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Linda Martín Alcoff
The Future of Whiteness
Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2015 (ISBN 978-0-7456-8544-1 (hc), 978-0-7456-8545-8 (pbk))
Reviewed by Shannon Sullivan, 2016
Narrated by Theodra Bane

What will happen to whiteness in the United States when white people become a demographic minority, as ethnographers predict will occur by 2050? This striking question launches *The Future of Whiteness*, and Linda Martín Alcoff answers it with a compelling argument that whiteness can and should have "a place in the rainbow," as the book's concluding chapter is titled. On the way to this conclusion, Alcoff defends a realist approach to social identity, including racial identity and whiteness in particular, and criticizes white exceptionalism in both its racist and antiracist forms. The upshot of the book is a conception of whiteness as historically emergent, context-dependent, and thus capable of change. *The Future of Whiteness* does not evade the past and present horrors of white supremacy, white privilege, and other forms of white domination. Nor does it claim to know with certainty what the future holds. It does, however, refuse to treat whiteness as essentially and inevitably racist, and this approach opens up the question of the future of whiteness. As Alcoff claims, whiteness isn't going to disappear anytime soon even given upcoming demographic changes, and so people of all races need to grapple with "whiteness as real, and really open-ended" (8).

The introduction to *The Future of Whiteness* is a full-length chapter in its own right that powerfully puts on the table "the unbearable whiteness of being" (1). Alcoff acknowledges various reasons why white people often try to distance themselves from white identity: from the theoretical, involving the alleged unreality of race, to the practical, such as the fact that nowadays "whiteness is not cool, it is not on the right side of history" (7). Whiteness is not merely an ideology or an analytic category for Alcoff, however, and this is why it can't be easily dodged. Like all identities on Alcoff's account, whiteness is lived by flesh-and-blood people. Some white people are fighting to maintain white superiority over people of color, and others are squirming to figure out how their whiteness might be made bearable (and the two groups aren't necessarily exclusive), but in both cases the lived meaning of white identity is at stake. White people are trying to understand and, in some cases, re-understand who they are. The question for the future is whether they can handle whiteness's being "ordinary as one [race] among others, neither more nor less" (189).

Transforming white identity in this way means rejecting the idea that whiteness--white people as well as white-dominated nations and white normative standards--is anything special or extraordinary. It means, in other words, deflating whiteness and rejecting white exceptionalism. After explaining a realist approach to social identity in chapter 1, chapter 2 demonstrates how an ahistorical understanding of whiteness underlies white exceptionalism of all kinds. In its racist version, white exceptionalism--typically merged with national exceptionalism in the United States--holds that there is something special about white America that makes it superior to other races and nations. It is this unique core that allegedly explains white Americans' extraordinary financial, aesthetic, artistic, scientific, and other achievements. Those achievements supposedly are unrelated to centuries of racism, colonialism, chattel slavery, Jim Crow, or other forms of exploitation and oppression.

Alcoff then tackles antiracist forms of white exceptionalism. Offering a refreshingly original criticism of white abolitionist positions such as that of Noel Ignatiev, Alcoff demonstrates how they are the flip side of the same coin of racist white exceptionalism. Even though antiracist white abolitionism seeks the end of whiteness in order to eliminate racism and white supremacy, like its racist counterpart it assumes that whiteness is fixed and unchanging. In its belief "that whiteness is simply and irrevocably tied to supremacist illusions, that racism is the logos of whiteness" (105), antiracist white abolitionism thus operates with a problematic understanding of how social identities are made and can be remade. It also is plagued with a faulty account of meaning, failing to see how meaning emerges through lived, historical practices. Meanings of course can become sedimented; they also can loosen and become more fluid, but either way they are situated and temporal. "The bottom line," as Alcoff pragmatically argues against all forms of white exceptionalism, "is that meanings are determined by use, either overt or covert ones, and use is always specific to context. And contexts change" (117).

Chapter 4 continues the book's argument against white eliminativism and then develops the notion of white double consciousness. Modeled on W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of the double consciousness of African Americans, who can (and often must) see the world from both white and nonwhite perspectives, whites? double consciousness represents a consciousness split between seeing themselves in the way that white dominant culture prescribes and seeing themselves as people of color see them. On Alcoff's account, white double consciousness is a kind of subjective incoherence that can produce significant existential and epistemic turmoil, and precisely for that reason it is a potentially valuable tool for remaking white identity into something "both white and morally defensible" (171).

