White Ignorance and the Struggle for an Anti-Racist Applied Linguistics

Feature article by Nicholas Close Subtirelu, Georgetown University

George Floyd was murdered by a white police officer who knelt on his neck for over eight minutes while Floyd struggled and called for relief and mercy. A teenager named Darnella Frazier recorded the incident, and her video has been viewed by millions of people. That video and others capturing incidents of anti-Black racism helped reignite protests against white supremacy and police brutality across the United States and elsewhere this year. Many in the field of applied linguistics have responded in kind asking what we can do to reshape our communities to be more racially equitable.

I believe we are right to ask ourselves what we can do, but I also believe that, for many of us, especially my fellow white folks, the answer must start with reflecting on ourselves, our ignorance, and our inaction. We should never forget what happened to George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and the many other men and women who have become the victims of police brutality directed disproportionately at Black people (e.g., Scott et al., 2017). However, I believe we should go a step further and ask ourselves why it took many of us until well into the twenty-first century to start noticing or caring about an injustice that, for Black folks, has been a central and horrifying part of their experience since people from Africa were enslaved and brought to the United States and other parts of the Americas several centuries ago.

The philosopher Charles W. Mills (2007) has written about what he calls "white ignorance," a concept that I believe is relevant for the ongoing discussion (e.g., Anya, 2020; Bhattcharya et al., 2019; Gerald, 2020; Motha, 2020) about how to challenge white supremacy in applied linguistics and build a field that can contribute to fostering racial justice in other spheres of life such as educational systems. Mills developed the concept of white ignorance as a way of pointing to socialization into whiteness and the privileges this grants white individuals as a mechanism for ensuring and maintaining ignorance about the realities of white supremacy. In part, he was motivated to offer an epistemological accounting of what many scholars of race accept as true, that most white people are profoundly ignorant about the realities of racism in the United States. Mills argued that

> white ignorance has been able to flourish all of these years because a white epistemology of ignorance has safeguarded it against the dangers of an illuminating blackness or redness, protecting those who for 'racial' reasons have needed not to know. Only by starting to break these rules and meta-rules can we begin the long process that will lead to the eventual overcoming of this white darkness and the achievement of an enlightenment that is genuinely multiracial. (p. 35)

What does this concept have to offer graduate students who are pursuing their training in applied linguistics? I hope that by focusing specifically on whiteness and understanding how it both passively and actively maintains its own ignorance, we can begin to unpack how our own scholarly practices may reflect this very ignorance. I know that my own thinking has at times reflected white ignorance. In the story that follows, I play the role of the privileged white student who fails to see the full extent of white supremacy, in part, because I refuse to accept the forms of evidence that are presented to me and instead insist that my ways of knowing are better. I, as a young white man, act out of the toxic combination of arrogance and ignorance characteristic of people with unexamined and unacknowledged privilege. I present this story in the hopes that my missteps can serve as a fruitful source of learning for others.

In my first year of college, I enrolled in a course called "Introduction to Ethnic Studies" to fulfill my university's requirement that all students take a class focused on diversity in the United States. It was my second semester of college. During my first semester, I had been empowered by a course called "Introduction to Critical Thinking" which had exposed me to ways of dissecting and analyzing arguments. Hence, I arrived in my ethnic studies class believing I was ready to critically scrutinize the ideas and arguments presented in the class. However, my prior education had not challenged me to think about my own positionality and how it affected the way I saw the world. In particular, it had not prepared me to scrutinize my own racial positionality and how it shaped my beliefs and thinking.

One of our first assignments in the course was to read sections of the widely acclaimed book *A Different Mirror* by Ronald Takaki (1993) and write a reflection about it. In *A Different Mirror*, Takaki offers a narrative account of different ethnoracial groups' experiences in what is now the United States. The book is mostly focused on the time period following European explorers' and settlers' arrival on the continent. While constructing his historical account, Takaki provides the reader snippets of primary historical texts such as song lyrics and newspaper articles to help illustrate the painful experiences of oppressed groups and the inhumane motivations of their oppressors. Takaki's scholarly approach favors vivid, emotionally stirring, and richly contextualized description over the detached, supposedly 'objective' writing that many white scholars produce. Like many ethnic studies scholars, Takaki does not aim to 'prove' that white supremacy exists; rather, he aims to illustrate its historical workings for his readers—readers he anticipates will come to his book having been profoundly influenced by white supremacy and white ignorance.

