

Shannon Sullivan

Good White People: The Problem with Middle-Class White Anti-Racism

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Shannon Sullivan's *Good White People* is an important analysis of the relationship between whiteness and class. Her target is middle-class white liberals: the post-Jim Crow whites in the United States and other white-dominated countries who consider themselves either non- or anti-racist. Throughout the book, Sullivan argues that maintaining class biases between white communities is a central way in which middle-class white people evade responsibility for racism. Each chapter explores one way in which middle-class white people reinforce a false sense of their moral goodness: by blaming white trash for racism, by "othering" white slaveholders, by using colorblindness to distance themselves from race and racism altogether, and by cultivating guilt, shame, and betrayal with respect to their white identities. Sullivan's diagnosis of the problem of middle-class white anti-racism seems exactly right, but I find myself hesitant to accept all of her claims about the way forward. I want to focus on the significance of Sullivan's analysis to critical race and feminist theory, while raising worries about some of the particulars.

In chapter 1, "Dumping on White Trash," Sullivan explores the ways in which middle-class white people "other" white trash to exclude lower-class whites from proper whiteness. She points out that etiquette as a form of social control has helped maintain the divide between middle- and lower-class whites. In the Jim Crow era, etiquette functioned to keep whites and blacks "in their 'proper' place," and racial etiquette today remains "a key method for training each new generation of white people into whiteness" (29). White trash fail to live up to whiteness by being uneducated and stupid; unclean, loud and lazy; and they share too many forms of speech, behavior, diet, and lifestyle with black people. In Sullivan's terms: "Whether willfully or ignorantly, white trash fail to speak, eat, dress, and otherwise behave as proper (middle-class) white people are supposed to, and their breach of white social etiquette threatens the boundary between white and nonwhite (especially black) people" (30).

If Sullivan is right, then it seems that she has actually uncovered a contradiction in middle-class white people's beliefs. She sets out to show that middle-class white people blame white trash for racism, which includes the idea that white trash are to blame for thinking that they are *superior* to blacks. So white liberals are "good" in contrast to white trash because they believe in racial

equality. But if white trash are inferior to middle-class whites because they are *too similar to blacks*, then middle-class whites endorse the very belief that they claim to reject: that *truly* white people are superior to black people in their forms of speech, behavior, lifestyle, and so on. Sullivan's claim that the racism of middle-class white people is often unconscious helps explain how this contradiction goes unnoticed. White liberals often forcefully assert their conscious belief in racial equality, while their practice of othering white trash reveals that they hold unconscious beliefs about racial inequality that underlie how they perceive white trash and people of color.

Sullivan demonstrates the complexity of the relationship between whiteness and class further. She points out that one might think that the tendency of middle-class whites to distance themselves from white trash in attempts to maintain proper whiteness suggests that whiteness is what matters most to middle-class whites "and thus that their class status merely is an interchangeable means toward that end" (39). Or, one might think that the tendency of middle-class whites to distance themselves *less* from middle-class blacks than from poor whites suggests that race is reducible to class. But Sullivan rejects this kind of reduction. She states: "Class differences within the group of white people make a meaningful difference to their race, and this is a constitutive, not an additive difference" (39). This observation echoes those of many intersectional feminists who have criticized additive analyses of different axes of social difference. Although Sullivan does not situate this book within intersectional discourse, her analysis adds something novel: the idea that a white person's being poor does not mean that he is at the intersection of class oppression and white privilege; but rather, his class oppression *changes the meaning of his whiteness*.

In chapter 2, "Demonizing White Ancestors," Sullivan challenges the idea that white slaveholders were demonic, evil, and fundamentally different from good white liberals. I should admit that I find Sullivan's psychoanalytic approach in this chapter challenging, but she plausibly argues that racial and racist messages have been passed on to white people from white ancestors, including the practice of othering people they perceive as different. White people today do not only "other" people of color (and white trash), but also white slaveholders whom they consider evil and inhuman. Sullivan argues that this perception of white slaveholders "replicates the very patterns of white racism that the repudiation of white slaveholders is meant to challenge" and works to absolve white people of their connection to white domination (66).

