

*The Racialized Reader***The Reader as Historical Subject**

At the end of the title essay from the collection *Nobody Knows My Name*, James Baldwin delivers his verdict on Americans' unwillingness to address the country's racial history: "What it comes to, finally, is that the nation has spent a large part of its time and energy looking away from one of the principal facts of its life."¹ Baldwin's claim that Americans have expended considerable effort in "looking away from" the racial facts of American life – the Scottsboro case of nine black teens wrongfully convicted of rape in 1931; targeted attacks on returning post-WW2 black servicemen; intense white reaction to school desegregation in 1954 – suggests not only a habit of conscious avoidance, but also the studied erasure of a history of black persons so that "Nobody Knows My Name." Baldwin's critique of denial has broad cultural relevance and is uniquely pertinent to the kinds of looking away in traditional Shakespeare criticism that effectively negate a black presence. Embarking on a journey through the South in the late 1950s, Baldwin hoped to confront this invalidating American experience that consigned him to social death as both author and black man. While Baldwin's authorial identity is not in doubt, as the essay's title reasons about his deftly stated racial isolation, the racial identity of the negligent observer as reader who insists on looking away occupies an important place in the theater of cultural spectacle. We are rightfully sensitive to the racial deletion of the ignored in the dialectic of looking away; we must be equally vigilant in accounting for the negligent onlooker as racialized reader to offset the critical fate of invisibility or disappearance. In conceiving the racial import of such a reader in the equation of looking away, criticism has been woefully negligent.

In 1968, only nine years after Baldwin's essay appeared, Roland Barthes published his seminal "The Death of the Author" in which, I argue, the

racial erasure or death of the reader constitutes a compelling blind spot. Barthes maintains that textual interpretation must not rely on authorial biography, leading him famously to declare the “death of the Author” for whom writing is that “obliquity into which our subject flees, the black-and-white where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes.”² A similar fate of disappearance has befallen the reader in modern criticism, which has often collapsed the distinction between the reader and reading, reader-reception theory notwithstanding. Where Barthes’s author cedes ground to textuality, a hallmark of poststructuralism, the reader in criticism has been subsumed into the seemingly abstract, autonomous activity of reading in ways that have quietly eroded the singularity and significance of the historically situated reading subject. Today, theories of early modern and contemporary reading betray this common tendency to conflate the reader and reading, resulting in the near nullification of the reader as a consequential historical presence.

Barthes insists, nevertheless, that the reader, unlike the author, determines textual meaning, that “the unity of a text is not in its origin but its destination.” Still, for Barthes, such a “reader is a man without history, without biography, without psychology; he is only that *someone* who holds collected into one and the same field all of the traces from which writing is constituted.”³ Barthes’s reader is a history-less subject and, specifically, an unraced interpretant whose “identity of the body,” in his suggestive but race-blind formulation, is supremely negligible. On the contrary, my interest resides precisely in a reader–critic situated and formed by a history of structural systems ranging from the slave economy and its social legacies to congressional legislation about immigration and racialized citizenship in the United States. This chapter not only addresses the missing racialized white reader within existing scholarship, but also sets out the historical and cultural parameters of that reader’s formation and the environments that have fostered racial denial and elicited racial distortion.

Theories of Early Modern Reading

To define more clearly the stakes of the theory of the racialized reader I propose, I will consider two important approaches as points of differentiation and emphasis: critics on early modern reading, dedicated to retrieving the lost reader, and, in the next section, recent debates on interpretation relative to the notion of the text’s hidden meaning. Theories of early modern reading have been influenced by historicist

theories and methods but pursued in ways very different from the theory I propose.⁴ The revolutionary turn to history in early modern studies, in the last two decades of the twentieth century, encapsulated a flashpoint that proves instructive. Stated briefly, humanism, long the bedrock of early modern studies, was critiqued for its universal and essentialist standpoint by scholars with historicist, cultural materialist, and neo-Marxist views who, despite some differences among them, placed a greater emphasis on “specific discourses and social processes” in constructions of the self.⁵ Humanism’s continuing universal appeal, writes Zeus Leonardo, “is quickly betrayed when, upon deconstruction, human experience appears cultural or racial (usually Eurocentric or White), and not universal.”⁶ Questions of race were largely ignored, however, by literary scholars engrossed in the particular late twentieth-century debate that worried about how to conceive of the human. In Jean E. Howard’s characterization of the constructionist view at the height of the historicist debates, “nothing exists before the human subject is *created* by history.”⁷ Howard’s critical assessment is correct, of course, but it sets up the following unaddressed question among scholars of the time: what about the racialized human created *in* history? The response relative to reading specifically produced a full body of work that, in effect, pursued business as usual. That is, despite the overt rejection of the universal human subject, the universal white subject was left firmly in place.

Evelyn Tribble notes that, beginning in the 1980s, scholars “increasingly located texts within the material conditions of early modern England, seeing writers as not transcending these conditions but complicatedly embedded within them.”⁸ In a highly influential essay, Robert Darnton describes the social life cycle of books as a “communications circuit” of production, circulation, and consumption running “from the author to the publisher (if the bookseller does not assume that role), the printer, the shipper, the bookseller, and the reader.”⁹ Such a focus on the material history of the book inspired interest in library inventories, customized bindings, the dynamics of the printed page, commonplace books, marginal notations, and, more generally, book use, to employ William Sherman’s formulation, that implies multiple forms of human interaction with books that included reading.¹⁰ One of the most concentrated areas of scholarship involved the reconstruction of a putative reader from the fragmentary evidence and material traces of the book’s social life. Marginal comments, textual corrections, scribbled annotations, and various jottings as found in Shakespeare’s First Folio, for example, constitute a record of writerly use from which human interaction and readerly activity might be intuited.¹¹

