the incident as a singular anomaly if I had not later experienced what became an ever-increasing list of similar experiences with white women.

As the years passed, wondering when and why a white woman would "have a meltdown" over something I said or did became a kind of training expectation and a source of personal worry. Even something as seemingly innocuous as my dismissing a group of participants for a

lunch break could provoke ire and a complaint that I was either unfair about time allocation or insensitive about the issues at hand. The incidents were infrequent, but persistent enough to make me despair because no matter how I tried to parse them, I could not understand why they continued. I knew that there were stereotypes about white women, stereotypes about black men, and stereotypes about white women and black men together. Yet none of those seemed to fit my experiences. Besides, white women were among the greatest supporters and attendants at the anti-racism trainings. Unlike white men (who usually did not attend), white women were more often courageous about racial issues and willing to take themselves and others to task. Indeed, they had been some of my best teachers about anti-racism efforts. Still, the string of firecrackers that was my freakish dealings with a small number of white women continued to explode.

I received some clarity in a training that happened late in 2008. I had since stopped working for the State of New Jersey and had helped establish the Beyond Diversity Resource Center to continue anti-racism training and other human relations efforts. The training director, Pamela Smith Chambers, and I were conducting a training session for members of a nonprofit organization that wanted to ensure that its staff members kept their diversity skills sharp. One of the exercises we conducted is a now classic one in which we asked participants to form a line standing shoulder-to-shoulder. I read a list of racial privileges and anti-privileges to the participants and asked them to move forward or backwards depending upon how each privilege or anti-privilege applied to them. Example: "If you have ever been followed by a security guard in a store because of your race, take one step back....If you have never been followed by a security guard in a store because of your race, take one step forward." This is a powerful exercise and one that can bring up strong emotions because of the visual impact it inspires: members of the culturally privileged group—white people—arrive at the front of the room because they have mostly taken steps forward, and members of the culturally



unprivileged group—people of color—arrive at the rear of the room because they have mostly taken steps backward.

After the participants moved themselves through the exercise, Pamela and I asked everyone to share their thoughts and feelings. There was nothing unusual in this debrief compared to the many others we had done in the past: emotions were high, and some individuals felt a startling sense of new learning. After about 30 minutes we were about to conclude the discussion, when one participant, Sue (not her real name), a white woman in her thirties, signaled that she would like to make a comment. I called her name and asked her to go ahead.

“I feel like I’ve been violated,” she said as she looked at me with a grimace. “And you don’t have any right to make me feel like this.” She broke her gaze from me and then glanced around the room. “It (the exercise) makes me think of how dangerous things might get. You know now that Obama has been elected, and there have been some blacks I’ve heard on the news that will want to get white people for what happened before. I don’t want to think about that. I just feel really violated and abused.”

I kept my facilitator game face on after Sue’s comment and closed the exercise by thanking her for sharing her thoughts. Her comments, however, made me want to both laugh out loud and to recoil in horror. The amusing part was my conjuring a scene of angry black people, having now brought to fruition their sinister plot to elect Senator Obama as president, attacking white people at random. I wondered, “Would my 79-year-old mother start making Molotov cocktails in her kitchen?” She really preferred to order out or go to a restaurant, so the likelihood seems small. The horrible part was that Sue’s use of the words “violated” and “abused” made me think of the words victims of domestic violence and sexual assault use to describe their experiences. Although I had engaged in no violence, Sue’s words used that language to describe how she felt I had treated her. I decided to try to research the larger societal connections involved in her statements in the hope that it would also illuminate the other

negative experiences I had with some white women during training sessions. I undertook this quest mindful that my negative experiences were repetitive but infrequent, and therefore I would be searching for the cause or causes of a particular dynamic—but certainly not the only dynamic—that happens between white women and black men.

History Written in Lightning/Leopard’s Spots

What was happening in my interactions felt like it came from somewhere else, not simply from the sometimes contentious relationship individuals have with their hosting diversity trainers. I wondered whether racial privilege was at work in sparking those experiences. The question was a tricky one because the white women and I represented groups that both hold and do not hold cultural privileges as part of primary identification; that is, I hold male privilege, but not white privilege; they hold white privilege, but not male privilege. Reasoning how these nested sets of privileges might have played out among us could yield two primary outcomes: Male privilege would make me act bossy, demanding, and entitled. White privilege would cause the women to avoid addressing issues of race and racism by claiming an illusory injustice at my hands. I would be harmed by the racism inherent in the actions of the white women; they would be harmed by the sexism inherent in my actions. Which part of the privilege dyad was actually at work—or more at work—in the situations would, of course, be subject to debate. However that debate might be settled (if it could be settled) seemed to leave a shallow, unsatisfactory outcome that did not explain how I found myself situated among a few white women who in my mind were unfairly crying “foul.”

