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# The Matrix of Whiteness

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## The provocations of #BlackLivesMatter

Why must it be declared that #BlackLivesMatter? In what ways have Black lives not mattered? Does saying #BlackLivesMatter mean that other lives, specifically white lives, or police lives, don't matter?<sup>1</sup> What does the discomfort and outright resistance of many white people to the declaration that #BlackLivesMatter say about the white psyche or soul? What does it reveal about white racial self-understanding and social and historical consciousness? These and other questions illuminate the subversive and interrogative functions of #BlackLivesMatter: one of the things the BLM declaration is meant to do, it seems, is to provoke soul-searching, critical, and transformative questions.

In my own extended white family, such questions have shown up in some specific ways.

For example, my wife and I are involved in a grassroots reparations initiative through our church. Some members of our extended family cannot and will not understand why we are doing this. They have said to us that since our families were not enslavers, we do not owe racial reparations. But this way of thinking about reparations (and racial justice more generally) is a failure of moral conscience, historical understanding, and Christian faith. For us, financial reparations are obligatory because for many generations our families have benefited from white affirmative action programs that have preferentially benefited us and systematically disadvantaged Black people.<sup>2</sup> As white people we have accrued educational, economic, employment, financial, housing, and healthcare advantages through policies that have structurally disadvantaged Black people. Though our families never owned and enslaved Black people, we have inherited much of what is good in our lives through systems and institutions historically premised on the principle that white lives matter more than Black lives. The blessings in our lives are not due to grace or merit—they are the unearned but intended outcomes of life in a world that has been designed to favor white people like us. In other words, even though we are hard workers, we have not earned everything

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that we have. We have sometimes struggled financially and have suffered illness and accident, but none of our struggles have ever been due to the color of our skin. Because white racial advantage is historically predicated upon Black racial exploitation, and because we are living off the capital gains of such exploitation, we believe it is a matter of moral conscience, a duty of justice, and an obligation of our Christian faith to return some of our unearned white racial inheritance.

We realize there are many approaches to reparations, but one way we do this as a family is by participating in a church group that builds relationships with and distributes funds to various local programs organized and led by Black people. Much of our extended family, however, refuses to acknowledge the importance of, let alone the need for, any of this. I have come to believe this refusal is because the effort to understand (let alone enact) reparations calls into question the ideas and values that fundamentally organize the way they understand the world and their place within it. To understand (and enact) reparations would thus entail a conversion.

The ideas and values I'm talking about here are neither biblical nor Christian, although many white Christians in the United States are ultimately oriented by them and think of them as entailed by their Christian faith. Rather than coming from the gospels or epistles or any other part of the Bible, though, these ideas and values are rooted in a racial mythology—the white myth of meritocratic individualism, or the matrix of whiteness. According to this myth: 1) we all live on an “even playing field” (regardless of gender, sexuality, class, race, or nationality), 2) people get what they work for, and therefore 3) people deserve whatever they have

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1. It is interesting (and very much to the point of this essay) that no one ever wonders if “Save the whales!” means “F\*&% the dolphins”.

2. See, for example, Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-century America* (New York: Norton, 2005).

## Learning about how the world is experienced by others is part of what it means to practice neighbor love—how is it possible to know how to love our neighbors if we do not try to understand their experience?

(for good and ill). There is no awareness of the embedding of individual lives in histories, institutions, and social systems in this mythology. However, it provides many white people with a sense of dignity and worth, it affirms the basic rightness of the social status quo, and it relieves them of the burden of social responsibilities beyond a limited sense of interpersonal morality. Since reparations implicitly questions this orienting myth, understanding the need for reparations, let alone actively committing to reparations, would require my extended family to unlearn the world as they have been taught, and racialized, to understand it. To the extent that this myth structures and orients white identity in the United States, questioning the myth puts themselves into question.

This is just one example of the way the provocations of #BlackLivesMatter have played out in my white family in recent years. But this example illuminates the rhetorically subtle and politically ingenious way in which #BlackLivesMatter signifies, and thereby interrogates, the *continuing* racial ignorance of most white people, the *unrelenting* prerogatives of white racial privilege, and the *persistence* of the culture of white supremacy.

My purpose in this essay is not to document the history or demonstrate the ongoing realities of white privilege and systemic anti-black racism in the United States. Yet *if you are a white person* reading this (and, given the denominational source of this journal, the odds are very high that you are white!) and doubt the realities of the long history of affirmative action for whites, or the historical longevity of white identity politics, or the ongoing effects of systemic anti-black racism, there are plenty of resources out there for you to do your own research. Doing this work should be understood as a responsibility of Christian faith. Learning about how the world is experienced by others is part of what it means to practice neighbor love—how is it possible to know how to love our neighbors if we do not try to understand their experience? This is not to say that neighbor love is reducible to race and racism—but race and racism are aspects of our world and experience, and therefore learning what we can about race and racism (i.e., how we and others have been racialized, and the various ways in which racism impacts us all) is a discipline entailed by neighbor love.