After more than three decades of these developments, Stephen Orgel, in his recent *The Reader in the Book*, can still speak of the “reading revolution” that follows from the evidence left by readers in early modern texts. This is a revolution “which has involved noticing what has been unnoticeable and finding evidence in the hitherto irrelevant; so that habits of reading, manifested in various marks and marginalia, have become as central to the nature of the book as format and typography, watermarks and chain lines.”¹²

Jennifer Richards and Fred Schurink observe that Darnton challenged reader-response critics like Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss on the grounds that “what they proposed was a theory of reading not a history.”¹³ Iser, following Georges Poulet, excluded the “life-story of the author” as well as the “individual disposition of the reader” from his reading formula.¹⁴ “Disposition,” when taken to mean more than a unique psychological constitution and emotional temperament, can be rehabilitated to refer to the tendencies and learned intellectual habits that are shared among significant swaths of a culture. I build on the historicizing impulse, broadly speaking, with a distinctly different focus on modern readers, whether students, theater practitioners, or most often, scholars producing criticism, who maintain or recreate the field of Shakespeare studies. Where Tribble speaks of the contextually determining “material conditions of early modern England,” I turn to the material conditions of race that have constitutionally altered our cultural disposition, and become the defining feature of modernity, to consider its significance for readers. Despite the impact of the material approach to theories of reading, I forego its indebtedness to the infrastructure of book history to address the modern reader in history more pointedly.

Trying to reconstruct individual early modern readers from fragmentary material evidence constitutes a return to the project of white invisibility, despite scholars’ laudable efforts, and defers, seemingly endlessly, any serious discussion about the racial identity of the contemporary scholar–reader. Instead of searching for ghostly human traces in the scribbles or cup stains on book pages, I am invested in understanding the motives of modern readers for whom the heritage of whiteness requires a transformative commitment to a racial ethics in our scholarship. In contrast to Orgel, who decodes readerly presences in books through “noticing what has been unnoticeable and finding evidence in the hitherto irrelevant,” I am more focused on what prevents readers from seeing in Shakespeare’s texts the “unnoticeable” or “hitherto irrelevant” racial signs that are anything but insignificant. These signs are often “unnoticeable,”

this book argues, because of the modern mental and social disposition of whiteness to not see or read race, and this tendency toward denial is especially significant in reading Shakespeare, who has become an icon of culture, humanism, and a largely white reading industry. The persistent pattern of racial ellipses that ignores the white subject–reader has, as I have argued, diminished and unmoored theories of reading.

According to Leonardo, White humanism cannot be conceded as a generalized concept unrelated to actual persons: “Transforming an event into something ‘human’ when it is racial in nature has been a staple of White humanism’s inability to come to terms with people of color’s concrete experience.”¹⁵ Finally, therefore, this study posits that examining systemic whiteness, the political and epistemological driver of White humanism, reveals the intellectual and cognitive difficulty of white scholars and readers in navigating race, the traces of which are evident in the erasures and elisions of the scholarship produced. Shakespeare, as a major early modern figure, and one located centrally within literary humanism, must be scrutinized closely in terms of the glaring racial erasures perpetrated by a historically white-dominant critical tradition. Again, the question is: What about the racialized human created *in* history? One robust response came in the form of an emergent body of scholarship in early modern race studies that located race relative to blackness through various historicist approaches touching on religion, colonialism, networks of trade, forms of labor, language, gender, and sexuality.¹⁶ I propose an alternative, and complementary, inquiry concerning the racialized white reader who is influenced by the institutional prerogatives of the systemic whiteness that is the informing epistemological and political practice in United States history and culture.

Interpretation: Beyond Surface Reading

As I indicated earlier, reading in literary studies often connotes modes of interpretation separate from the actual reader engaged in the interpretive enterprise. Before turning directly to discuss systemic whiteness as an epistemological formation, I would like to examine “interpretation” and the recent debate it has generated. It is a debate that focuses on the practice of unlocking secrets in texts without sufficiently unpacking the idea of the reader–interpretant as a subject in history. Once again, we must confront the issue of racial ellipsis. Deidre Shauna Lynch and Evelyne Ender offer a description of reading on which many would agree: “the one thing reading almost always entails, after all, is an encounter between

a consciousness and a material object.”¹⁷ The authors, however, observe that historians of reading have consistently noted the methodological complexities that belie an assessment of an apparently straightforward activity. Recent discussion has centered on interpretation in contemporary literary and early modern criticism. According to Rita Felski, the debates around interpretation concern a particular mode of analysis, “a *thought style* that slices across differences of field and discipline,” whose intellectual reflex to search out hidden truths is epitomized in Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of suspicion.¹⁸ The main outlines of this current critique of interpretation are found in the 2009 article, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” by Sharon Best and Stephen Marcus. Interpretation as decoding hidden meaning, they argue, is superfluous in a media-saturated age that divests itself of secrets through overexposure. History wears its horrors and political projects openly on its sleeve, as represented in the articulate images of human torture at Abu Ghraib or the utter dispossession of African Americans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina left adrift by the state’s racial indifference and incompetence. As a result, Best and Marcus postulate a methodological shift toward “surface reading” that only requires description: “we take surface to mean what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding.” They conclude: “A surface is what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*.”¹⁹