As I thought about my “white women interactions,” I was reminded of the feelings that came to mind when I watched a scene from *Birth of a Nation*, a pre-modern film about the South after the Civil War (Griffith, 1915). To show the social disruptions of that era, the film has a scene in which Flora, a white woman from the South, goes to get water from a spring. When Flora pauses, she

is spied by Gus, an emancipated slave (who is played by a white actor in blackface). Gus watches Flora with a sinister look and then comes from his hiding place in the brush to announce that he is a captain in the military and wants to marry her. He takes her hand but she slaps him and runs away through the forest with Gus in pursuit. Although Gus says that he will not hurt her, Flora climbs to a cliff and threatens to jump if Gus does not stay away. When Gus continues his approach, Flora falls from the cliff and dies. It is unclear whether Flora slips or throws herself from her perch, but the film suggests that such distinctions are unnecessary. The intertitle over Flora advises: "For her who had learned the stern lesson of honor, we should not grieve that she found sweeter the opal gates of death."

Flora lives long enough, however, to tell her brother about her pursuer, and consequently Gus is later captured, tried by the Klan, lynched, and castrated. President Woodrow Wilson described the film as "history written in lightning," a history he added, that was "regret(ably)...all true" (Schickel, 1984, pp. 268-270).

Birth of a Nation was based on the book, *The Clansman*, by Thomas Dixon (1905), who well captures a popular depiction of white women and their relationship to black men after reconstruction. In another one of his books, *Leopard's Spots*, Dixon recounts the return of a Confederate veteran, Tom Camp, to witness the wedding of his daughter Annie, to Hose Norman, "a gallant poor white from the high hill country." According to the story, immediately after the Reverend John Durham completes the marriage ceremony, "a black shadow (falls) across the doorway," and a drunken "burly figure of a big Negro trooper" and six others burst into the room. After frightening the guests and causing a scuffle, the troopers carry Annie into the woods in preparation for rape. As part of the rescue plans, Tom asks his allies not to spare Annie's life in the effort to thwart the rape: "Shoot, men! My God, Shoot! There are things worse than death!" Tom later thanks his friends for killing Annie during the melee because they

had saved his daughter from "them brutes" (Dixon, 1908, pp. 123-127).

The modern reader should know that writers like Dixon did not consider the story recounted above, although fictional, an exaggeration of the truth. The Historical Note to *Leopard's Spots* makes the point directly:

"I wish to say that all the incidents used...were selected from authentic records, or came within my personal knowledge...The only serious liberty I have taken with history is to tone down the facts to make them credible in fiction. ...It will be a century yet before people outside the South can be made to believe a literal statement of the history of those times. ...I tried to write this book with the utmost restraint" (Dixon, 1908, p. x).

Presumably, others believed the story too, and answered the book's title-page question, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots?" (Dixon, 1908, p. vii) with a firm "No!"

As I looked at these sources and the greater historical record, I had to ask myself if my "white woman experiences" were their progeny, and if so what part privilege had played in my experiences. I also wondered how it would be possible for that racial history, now about a century old, to play itself out in the 21st century among people so modern, reflective, and aware of stereotypes.

Post-Civil War lynching that grew out of the ideation of black men as raping brutes is well known. Because of Southern worries about the political enfranchisement of blacks, lynching was seen as a justifiable weapon to preserve old racial hierarchies. A mythical history emerged in which what was wrong with the South could be exemplified in the need to defend white women against raping black men (Royster, 1997). This myth had fatal consequences. In 1893 alone, 52 black men were lynched just for claims, allegations, attempts, or suspicions of rape (Wells, 1895).

Most of the alleged crimes were unfounded, and therefore the lynchings were acts of violence used to consolidate racial power with the protection of white women used as a deception (Wells, 1900). Moreover, whole communities were purged of all black residents because of such claims (Jaspin, 2007).

White women have racial privilege, but that privilege seemed an ill-suited explanation of what seemed to be similar experiences between myself and white women, and the black men and white women I learned about as I studied lynching in the United States. A claim of wrong (often sexual) from a white damsel in distress, the uncontested societal need to redress the offense, and a lynching were the threads that seemed to be relevant to my own experiences. If the analogy were true, privilege offered only glancing insight into how the actions and patterns of thought could carry themselves forward. One of the consequences of holding privilege, for example, is the tendency for the person holding privilege to “define the issue at hand,” including the determination of whether a particular action is moral, immoral, bigoted, or fair-minded, or the determination of whether persons under scrutiny are worthy, respected, savages, or contemptible (Parker & Chambers, 2007). Although this effect of privilege helps explain why the individual women I encountered might well understand the consequences of their complaints about me, privilege did not explain why the ideology that formed the complaints was so powerful and persistent.