Neighbor love is not only about loving others. We are to love others as ourselves. And since we as white people also live in a racialized world, neighbor love also entails learning (and unlearning) how race and racism have formed (and malformed) us. In short,

neighbor love, in a world such as ours, entails that white people need to get free from Whiteness. This may sound quite odd. If we didn't choose when, where, or to whom we were born, and we can't change the color of our skin or our genealogy, what could it possibly mean for white people to get free from Whiteness? My aim in this essay is to explore one aspect of this idea.<sup>3</sup>

### The matrix of Whiteness and Charles Mills' *The Racial Contract*

Recently I had the privilege of co-teaching portions of a seminary class with Professor Linda Thomas, the guest editor of this special issue. Most of our students were white and will be serving ministries in predominantly white congregational settings. We opened the class with a clip from the movie *The Matrix*. [I do not have space here to review the plot of the movie, but if you are not familiar with it, a quick internet search will provide you with a summary.] We showed the scene in which Morpheus (played by Laurence Fishburne) helps Neo (played by Keanu Reeves) to see that everything that he believes to be real is really a computer simulation. Neo is understandably terrified by this, and he doesn't want to believe it. The world that, up to that point, he believed was real, that his mind and the people around him told him was real, was not the world as it really is! The reality was that humans had been colonized by the technologies they had invented, their minds had been hacked by the computer programs they had designed, and, in a reversal of roles, their bodies were being harvested by machines. Discovering this reality throws everything into question for Neo and forces him to make a choice, a choice offered to him by Morpheus in the form of a "red pill" or "blue pill." The "blue pill" would return Neo to the ignorant bliss of the simulation (and his and others ongoing exploitation), whereas the "red pill" would free Neo from the simulation. But in place of the comforting bliss of ignorance, the "red pill" would force Neo to figure out who he really is, how the world really works, and to struggle with the responsibilities entailed by his awakening.

After opening with this richly metaphorical scene, we turned to the text we had assigned that day, Charles Mills' *The Racial Contract*. This is a difficult text in several respects – philosophically, morally, and even spiritually. *The Matrix* provides a useful heuristic for interpreting Mills' argument. Mills the author-philosopher is like the character Morpheus—a wise and experienced elder helping readers to see the world as it is rather than as they would like it to be (and as they have been racialized to understand it). Readers (and especially white readers) are like Neo, painfully coming to see reality (yes, the movie plays with many allusions, including Plato's

3. It's possible that some readers might be troubled by my focus on white people in this essay since it appears in a journal issue thematically concerned with #BlackLivesMatter. But #BlackLivesMatter is not only about, or for, Black people. Although led by Black people, the work of building a more racially (and socially, economically, and environmentally) just democracy is collective work. And one critical aspect of that work is the work that white people need to do with respect to Whiteness—thus the focus of this essay.

“allegory of the cave”). And the argument of the book forces readers to make a choice about how they will live after reading it (and being read by it)—will they choose the blue pill and continue to live enslaved to racial ignorance, or will they choose the red pill’s liberating path of knowledge, struggle, and uncertainty?

### An examination of Mills’ argument

The central concept of Mills’ book, as the title indicates, is the idea of the Racial Contract (hereafter RC). As Mills describes it, the RC is “the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today.”<sup>4</sup> The first thing that should be explained is how Mills uses the concept of “contract” and what type of contract he takes the RC to be. Mills distinguishes the RC as a “natural contract” from classical social contract theories (e.g., Hobbes, Rousseau, Mill). Whereas the social contract is a speculative device (like a simulation) used to justify the moral ideals of a just society, a natural contract shows how things really are (the reality behind the simulation). “[T]he point of analyzing the [natural] contract,” Mills argues, “is not to ratify it but to use it to explain and expose the inequities of the actual nonideal polity and to help us to see through the theories and moral justifications offered in defense of them. It gives us a kind of X-ray vision into the real internal logic of the sociopolitical system.”<sup>5</sup>

In an article in the *Atlantic* written soon after the murder of Ahmaud Arbery by white vigilantes, Adam Serwer referenced Mills’ *Racial Contract* in a way that helps to explain how it works:

If the social contract is the implicit agreement among members of a society to follow the rules—for example, acting lawfully, adhering to the results of elections, and contesting the agreed-upon rules by nonviolent means—then the racial contract is a codicil rendered in invisible ink, one stating that the rules as written do not apply to nonwhite people in the same way. The Declaration of Independence states that all men are created equal; the racial contract limits this to white men with property. The law says murder is illegal; the racial contract says it’s fine for white people to chase and murder black people if they have decided that those black people scare them.<sup>6</sup>

Whereas the social contract is the story we tell about how the world should be morally ordered, the RC, as a natural contract, is a lens that helps us to see the world as it really is—it helps us to see through the simulation/ideal to the real/actual.