Sullivan's solution is for white people to retranslate the enigmatic messages white slaveholders passed on so that they can come to make sense of white slaveholders' actions and come to see them as fallible persons. For example, by understanding how white slaveholders' rationalization for slavery was grounded in (however misguided) family values and a concern for lower-class whites, white people can learn something important from white slaveholders: that "the free labor industrial system blossoming in the North exploited and oppressed the white working class" (79). Sullivan argues that retranslating white slaveholders' actions in this way opens up the possibility for what Cheshire Calhoun calls "aspirational forgiveness." This kind of forgiveness takes place "when we are able to focus sympathetically on something other than moral culpability . . . it occurs, as Calhoun explains, when we choose 'to place respecting another's way of making sense of her life before resentfully enforcing moral standards'" (76). Sullivan references Obama's forgiveness of his grandmother for her racism as an example of aspirational forgiveness, where

he came to focus on the positive role his grandmother played in his life. She argues, "while Obama is not white, his relationship with his grandmother illustrates the aspirational forgiveness for which white people can and need to strive" (82).

But it is important to acknowledge Obama's race in thinking through this example. Obama's being black gives him standing to forgive white people for racism (at least certain forms of racism), and it is not clear how white people could have standing to forgive white slaveholders for harms that were not done to them. There are further complexities as well: Obama might *not* have standing to forgive forms of racism that uniquely target black *women*. What's more, there is a lot at stake in advocating forgiveness. Forgiveness is not just the way I think and feel about some past event, but also a moral and often political message that communicates that one has come to terms with and is moving on from an injustice. Sullivan has not offered reasons for thinking that white people have the standing to decide when they get to come to terms with and move on from slavery.

I also do not think that forgiveness is needed to achieve Sullivan's ultimate aim, which is for middle-class white people to reconceive white slaveholders as fallible persons so they can see how they, too, participate in racism for which they must take responsibility. *Good White People* came out two months before Sue Campbell's *Our Faithfulness to the Past*, but Campbell's insights are strikingly relevant to Sullivan's argument in this chapter (see Campbell 2014). On Campbell's view, individuals who are members of groups responsible for serious harms can identify with them through a kind of "resistant identification," that is, "identification with a collective history with which one disapproves" (115). She draws upon Genevieve Lloyd's "Individuals, Responsibility, and the Philosophical Imagination" to show how *through* taking responsibility, we enter into emotional relations with groups to which we belong that are responsible for serious harms, and these emotional relations help constitute our identifications with them as well as our own identities.

But our emotional relations need not include sympathy. Campbell draws upon Minnie Bruce Pratt's narrative in "Identity: Skin, Blood, Heart" to show that Pratt's taking responsibility for racism does not "display bonds of sympathetic identification" (128). Pratt is fearful of those outside her "narrow circle" and comes to realize that her own emotional life and identity have been shaped by the exclusion of others in a racial hierarchy. Campbell argues that, in describing herself as her "father's daughter in the present" and her "commitment to 'honor the grief of his life' by striving to change much of what he believed in," Pratt takes responsibility not by sympathetically identifying with her father and other white racists, but by making herself "answerable for the ways she has been shaped" (131). I would be interested to know what Sullivan might say about resistant identification as an alternative way in which white people can identify with white ancestors.

In chapter 3, "The Disease of Colorblindness," Sullivan argues that colorblindness as an approach to educating white children reinforces racism. Drawing upon psychological literature, she offers concrete examples to show that young children pick up on race very early. In one, a four-year-old white girl named Renee was pulling two other girls in a wagon, including a three-year-old Asian girl named Lingmai. When Renee got tired of pulling the wagon and Lingmai offered to take her place, Renee said that, "she could not do so because only white Americans are

allowed to pull the wagon" (94). This example, among others Sullivan offers, suggests that children may not be racially innocent. By using colorblindness as an approach to education, which ignores rather than addresses race, white people fail to prevent children from developing racist habits. Sullivan argues in favor of an alternative approach that includes directly confronting race and racism with children. For example, in a classroom and parenting context, she argues that we need to replace "cultural tourism," which depoliticizes race and reinforces the perception of white people as race-less, toward a "critical multiculturalism" that confronts power and white domination (98).