Best and Marcus set out a project that challenges a dominant reading practice dating from the last quarter of the twentieth century among scholars “trained to equate reading with interpretation,” identified specifically with uncovering concealed, coded, or latent information.²⁰ Dubbed “symptomatic reading,” this particular “practice encompasses an interpretive method that argues that the most interesting aspect of a text is what it represses.”²¹ Notably, symptomatic reading singles out the critic as a heroic, unusually skilled, master decoder “who performs interpretive feats of demystification.”²² Admitting to their own earlier pleasures in this hunt for undisclosed material, Best and Marcus now eschew this particular investigatory pursuit, which they identify most closely with Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious* (1981). Jameson writes: “If everything were transparent, then no ideology would be possible, and no domination either; evidently that is not our case.”²³ In this passage, Jameson sets out the predicate of his reading practice, arguing that the uncovering of undisclosed meanings in texts equates to attempts to expose ideology and its political work in the name of freedom. Reading strategies that unearth covert content have, therefore, a wider, more far-reaching

social purpose than any narrowly defined, local act of textual encounter, committed as reading is in Jameson's view to a grand liberatory vision. By contrast, Best and Marcus admit a retrenchment in Jameson's aspirational politics and remain "skeptical about the very possibility of radical freedom and dubious that literature or its criticism can explain our oppression or provide the keys to our liberation."²⁴ Their assessment of the limited "revolutionary capacities of both texts and critics" within the university have resulted in the far more modest project of surface reading.²⁵ But when the political stakes are as high as they are today, given the destructive purposes to which race has increasingly been put, reading, literary studies, and the role of the critics engaged in the project of racial literacy seem urgently important and capacious once again.

Best and Marcus's intervention provoked a strong response. Critics appreciate the value placed on the close attention to texts in English literary studies, where teaching students to be better, more astute readers is a priority. Whether Best and Marcus focus on "surface reading,' 'slow reading,' 'close but not deep reading,'" writes Lisa Freeman approvingly, they have isolated and foregrounded a "renewed interest in an attentiveness to textual detail."²⁶ Still, Freeman notes that suspicion plays a valuable role in the archive; for example, eliciting greater self-awareness "both about what we see before us and about our own reading tendencies."²⁷ Elizabeth Weed welcomes the opportunity for reassessment, since "no critical practice can maintain its vitality without continually questioning its reading practices," even though she laments the authors' sense of political defeat and frustration.²⁸ And Crystal Bartolovich adds that the narrowly stated textual preoccupations of surface reading "mark a pointed withdrawal from politics."²⁹ In this political retreat, Jeffrey L. Williams sees "the shrunken expectations of academe, particularly of the humanities, and a decline in the social prestige of literary criticism."³⁰ Thus, the charge of "narrowness" and "blinkered vision" punctuate the criticism leveled at the overall project that displays an otherwise useful close attention to texts.³¹ The challenge presents itself: to maintain textual attentiveness without loss of political import, by proposing a notion of racial literacy that impinges on the most critical concerns facing our culture today.

Notably, Best and Marcus begin by interrogating the "we" in the title of the special issue in which their essay appears, "Reading 'The Way We Read Now.'" They describe a "relatively homogeneous group of scholars who received doctoral degrees in either English or comparative literature after 1983," who are trained in theory and fluent in symptomatic reading as the mainstay of interpretation.³² Acknowledging the constitution of the

readerly community is an indispensable and welcome point of departure. Now, decades later, in light of their disavowal of earlier theoretical persuasions and the adoption of surface reading, a glaring oversight of an even more influential commonality appears: the racial homogeneity of this corpus of critics whose academic formation they describe. This “we” that Best and Marcus attribute to educational preparation must be examined further to include among its defining features the systemic whiteness within which the vast majority of academics in early modern and Shakespeare studies operate. With this acknowledgment, a significant crack in the façade of surface reading appears when attention to describing fails to admit or even look *at* “evident, perceptible, apprehensible” signs of race.

When Best and Marcus claim that “A surface is what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*,” they echo Peter Stallybrass and Margreta de Grazia’s proposition for reading Shakespeare where stubborn material data – “old typefaces and spellings, irregular line and scene divisions, title pages and other paratextual matter” – demand to be “looked *at*, not seen *through*.”³³ I contend that these arguments express an egregious oversight by looking *past* the reader who is structurally impelled by the motives of white reading. For all the renewed skepticism about hidden or repressed content, the circumvention or occlusion of the white readerly identity from the equation of reading is a spectacular example of irony. The consistent refusal among critics to acknowledge whiteness as the indelible criterion of identity in the United States is a function of the purposeful strategies of systemic whiteness: pervasive, dominant, and the wielder of power, but not the *object* of discussion or conversation that, by definition, would subvert its agential status. Other identities are raced, but whiteness exists uncontained, describing but not described so that it eludes even Best and Marcus’s minimal descriptions of “we.” My use of the terminology of denial and repression is meant as a response to Best and Marcus’s objections, not an adoption of a psychoanalytic framework. I am, however, interested in how we read, by calling attention to the racial blind spots in criticism and the cognitive dodges employed as a consequence of systemic whiteness. Again, we recall Best and Marcus’s claim: “A surface is what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*.” They suggest, unfortunately, that looking *at* is a much less complex venture, requiring less training for the human reader conceived as recorder of data, and much less subject to the vagaries of human input and interpretation when, in fact, one of the central arguments of this book is that looking *at*,

especially when conditioned by race, is far from perfect, easy, or straightforward. In early modern studies, looking at, through the lens of race, is constrained by a history of ignoring race or seeing race from a jaundiced, biased perspective that leads to distortions in the critical visual field.