"What would it mean for whites to become more positively embodied as white within a multipolar social landscape?" (176). As chapter 4 closes with this question, it touches on the alienation felt by many poor, working-class, and rural white people, whose lives do not correspond much with dominant narratives of whiteness and white privilege, which are implicitly geared toward middle-class and affluent white people. When asking about the future of whiteness, class differences among white people must be at the center of discussion. Here again is how context, situation, and history matter to whiteness. Whiteness does not have the same meaning or the same effects for all white people, and the gaps between different groups of white people in the United States are growing at the same time that the nation's racial demographics are changing. From explicitly to implicitly raced hot-button topics, "the nation is increasingly politically polarized on a number of critical issues, from guns to healthcare, and that polarization is mainly due to the polarization occurring among whites themselves" (10).

Alcoff continues to examine intersections of whiteness and class in the book's conclusion, focusing primarily not on exemplary white heroes who engaged in extraordinary antiracist efforts, but instead on ordinary white people organized around mundane activities of day-to-day living. "In asking about the future of whiteness," Alcoff argues, "it is this unglorious majority who will decide the order of the day (189). In fact, a concern for everyday white folk runs throughout *The Future of Whiteness*, including Alcoff's autobiographical explanation of her and her family's complicated relationship to whiteness. The book's conclusion returns to the introduction's context-sensitive admonition that "we must come to understand all the things that whiteness has been" (36). Alcoff continues: "And to understand this, we need to have in our minds the poor whites, southern whites, uneducated whites, hardscrabble whites whose trailer existence hardly accounts for much privilege" (26). This is not to let poor whites off the hook in terms of the psychic and material benefits that their whiteness can still provide.

The concrete examples Alcoff provides, including the "freedom to own guns and to hunt" (36), are instructive since they probably aren't seen as privileges by most poor whites, at least not in comparison to the advantages that whiteness affords the middle and upper classes. Alcoff's point stands, however, that the future of whiteness in the United States--indeed, the future of all of us, no matter what our race or nation--requires grappling with entanglements of race and class.