A Lynch Tango

I have found a theory of ideology set forth by J.M. Balkin, however, that offers the explanations I was seeking, and that provides a central addition to anti-racist thinking about privilege. Balkin (1998) describes ideology as the “socially generated and socially sustained ways in which human beings understand and constitute their world” (p. 2), a kind of “cultural software” that resides in each individual, is passed down and “rewritten” among individuals through their interactions, and that enables individuals to make judgments about the social world. Cultural software is powerful because it is ubiquitous; people are necessarily

immersed in it, and in normal circumstances it drops into the background by shaping experience but remaining unnoticed (Balkin, 1998). For example, when individuals go to a restaurant, there are many associations, customs, and hierarchies that they must understand: how to address the server, what service should be expected, how much time should customarily elapse for the food to arrive, how loudly to speak in the restaurant, and whether to leave a tip are all part of cultural modes of behavior and expectation that members of the society pass on to others. Yet, these customs are so common that they seem invisible. The advantage of this invisible software is that individuals can anticipate much about the world around them and move through their day efficiently; it would be difficult to eat at a restaurant if the rules of engagement constantly changed. The disadvantage of this invisible software is that some of these expectations perpetuate and preserve entrenched bigotry and injustice (Balkin, 1998).

I became especially interested in Balkin’s discussion of cultural narratives as a potent means of transmitting a society’s ideology because the themes embedded in *Birth of a Nation* and *Leopard’s Spots* fit into a narrative structure. Narrative thought is the organization of the world into a sequence of events—a plot—with cultural expectations. Narratives frame our understanding of what is happening around us by using a stock story to ascribe particular purposes and intentions to individuals (Balkin, 1998). What I have now termed a “lynch narrative” was similar to my own experiences and the wider historical account. In this stock story, African American men are sexual monsters who pursue white women. Those men must be subjugated to preserve the social order, and white men are the primary rescuers (D’Emilio & Freedman, 1998; Gunning, 1996). Embedded in the narrative are not only old stereotypes about African Americans and the ability to keep them terrorized and intimidated, but also deeply held expectations about white women, who are constructed as being pure, pious, and modest, and whose bodies become objectified as metaphors for the purity of the entire nation

(Gunning, 1996; Royster, 1997). In turn, the lynch narrative is supported by other narratives such as the “frontier myth” and the “savage war” in which white Americans put themselves in the wilderness and civilize it through expansion and the subjugation of uncivilized, indigenous people (Slotkin, 1998). The “rape narrative” is another complimentary companion. In it, women are shattered through sexual violence and, as a consequence, lose their reason and voice (Cutter, 2001).

As these narratives operate in my own interactions with white women, the narratives play themselves out with a more modern spin. In this stock story I am the brute harassing white women about race, taking them to task, and putting them in distress. White women play a wounded, mostly distraught role, and are left to call upon the surrounding community for assistance and retribution. Substituting for an overt sexual threat is the challenge and potential upset that anti-racism brings to our society. Then finally comes a plea for help that is assumed to be unquestionably well-grounded and sufficient to incite others to make me stop.

Because narratives are part of a larger ideology, it is no surprise that the lynch narrative would be persistent and invisible. As Balkin (1998) states, “Because individuals are constituted by their cultural software, they are continually immersed in forms of hermeneutic power without noticing it.” (p. 271). This gives us the opportunity to better explain why racial privilege—part of our society’s ideology—is so often unnoticed. Furthermore, the ideas of cultural software and its constituents, like cultural narratives, give us an additional opportunity to understand the interlocking sociological mechanisms that keep racial privilege and racism in place. I firmly believe that the work of addressing racism is difficult precisely because it is so firmly entrenched in our society and so absorbed by its members that they fail to see it except in its most blatant forms. Although discussion about racial privilege is one way to help individuals understand racism, the concepts of ideology, cultural software, and cultural software’s constituent parts offer other useful tools for learning.

The discussion of ideology can be particularly rich. I wonder, for example, to what extent the lynch narrative makes itself true in the interaction among black men and white women because of the narrative’s ability to subtly shape human action (Balkin 1998). Does the lynch narrative cause black men to become modern-day provocateurs against white women? Does it cause white women to act like damsels in distress? Additionally, the question of responsibility looms large as we look at ideology. In the lynch narrative, women are coined as passive and retreating. Does the narrative shift societal scrutiny away from the moral responsibility that lies with those who are complicit with retribution but do not carry out the retribution themselves (cf. Haslam & Reicher, 2008)?

Finally, I wonder whether we can have discussions about these and other questions while keeping the rape narrative—a buttress to the lynch narrative—and actual rape distinct (Anderson, 2005). The rape narrative is a stock story that helps perpetuate our racial ideology. Sexual assault is a violent crime that happens to more than 17% of women in the United States (U.S. Department of Justice, 2005). Although the two share elements in common, the importance of ideology and the harmfulness of sexual assault may be minimized if the two are conflated.

By examining the components of our racial ideology in this and other contexts, we have the opportunity to better grasp their consequences, evaluate their adequacy, and ultimately replace old patterns of thinking with others that we believe will be more suitable. I have found relief in understanding one of the important bases of my previously puzzling interactions with white women, even if that understanding does not promise that the lynch narrative will not play itself out in the future. I think that this racial ideology has held black men and white women in a kind of dance: a lynch tango. With investigation and commitment we can stop the dance, or at least understand why we continue to step on our partners’ toes.

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