We can learn much from the authors' omission; their debate over interpretation constitutes a misinterpretation. First, surface reading is insufficient for the deep cultural and historical reading of race's somatic signs, bearing in mind that words, too, have a somatic racial expression. Racialized skin color, rooted in the obvious properties of surface matter, is treated, following Best and Marcus's logic, as if it is an unimportant or nonexistent historical sign when race, by definition, is a function of interpretation: the symptomatic, culture-specific interpretation of bodily signs. Let us also bear in mind Alexander Weheliye's definition of race "as a set of sociopolitical processes of differentiation and hierarchization, which are projected onto the putatively biological human body," whose materiality is required reading of the kind abjured by these critics.³⁴ If the reader deserves to be read, as the authors concede, then the analog of skin color to surface signs suggests the necessary disclosure and unearthing of the historical and cultural forces that constitute whiteness in American culture and shape the epistemological habits that inform our reading. The necessary and unavoidable conjunction of race and symptomatic reading posits a return to the political pertinence of literary criticism and a reaffirmation of its relevance in our time, when the urgency of history calls for a reckoning, and the academy, especially the humanities, can marshal its considerable intellectual resources in eloquent response. If symptomatic reading boasts the heroic reader, we must all be heroic in our collective efforts to recognize race, its historical reality, and deep interference in our scholarly identities and practices as a point of transformative departure.

Second, the authors' extraordinary claim of textual transparency ignores the definition stated earlier: reading as "an encounter between a consciousness and a material object," where that embodied consciousness, imprinted, constrained, and defined by the institutional imperatives of systemic whiteness, is excluded from the reading equation. Accounting for a white reading subject, therefore, leads to the following recognition: that the epistemological training (as opposed to only the educational one discussed by Best and Marcus) in cultural whiteness creates a *textual product* that is not to be confused with the text itself as a dense linguistic entity. We are, by now, used to the idea of multiple versions of a Shakespeare text due to editorial interventions of recent decades.

Similarly, the textual product of white reading, different from the actual printed words and text, connotes multiple textual variants and versions whose editorial criteria are guided by omissions, obfuscations, and oversights whose purpose is to maintain fidelity to principles of institutional whiteness and the project of racial erasure. Systemic whiteness has coopted the notion of textual and critical production and transformed – one might even say disfigured – what the very notion of reading (whether surface or deep) means.

Systemic Whiteness and Racial Formation

In the absence of a theory of a racialized reader, therefore, I attend here to the role of the cultural and racial formation of the reading subject that produces a specific mental conditioning and praxis. I build on Michael Omi and Howard Winant's definition of "*racial formation* as the socio-historical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" to foreground the epistemological effects of such a "sociohistorical process."³⁵ For this theory of reading, I cite the concept of pragmatics to underscore my understanding of reading, which incorporates not only the reader's interaction with the text, but also the cultural formation of the reader and its effect on the reading event.³⁶ If, according to Iser, texts have a repertoire, that is, the contexts and histories that inform them, I emphasize here a contextual and historical repertoire of the reader – its cultural and cognitive sources, influences, and authorizing master narratives – that in the United States is grounded in systemic whiteness.³⁷ Modeled on the institutional formation that produces the chronic inequalities of structural racism, systemic whiteness is inversely proportional in securing the institutional privileges created for whites in a white-dominant society.³⁸ Systemic whiteness is rooted in history and deeply invested in the conscious and deliberate tactics that have been deployed in securing a white-dominant framework within which United States culture operates to sustain subjects' position as white. It is a term that speaks to the cultural location of subjects shaped and informed by a history of institutional dictates and practices that have codified the nation's episteme since its founding. As a result, in a reading event, like any other social activity or practice, the cultural and epistemological formation of systematic whiteness functions as an active agent that influences how we read.

Omi and Winant describe the history of the United States as largely a "*racial dictatorship*."³⁹ Beginning in 1607 with the founding of

Jamestown, this racial dictatorship carried through independence from Britain to the end of the Civil War in 1865 and up to the present. Despite notations of physical difference among groups of people in the Bible or Herodotus, these authors argue that the modern idea of race began with the rise of Europe and the prosecution of conquest in the New World, that is, from the age of Shakespeare and beyond. The racial project of conquest, subjugation, and seizure initiated a history of white rule in the United States that was legitimized in its institutions and exercised with seeming impunity in every human sphere. This includes the racial hierarchization of legalized black slavery and the instauration of white supremacy; congressional declaration of white citizenship beginning in the eighteenth century; governmental manipulation of the census; exclusive immigration policies, especially since the nineteenth century; the collapse of Reconstruction and the rise of Jim Crow; racially targeted, restrictive voting rights laws; and persistent, authorized social discrimination up to the present in the judicial system, housing and labor markets, the military, and education.⁴⁰ Racial dictatorship in the United States has had three main consequences: it established whiteness as *the* defining American identity; authorized social organization along a color-line; and consolidated racial identities, such as “black,” pursuant to the politics of slavery and marronage.⁴¹

Although historians understand that “racial disparities are older than the life of the United States,” the entanglement of the nation’s origins with the enslavement of Africans has left an attitudinal imprint on its character and a legacy of structural inequality.⁴² The contradictions of Thomas Jefferson, founding father and proponent of freedom while a slaveholder, distill into a representative figure the hypocrisies of a nation that blindly ignored the burden of racial exclusion from its aspiration of inalienable right to liberty.⁴³ Ibram X. Kendi records the opposition of Jefferson Davis, the future president of the Confederacy, to a bill intended to fund black education in 1860: “‘This Government was not founded by negroes nor for negroes,’ but ‘by white men for white men.’” For Davis, the bill’s flawed intent was doomed because the essential “‘inequality of the black and white races’ was ‘stamped from the beginning.’”⁴⁴ Douglas Blackmon’s account of exploited human labor by big American companies after Emancipation up to the post-World War II period illustrates the persistent pattern of inhumanity surrendered to profiteering. The trove of records of the sale and re-sale of free men who had committed no crime, their physical coercion, and uncompensated work in “mines, lumber camps, quarries, farms, and factories,” supplies a harrowing tale of the lurid re-investment in the practices of “slavery by another name.”⁴⁵ Blackmon’s documentation also highlights the ruse that

would help perpetuate the vulnerability of blacks to the justice system: “the capture and imprisonment of thousands of random indigent citizens, almost always under the thinnest chimera of probable cause or judicial process.”⁴⁶ Confirming the extensive institutional legacy of blackness and criminality, Michelle Alexander argues that the United States criminal justice system incarcerates people of color disproportionately, stigmatizes them through felony labeling, deprives them of certain civil rights upon release, and, in effect, creates a caste system that continues to reproduce racial hierarchies and legitimize discrimination in education, jobs, and housing in the twenty-first century iteration of the New Jim Crow.⁴⁷