All of the examples Sullivan draws upon to illustrate the ways in which colorblindness reinforces racism are illuminating, and together they convincingly show that white people really should give up on colorblindness as an approach to children's education. Sullivan even uses personal examples to show how she came to recognize some of the class and race habits she learned growing up, and her willingness to expose her own mistakes in addressing class and race strengthen her call for white people to critically reflect on their racial habits. It made me reflect on my own childhood experience growing up in a small, almost exclusively white village in southwestern Ontario. I have memories of learning about good white Canadians' attempts to "civilize" indigenous Canadians into Western culture in high school history. But beyond that memory--one that distorts history--I was not confronted with questions about race until my undergraduate studies. I think that we should fully embrace Sullivan's call for white people to confront race and racism with children.

In the final chapter, "The Dangers of White Guilt, Shame, and Betrayal," Sullivan argues that white people should replace with self-love their feelings of guilt, shame, and betrayal with respect to their white identities. She builds on her 2012 "On the Need for a New *Ethos* of White Antiracism" to show that negative affects contribute to white people's ill racial health, leaving them weak and powerless and thus incapable of making positive contributions to racial justice. Sullivan also makes the important observation that these emotions are not socially and politically neutral. She draws upon educational theorist John Preston's work to argue that white guilt and shame are predominantly emotions that middle-class people feel. For example, white working-class students generally do not feel guilty or ashamed about being white because "[they] often have to monitor their selves in ways that preclude emotional expressions" to maintain their rightful membership in the classroom (137-38). Sullivan suggests that, since white guilt and shame do not help lower-class whites gain symbolic capital in their communities, promoting white guilt and shame deflects racism onto lower-class white people who don't experience these emotions.

The argument that white guilt and shame are raced and classed moves quickly, and could benefit from more examples and discussion. Sullivan, too, acknowledges that philosophers need to think more about the ways in which emotions can be raced and classed (and gendered) as well as "how race and class intersect with gendered emotional expectations and demands" (136). This section of the book is a good starting point for these discussions, and will be an important read for feminist philosophers interested in exploring connections between the philosophy of the emotions and intersectionality.

As for the way forward, Sullivan argues that white people should cultivate self-love. I found this part of her argument to be the most difficult to accept. Sullivan describes the kind of self-love she favors in a number of ways. For example, it is an "affect that binds a person to that which she loves" (9); a love that does not desire to be burdened with negative affects; a love that is "suspiciously selfless" inasmuch as love in order to benefit oneself is a means to the ultimate goal of benefiting others (125); and a love that is accepting of one's white identity and that exercises and strengthens positive affects regarding race and thus allows individuals to digest instead of resentfully stew over, avoid, or deflect their roles in racist institutions and histories. It is not an uncritical feeling better about oneself (and feeling happy or good is not necessary to positive affects, on Sullivan's view); rather, the call for self-love is "a call for [white people] to nourish their positive affects with regard to whiteness so that a different kind of political and interpersonal action on their part will be possible" (148).

I want to emphasize that I do not have the space to do justice to Sullivan's argument in favor of self-love. It is complex and surprisingly persuasive. But I found myself wondering: what exactly *is* love on Sullivan's account? She provides through her descriptions a clear picture of the function or power of self-love in racial justice movements. But I am not clear on what love is. What's more, I wonder: How can I love my whiteness when it is *not yet transformed* into something worthy of love? These questions may stem from my own difficulty as a "good white person" with moving beyond the dominant moral discourse on racism, but I suspect that this is a difficulty many readers will face in reading Sullivan's insights on white self-love.

Good White People is undoubtedly a major contribution to critical race and feminist theory. It is also a major resource for white people more generally, especially white people who want to be allies with people of color in racial justice movements and white parents and teachers who want to know how to talk about race with children. Sullivan directly challenges the feelings of paralysis that many white people feel when we think about our complicity in racism, showing us ways forward that call for our agency. It is well worth reading.

References

Campbell, Sue. 2014. Remembering who we are: responsibility and resistant identification. In *Our faithfulness to the past: The ethics and politics of memory*, ed. Christine M. Koggel and Rockney Jacobsen. New York: Oxford University Press.