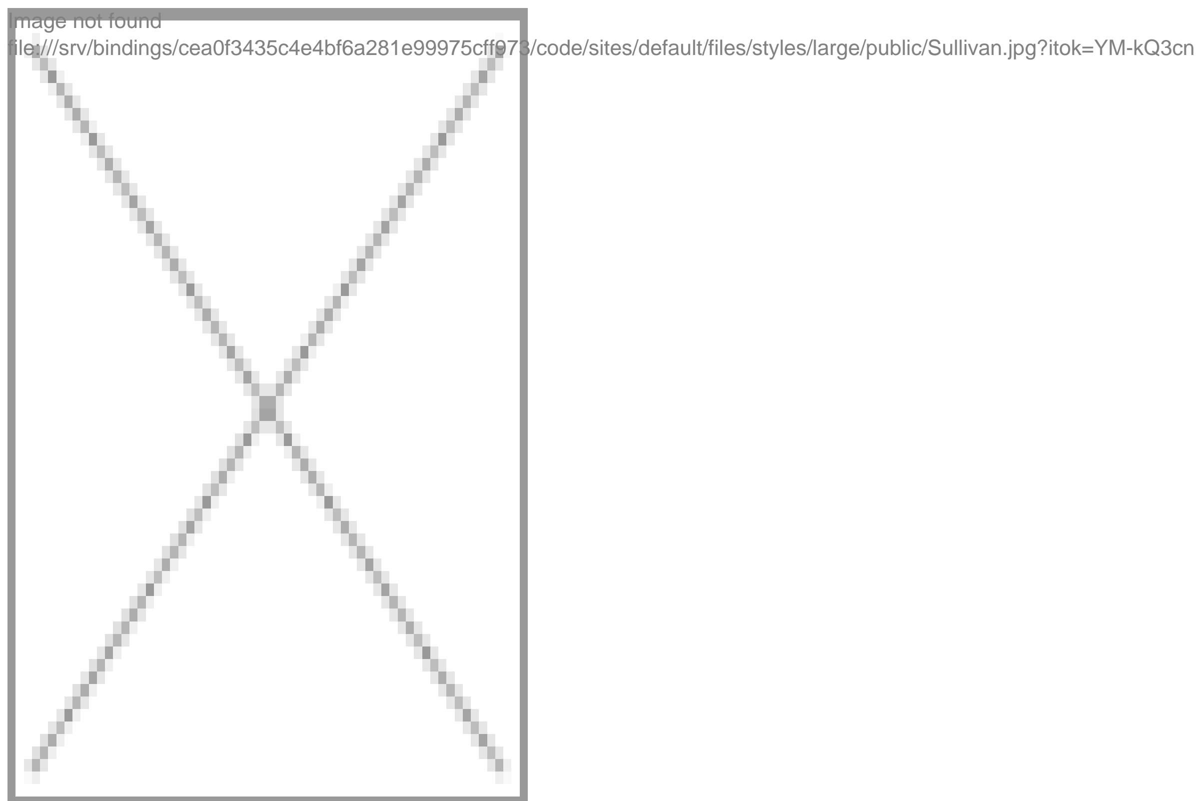
Alcoff's final example in the book does just that. She recounts the intriguing story of C. P. Ellis, a poor, eighth-grade-educated white man who joined and eventually led the Durham, North Carolina Ku Klux Klan in the 1950s because of the social respect that the Klan community gave him. He ultimately changed his mind about both the Klan and African Americans after working with a black woman, Ann Atwater, a militant civil rights activist, on how best to desegregate schools in the wake of Brown v. Board of Education. Ellis's conversion story is worth reading in its entirety, but what stands out in Alcoff's retelling of it is the reason Ellis reluctantly agreed to work with a person he despised. Unlike middle- and upper-class white people in Durham, who could afford to put their children in private schools to avoid desegregation, Ellis's children were stuck with the public school system. To make sure that they received a fair education--recall that at this time Ellis was still a Klan member, so "fair" meant assuring that the superiority of white people was upheld--Ellis worked with Atwater as co-leaders of the local school board.

That experience turned out to be transformative of Ellis's white identity. He came to understand the high cost of the community and respect that the Klan gave him. When Ellis tried to explain to Klan colleagues how he and Atwater similarly struggled with the hardship and shame of poverty, they threatened his life, and Ellis broke with the Klan. Still poor and lacking social support--shunned by white groups, he nevertheless didn't fit in with African American communities--Ellis remained close friends with Atwater but struggled to find a new place in the world as a lower-class white man who no longer believed in white superiority. Though his struggle with isolation and social rejection continued until the end of his life--in many ways, that is the unbearable lesson offered by his story--Ellis succeeded in finding a way to live whiteness as merely one race among others.

Alcoff acknowledges that she writes about Ellis with a note of sympathy (203), and it is on this point that I wish to close. (It's also a point that suggests why *The Future of Whiteness* will succeed in reaching both audiences outside the academy and students in philosophy and related courses.) A note of sympathy, a tone of care, an attitude of respect--these moods pervade Alcoff's book, even when she is forthrightly discussing egregious white people, such as Klan members. Her sympathy and care are always clear-eyed and undeceived: there is no soft-selling the problems of whiteness and white people in this book. But precisely because Alcoff sees the enormous complexity of those problems, *The Future of Whiteness* doesn't take the easy route of universally damning whiteness and white people. The hard route advocated by Alcoff is the one that tries to build toward "a future in which we can all find a place," and such building requires "facing the truths about who we are [and] how we got here" (204). This is a future that Alcoff can help us all envision.

Shannon Sullivan is chair of the Philosophy Department and professor of philosophy and health psychology at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte. She is the author of four books, most recently *Good White People: The Problem with Middle-Class White Anti-Racism* (2014) and *The Physiology of Sexist and Racist Oppression* (2015). *Good White People* was named a 2014 *CHOICE* Outstanding Academic Title and a *Ms. Magazine* Must-Read Feminist

Book of 2014. She also is co-editor of four books, including *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (2007) and *Feminist Interpretations of William James* (2015).



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