As a result of this chronic discriminatory pattern, Ta-Nehisi Coates argues, “white supremacy is not merely the work of hotheaded demagogues, or a matter of false consciousness, but a force so fundamental to America that it is difficult to imagine the country without it.”⁴⁸ White supremacy is, in short, the shaping force of the reader’s repertoire, and congressional legislation has played a substantive part in sustaining white supremacy in the United States. In the year following the ratification of the US Constitution, the Congress of 1790 declared “that all free white persons,” who met specific residency requirements, “shall be entitled to the rights of citizenship.”⁴⁹ Although congressional leaders debated the requisite period of residency, the eligibility of Catholics and Jews, or foreign persons’ rights to land ownership and inheritance, for example, the congruency of race and citizenship was already so ingrained that the criterion of whiteness was never questioned. In fact, Matthew Frye Jacobson observes, “the nation’s first legislators saw the law as too inclusive rather than too exclusive, and nowhere did they pause to question the limitations of naturalized citizenship to ‘white persons.’”⁵⁰ Across the legislative spectrum of the early colonies the racial designation “white” was enjoined to the practical work of citizens who could affirm civility against the barbarous “savages,” propound Christian virtues, and help suppress slave rebellions or prosecute the Indian wars. The result was the creation of a public ideology of belonging and fitness to share in the republican virtue of self-government. Thus, Jacobson writes, “the word ‘white’ did attain wide usage in New World political discourse, and it was written into an immense body of statutory law” to grant vast amounts of social and legal privilege and never to curtail them, the exception being marital proscriptions to ensure the purity of the white race.⁵¹ South Carolina law declared that state’s restriction of the franchise to “a free white male,” and in similar fashion in 1777, Georgia limited the right to vote to “all male white inhabitants.”⁵² By the time of the 1790

Naturalization Act, therefore, the legal enshrinement of white citizenship expressed widely held views about white male supremacy and competency in the work of self-government, cultural ownership, and national identity.⁵³

For a country increasingly populated by immigrants, after aggressive indigenous displacement and removal, the project of immigrant gatekeeping tells the story of concerted white maintenance. Over the following century, debates about what it meant to be an American accelerated, in response to waves of immigration during the 1800s, and mounting restrictionism led Congress to take action, notably in the period between 1890 and the 1920s. The Dillingham Commission was established by Congress in 1907 to study and produce a report on this decades-long influx of immigrants relative to the degree of their assimilation, loyalty to their new country, and their degenerative impact on the American economy and culture. The forty-one volume Dillingham Commission report, published in 1911, drew a firm distinction between old immigrants, from northwestern Europe (England, France, Germany), and new immigrants, from southeastern Europe (Italians, Armenians, Poles). The report concluded that new immigrants were less likely to assimilate to American culture, values, and habits and recommended a literacy test that was adopted for exclusionary purposes in the 1917 Immigration Act. Desmond King remarks that the Commission's explicit focus on new European immigrants "reinforced the political marginality of African Americans: conducting the debate in terms exclusively of white immigrants emphasized a vision of the United States' identity as a white one."⁵⁴ Despite centuries of residency in America, African Americans were discounted when the "criteria of assimilability" were favorably identified with "Anglo-Saxon Americanism, which was white."⁵⁵ Importantly, the report, by relying on the work of anthropologist Franz Boas, gave unintended credence to the proponents of eugenics who wanted immigration policy to be based on their radical theories of racial management.⁵⁶ They got their wish in the Johnson–Reed Immigration Act of 1924, whose reliance on eugenic theories was cited as a model for the horrific experimental work in 1930s Germany.⁵⁷ The exclusion of "the descendants of slave immigrants" from the 1929 national origins legislation reconfirmed a sustained and closely held American identity as white.⁵⁸

Although class, wealth, and education allowed for differentiation among whites, over time ethnic whiteness gave way to a racial whiteness that, in turn, was consolidated and mobilized against black social advancement.⁵⁹ In the antebellum era, arriving Irish immigrants lived and worked

alongside free blacks, and “it was speculated,” writes Noel Ignatiev, “that if racial amalgamation was ever to take place it would begin between these two groups.”⁶⁰ The strategy of associating new immigrants with blacks would lead to a disassociation *from* blacks once the opportunities for white entry and acceptance presented itself. Already evident in the failed aftermath of Bacon’s Rebellion of 1676, which united “slaves, indentured servants, and poor whites in a revolutionary effort to overthrow the planter elite,” Alexander argues persuasively that a “racial bribe” was also instrumental in the defeat of Reconstruction and the rise of Jim Crow; the promise to whites of all classes of distance from the taint of black slavery and its persistent legacy was an effective political lure.⁶¹ Union support for the dignity of work enabled European ethnic white assimilation while aggressive anti-black exclusion was enforced, in some instances, by white youth gangs.⁶² This production of a white racial supremacy, the result of a deliberate blending and moderating of diverse European ethnics into American whiteness, holds powerful cultural sway in its reward system that continues to bar black legitimacy in maintaining the exclusivity of racial rank. Where debates around assimilation became central to the Dillingham Commission inquiry, highlighting the anxieties about outsiders and the degeneration of the texture of the American polity, strategies to facilitate shared whiteness were already serving as a cultural glue that mitigated any perceived erosion of American identity. Using the descriptive title *Working Towards Whiteness*, David R. Roediger posits the successful culmination of decades-long efforts of white ethnic inclusion at the end of World War II.⁶³