After engaging superficially with the book, I dismissed it as not methodologically rigorous. In particular, I felt that Takaki had failed to 'prove' the existence of white supremacy due to the approach his scholarship took. I wish I had reflected on what it means to 'prove' that white supremacy exists and why I felt like I, a young white man, should be the arbiter of this question. Instead, I headed to the library and found some experimental psychological research on implicit racial bias that better conformed to the beliefs I held at the time about what constituted 'proof' of racism. For my assignment, rather than engaging with the ideas in *A Different Mirror*, I wrote an essay about how experimental methods provide a better basis for documenting the presence of racism in U.S. society. For example, I cited social psychological research demonstrating that people are more likely to 'see' ambiguous objects as weapons when they are held by Black people than when they are held by white people (e.g., Payne, 2001). In Payne's study, participants were shown pictures of faces and objects, and Payne found that pictures of Black faces primed participants to 'see' the object as a weapon, suggesting that the participants were biased toward seeing Black people as violent. I argued that such experiments provided a superior way of 'proving' racism than that offered by Takaki in *A Different Mirror*. I failed to recognize that, despite its strengths and clear relevance to explaining the disproportionate violence enacted on Black people by the police, scholarship like Payne (2001) does not do the important work of placing individuals' actions in a broader historical context in the way Takaki's does. The instructor of the course, a woman of color, handled my arrogant refusal to engage seriously with the work she assigned magnanimously; she gave me a "B" and asked that, in future assignments, I engage more directly with the assigned reading material.

Several years passed before I came to realize that I deserved an "F" on this assignment. Even though I articulated what I felt was the 'right' position (i.e., affirming the presence of racism in U.S. society), I did so by rejecting the voices, experiences, and ways of knowing of people who are directly affected by white supremacy and who have developed a field of inquiry (ethnic studies) designed to develop and disseminate exactly these voices, experiences, and ways of knowing. I, a young white man, had not yet learned to listen, and, indeed, I had been taught to systematically ignore the ideas of racialized people when they did not conform to white ideas about what constitutes good scholarship. I judged the extensively documented narratives about the realities of racialized people's experiences with white supremacy presented to me as inadequate in much the same way that Black people's concerns about the police have historically been dismissed when not accompanied by a viral video. Indeed, even when it is confronted with video evidence of horrific crimes, white ignorance has found a way to prevail with disturbing regularity.

I am embarrassed and ashamed of the way I behaved in my ethnic studies class. I regret the harm that my dismissiveness caused the instructor as well as the students of color in the class. The incident is rendered all the more embarrassing when one considers that racism and white supremacy are central to my scholarship today. I raise this embarrassing experience because I believe it highlights an important point about the connection between epistemological beliefs and white privilege. I did not see my ways of seeing the world as connected to my whiteness, my maleness, or other aspects of who I was. I believed that I was simply applying the scientific method and logic to arrive at 'truth.' I thought that I could be of service to those advocating against racism by teaching them the 'correct' way of knowing, through, for example, rigorously designed experiments. I was stupendously and arrogantly wrong, and had I been willing to listen and to engage with the arguments of others on their own terms, I would have found this out much earlier and spared others harm.

I hope that other applied linguists who hold white privilege will take this story and the lesson it offers to heart. I hope that students who find themselves confronted with readings that challenge their beliefs consider that those beliefs may reflect the white ignorance that they have been socialized into and approach opportunities to learn from Black, indigenous, and other people of color humbly and respectfully. Undoing our own white ignorance is not glamorous, but I believe it would go a long way toward helping us build an anti-racist scholarly community.

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