The congressional and public debates about immigration have focused on an idea of a white nation whose existence is defensively predicated on posing the perennial question: “Who is an American?” Deeply interwoven in the institutional fabric of the nation, whiteness is not incidental or occasional, but structural; systemic whiteness is the intentional product of the racial disparities inherent in and generated by the nation’s institutions. Not simply the idiosyncratic or unique identity of a single individual, but the product of fundamental social structures, whiteness establishes a group mandate, bears the imprimatur of institutional authority, and is gifted the social levers of power and privilege. In the United States, whiteness is the feature of the social system shaped and regulated by its institutions and affiliates. The nation’s informing political framework of racial dictatorship suggests that systemic whiteness is always engaged in projects of power and self-normalization – that is, inventing self-serving norms that are the product of *mis*interpreting history.

My attempt to define the structures and practices of systematic whiteness as a product of history bears comparison to Bourdieu's habitus, or other similar constructionist theories of culture that, nevertheless, neglect race. According to Bourdieu, as subjects we inhabit homogenous environments whose social dynamics are informed by and reproduce seemingly common-sense ideas formed over time, or what he describes as "history turned into nature."⁶⁴ We are immanent bearers of an entire social and institutional history whose unguarded, improvisational acts reflect and reveal that social education. Bourdieu's theory relies on the "unconscious" dimension of the institutional acculturation and education of agents acquired through repetition over time: "The 'unconscious' is never anything other than the forgetting of history," a normalization that induces repeated, unreflective action.⁶⁵ Again he writes: "It is because subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know. The habitus mediates an individual agent's cultural practices, without either explicit reason or signifying intent, to be none the less 'sensible' and 'reasonable.'"⁶⁶ As such, a reader is engaged in an everyday cultural practice whose racial habitus is the subject of exploration.

Indeed, reading and acting within the constraints of systemic whiteness have powerful effects so routinized over the years that one assumes a recognizable, familiar, natural order of things that resonates as just and "reasonable" within a chosen environment such as academia. But to not challenge this version of the "unconscious" behavior is to let "reasonable" – because they have always been justified – defenders of white supremacist positions off the hook without any demand for accountability to themselves and society. I would emphasize, further, that in my reading, this idea of the "unconscious" is more akin to taking things for granted, or, when confronted, denying the already politicized status quo rather than an assertion that one can never have access to the knowledge and awareness about the operations of systematic whiteness – otherwise what would be the practical value of reflective education, the consciousness-raising of social protest, or engaged work for policy change? The passivity of the reader, to build on de Certeau's critique, whose reading activity is subjected to *racial* determinations or strategies, and not merely class, must be resisted by way of a series of tactical maneuvers that will allow for agency in the act of reading.⁶⁷

White Reading as Distortion

One of the conventional difficulties arising from discussing reading resides in the seeming impossibility of grappling with the individual experiences of

any number of persons, but the notion of systemic or structural whiteness allows for a collective account of readers reading. A mechanism is required by which a sufficiently compelling and real commonality among vast numbers of readers can be attested. Systemic whiteness embedded in the nation's origins, practices, institutions, and routines of daily life is such an analytical mechanism. In his use of the phrase "white culture," John Hartigan supports the quest for an inclusive, analytical approach to understanding cultural formation, arguing that the breadth implied by the word "culture" "establishes a register apart from individual identity."⁶⁸ As critics have observed, varieties exist within the broad racial category of whiteness because of education, wealth, class, and geographic region, of which we must be mindful.⁶⁹ And while the inclusive approach might appear "homogenizing," whiteness in the immigrant society of United States is the historic product of the homogenizing tendencies of cultural assimilation.⁷⁰ Thus, the question remains: What are the consequences for reading that follow from whiteness' shared, inclusive, and systemic effects? Whiteness, as "a set of institutional routines and 'white cultural practices'" consistently provides and ensures privileged material access across an array of social experiences like access to home financing, the funding of freeway projects, placements of dumps, and political campaign priorities. As a result, Hartigan argues, "whites benefit from being white whether or not, as individuals, they hold supremacist notions, harbor racist sentiments, or are made anxious by the physical presence of people of color." In a manner consistent with Bourdieu's theory of the "unconscious" function of the habitus, I would argue, Hartigan reiterates "the material relations and social structures that reproduce white privilege and racism in this country, quite apart from what individuals feel, think, and perceive."⁷¹ Hartigan's primary concern with whites' access to material privileges leads him to identify a principle pertinent to the extra-individual analysis that a concept like systematic whiteness employs where readers, engaged in an explicitly social activity, might not even be conscious in the moment of their dependence on protocols and provisions of whiteness that pervade their everyday lives. Germane to systemic whiteness, therefore, are material, social, and epistemological privileges constantly available for those who qualify.

The individual becomes so enmeshed within structural whiteness that one might not always be aware of the operational forces and processes that are designed to produce white supremacist outcomes, yet the racial logic – one might say *illogic* – of systemic whiteness constantly plagues the individual. According to Charles W. Mills in *The Racial Contract*,

understanding epistemology in a racial context requires acknowledging divergent realities, one actual and the other race-dependent, that is, built on retrofitting empirical, objective reality to its own particular purpose.⁷² This reality-bending construct is the fantasy of whiteness projected onto the world to impose a self-serving order and vision of power that must distort truth, as in the baseless Enlightenment declarations of the natural superiority of whites that justified colonial exploitation and black enslavement. Traditional social agreements about what “counts as moral and factual knowledge of the world” are disrupted by a racial contract, as Mills describes it, committed to the peculiar demands of a racial order that relies on misinformation to distort lived reality and substitute an idealized alternative that selectively celebrates and validates everything white.⁷³ This “invented delusional world, a racial fantasyland, a ‘consensual hallucination’” required by the racial contract has consequential material effects.⁷⁴

The conscious and deliberate strategies employed for centuries to ensure normative white dominance have remained the untold story of Western political thought. “So here, it could be said,” Mills writes of what is, in effect, a white epistemology, “one has an agreement to *misinterpret* the world. One has to learn to see the world wrongly, but with the assurance that this set of mistaken perceptions will be validated by white epistemic authority, whether religious or secular.”⁷⁵ Systemic whiteness, which is the institutional validation of whiteness as officially sanctioned, not only entails histories and legacies of power, discrimination, and injustice, but is also invested in the kind of epistemological distortion that affects how we process information and read: “One could say then, as a general rule, that *white misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception on matters related to race* are among the most pervasive mental phenomena of the past few hundred years.”⁷⁶ Central to the project of *Black Shakespeare* is the calling out of a white epistemology that *misinterprets* Shakespeare’s investment in blackness and race along with the other reorienting adjustments that we are constantly compelled to make in order to render whiteness reasonable, true, and right. This study takes seriously Mills’s thesis concerning the way a white epistemology bends and misrepresents race-specific reality to serve its particular purposes and extends the argument to a theory of reading. The book maintains as a central proposition that the epistemology of systemic whiteness reimagines and distorts a text through the operational principles of elision, erasure, and avoidance. History, too, is distorted, and its role in white epistemological formation is constantly under pressure of

*mis*interpretation and forgetting, a looking away that vitiates race's thick, symptomatic formation. Whiteness's need to deliberately *mis*read reality is consequential for Shakespeare especially, considering the function of his work as a bulwark of White humanism and as a space for the free rein and implantation – with all of the term's colonizing implications – of the White imaginary.

Notes

- 1 James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961) (New York: Vintage, 1993), 116.
- 2 Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *The Rustle of Language*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1986), 55, 49.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 54.
- 4 Edith Snook, "Recent Studies in Early Modern Reading," *English Literary Renaissance* 43.2 (2013): 343–378 (370): "The field is, unsurprisingly, dominated by historicist approaches and includes the work of both literary scholars and historians who examine representations of reading in literature and investigate the archive of reading's records."
- 5 Jean E. Howard, "The New Historicism in Renaissance Studies," *English Literary Renaissance* 16.1 (1986): 13–43 (20). Howard provides a substantial account of the key inaugural texts that represent this turn to history (13.n1). The debate is crystallized in several texts, including Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology, and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, eds., *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); and the later response by Robin Headlam Wells, *Shakespeare's Humanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- 6 Zeus Leonardo, "Through the Multicultural Glass: Althusser, Ideology, and Race Relations in Post-Civil Rights America," *Policy Futures in Education* 3.4 (2005): 400–412 (405). Similar concerns about the racial complexities of liberal humanism have been argued by Mills in *Black Rights/White Wrongs*.
- 7 Howard, "The New Historicism in Renaissance Studies," 21.
- 8 Evelyn B. Tribble, *Margins and Marginality: The Printed Page in Early Modern England* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 3.
- 9 Robert Darnton, "What is the History of Books?" *Daedalus* 3.3 (1982): 65–83 (67). See also Darnton's "First Steps Toward a History of Reading," *Australian Journal of French Studies* 23.1 (1986): 5–30.
- 10 On the genealogy of book and reading histories, see Jennifer Richards and Fred Schurink, "The Textuality and Materiality of Reading in Early Modern England," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 73.3 (2010): 345–361; William

- H. Sherman, *Used Books: Marking Readers in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); for a review of scholarship of early modern reading, see Snook, "Recent Studies in Early Modern Reading." Calling for a more expansive approach that is gender aware, see Heidi Brayman Hackel, "'Boasting of silence': Women Readers in a Patriarchal State," in Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker, eds., *Reading, Society and Politics in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- 11 Emma Smith, *Shakespeare's First Folio: Four Centuries of an Iconic Book* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 121–182.
 - 12 Stephen Orgel, *The Reader in the Book: A Study of Spaces and Traces* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2. In addition to Sherman's *Used Books* and Smith's *Shakespeare's First Folio*, see Jennifer Andersen and Elizabeth Sauer, eds., *Books and Readers in Early Modern England: Material Studies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); Heidi Brayman Hackel, *Reading Material in Early Modern England: Print, Gender and Literacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Jason Scott-Warren, "Reading Graffiti in the Early Modern Book," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 73.3 (2010): 363–381.
 - 13 Richards and Schurink, "The Textuality and Materiality of Reading," 346; see also Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, translated by Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.)
 - 14 Iser, *The Implied Reader*, 292.
 - 15 Leonardo, "Through the Multicultural Glass," 405.
 - 16 See Britton, "Recent Studies in English Renaissance Literature."
 - 17 Deidre Shauna Lynch and Evelyne Ender, "Introduction: A Time for Reading," *PMLA*, Special Topic: Cultures of Reading, 133.5 (2018): 1073–1083 (1078).
 - 18 Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 2. Felski does not take a position against interpretation, or, as she prefers, the term "critique" that encompasses similar practices; she writes in favor of more options than the limitations of a single method and critical style (8–10). For an engagement of this debate around the notion of "reparative reading," see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is about You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).
 - 19 Sharon Best and Stephen Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108.1 (2009): 1–21 (9).
 - 20 *Ibid.*, 1.
 - 21 *Ibid.*, 3. Elizabeth Weed debates Best and Marcus's reading of Althusser's use of the term "symptomatic reading" in "'The Way We Read Now,'" *History of the Present* 2.1 (2012): 95–106, esp. 101.
 - 22 Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading," 13.

- 23 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 61.
- 24 Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading," 2.
- 25 Ibid., 15–16.
- 26 Lisa Freeman, "Why We Argue about the Way We Read: An Introduction," *The Eighteenth Century* 54.1 (2013): 121–124 (122).
- 27 Ibid., 123.
- 28 Weed, "The Way We Read Now," 95.
- 29 Crystal Bartolovich, "Humanities of Scale: Marxism, Surface Reading – and Milton," *PMLA* 127.1 (2012): 115–121 (116).
- 30 Jeffrey L. Williams, "The New Modesty in Literary Criticism," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 5, 2015, www.chronicle.com/article/The-New-Modesty-in-Literary/150993.
- 31 Freeman, "Why We Argue," 122.
- 32 Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading," 1.
- 33 Margreta de Grazia and Peter Stallybrass, "The Materiality of the Shakespearean Text," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 44.3 (1993): 255–283 (256, 257).
- 34 Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 5.
- 35 Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 55.
- 36 Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge, MA: Technology Press of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1960). Jakobson's mapping of six aspects of language highlights the set toward the contextual (which has a "denotative" and "cognitive" function) as "the leading task of numerous messages" (353).
- 37 Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 68–95. While Iser theorizes a dialectic between the text's and reader's repertoires, my reading does not follow this formulation.
- 38 On systemic racism, see Joe R. Feagin, *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, and Reparations*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2019), 1–34.
- 39 Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 65. For their examination of racial dictatorship and European conquest, see 61–69; and for their definition of a "racial project," see 55–56.
- 40 Excellent discussions of the institutional history that produces what I describe as systemic whiteness are provided by Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color* and Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*.
- 41 Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 66.
- 42 Ibram X. Kendi. *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Nation Books, 2017), 2.
- 43 Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: Norton, 2003), 3–6.
- 44 Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning*, 3.
- 45 Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Anchor Books, 2009), 6.

- 46 Ibid., 7.
- 47 Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012). For a statistics-based approach to race and rates of incarceration, see Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).
- 48 Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic*, June 2014, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/.
- 49 Quoted in Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 22. On the importance of the legal definition of citizenship as codified in race, see also Paul Spickard, *Almost All Aliens: Immigration, Race, and Colonialism in American History and Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 79–128, esp. 89–91.
- 50 Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 22. Jacobson's excellent study provides a detailed account of whiteness, immigration, and citizenship; see esp. 13–38.
- 51 Ibid., 25.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Painter, *The History of White People*, acknowledges that the insertion of "free" indicates that some whites in servitude were not included in the 1790 Congressional Act, but the 1800 census addressed the classification issue, and as "politics freed all white people and ideology whitened the face of freedom, 'free white males' seemed a useless redundancy" (106).
- 54 Desmond King, *Making Americans: Immigration, Race, and the Origins of the Diverse Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 80.
- 55 Ibid., 81.
- 56 Boas has stressed the assimilability of new immigrants to the American environment, but his use of cranial measurements for his study allowed for the displacement of his cultural emphasis with a eugenic one. See King, *Making Americans*, 50–81.
- 57 Ibid., 167; for a recent study of the 1924 Act and its devastating social afterlife, see Jia Lynn Yang, *One Mighty and Irresistible Tide: The Epic Struggle Over American Immigration, 1924–1965* (New York: Norton, 2020).
- 58 Quoted in King, *Making Americans*, 224.
- 59 McDermott and Samson, "White Racial and Ethnic Identity," esp. 246.
- 60 Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 2; see also 40–59. Nativist reaction qualified Irish Catholic Famine migrants as black to highlight the cultural xenophobia that viewed non-Protestant affiliation with suspicion. Ignatiev reminds us that while the oppressive Penal Laws of the eighteenth century forced Irish emigration, it was only with the Famine Migration of the nineteenth century that the bulk of arriving Irish could be described as Catholic (38–39). On the racial assimilation of the Irish and other European immigrants, see also Allen, *The Invention of the White Race: vol. 1: Racial Oppression and Social Control*, 2nd ed. (New York: Verso, 2012), esp. 177–199; Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

- 61 Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 24, 25. The notion of the “racial bribe” was powerfully articulated by W. E. B. DuBois as “the public and psychological wage,” the cost of white racial affiliation. See his *Black Reconstruction in America*, edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 573.
- 62 McDermott and Samson, “White Racial and Ethnic Identity,” 251.
- 63 David R. Roediger, *Working Towards Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 136–137.
- 64 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 78; on the “habitus” and “homogeneity,” see, 80–83. For a useful discussion of the habitus, see John Fiske, “Cultural Studies and the Culture of Everyday Life,” in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg et al. (New York: Routledge, 1992), esp. 156, 161–64.
- 65 Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 78–79.
- 66 *Ibid.*, 79.
- 67 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 174–176.
- 68 John Hartigan Jr., “Establishing the Fact of Whiteness,” *American Anthropologist* 99.3 (1997): 495–505 (496, 497).
- 69 Paul R. Croll, “Modeling Determinants of White Racial Identity: Results from a New National Survey,” *Social Forces* 86.2 (2007): 613–642, esp. 634–635.
- 70 Hartigan, “Establishing the Fact of Whiteness,” 502.
- 71 *Ibid.*, 496.
- 72 Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 9–19.
- 73 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 74 *Ibid.*, 18.
- 75 *Ibid.*
- 76 *Ibid.*, 19.