But how and why did the RC emerge—how and why did the RC justify the valuing of white lives over Black lives? A central thesis in Mills’ argument is that there is an economic element fore-

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grounded in the RC. This contrasts with the background nature of the economic element in classical social contract theory. Mills writes: “The whole point of establishing a moral hierarchy and juridically partitioning the polity according to race is to secure and legitimate the privileging of those individuals designated as white/ persons and the exploitation of those designated as nonwhite/ subpersons.”<sup>7</sup> The RC originates, then, as an exploitation contract. The RC evolved through religious, moral, and legal justifications developed to rationalize European colonialism and the enslavement and economic exploitation of Black lives.

And yet, as important as the question of the RC’s historical origins may be, this essay is focused on the question of how the RC is maintained. Although the RC originates historically as an economic exploitation contract (through slavery and colonization), it continues to operate through political, moral, and epistemological registers. This is to say that it is maintained in the way we understand and institutionalize power and governance, through the dominant cultural coding of what is good and right, and by way of the disciplining of the production and transmission of knowledge.

Thus, politically, the RC is maintained through the white dominance of power, policy, and governance: for instance, in the U.S., consider how rural white power is structurally leveraged through the Electoral College and Senate; or, more recently, through GOP efforts to suppress the vote and interfere with state electoral boards under the guise of electoral integrity prompted by Trump’s Big Lie. Morally, the RC is maintained through racial tropes that inflect the ordering of good and right—consider, for instance, the culturally and morally prevalent coding of innocence, industriousness, and trustworthiness as white and suspicion, laziness, and deception as black. Epistemologically, the RC is maintained through the ordering, disciplining, and classifying of knowledge—consider debates over literary canons, about gender, race, and ethnic studies in higher education, and most recently,

4. Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract*, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), 1.

5. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 6.

6. Adam Serwer, “The Coronavirus Was an Emergency Until Trump Found Out Who Was Dying,” *The Atlantic* (May 7, 2020), <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/americas-racial-contract-showing/611389/> [retrieved 21 July 2021]

7. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 32-33. Note that the slashes between “white” and “person” and “non-white” and “sub-person” alludes to philosophical and scientific discourses which anchored cultural and racial hierarchies in a combination of evolutionary and anthropological speculation.

the manufactured culture wars over Critical Race Theory.

Through these mechanisms, the RC functions as the core ideological system of the modern Western world, an ideology that reproduces and legitimates white racial privilege and Black and Brown racial disadvantage. As a “core” ideological system, the RC pervades all aspects of modern life—culture, education, law, politics, religion, and economy. As an “ideology,” the RC is constructed of ideas, values, scripts, and codes that are transmitted through people and institutions who benefit from it.

And yet it is often invisible to those who are beholden to it—in fact, “invisibility” is intrinsic to ideology and allows it to reproduce. Why is it that so many white people need a case to be made for them to see systemic antiblack racism, and why, even when such a case is clearly made, with appeals to evidence, data, history, and all the standard protocols of truth-telling, do they still refuse to see it? Why is the declaration #BlackLivesMatter subversive and interrogative? In helping to explain the RC’s “invisibility,” Mills’ argument helps us to respond to these questions.

One of the keys to the functioning of the RC is through the cultivation and reinforcement of what Mills calls an “epistemology of ignorance.” The epistemology of ignorance makes the RC invisible / inaudible / imperceptible to those who benefit from it, especially white people. As such, the epistemology of ignorance generates cognitive and moral dysfunctions that prevent beneficiaries (esp. white people) from understanding the world they have made. As Mills explains it, the epistemology of ignorance “precludes self-transparency and genuine understanding of social realities,” with the result that white people in general “live in an invented delusional world, a racial fantasyland.”<sup>8</sup>

This “invented delusional” world is what I refer to in the title of this essay as the “Matrix of Whiteness,” which is organized, in part, around the white myth of meritocratic individualism. Just as Neo, prior to his education by Morpheus, mistook a simulation for reality, the matrix of Whiteness creates a false sense of reality for white people. As Mills observes, “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, a cognitive and moral economy psychically required for conquest, colonization, and enslavement.”<sup>9</sup>

Mills acknowledges James Baldwin’s earlier insights into the epistemology of ignorance. Mills quotes from Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*: “White supremacy ‘forced [white] Americans into rationalizations so fantastic that they approached the pathological,’ generating a tortured ignorance so structured that one cannot raise certain issues with whites ‘because even if I [i.e., Baldwin, or Mills] should speak, no one would believe me,’ and paradoxically, ‘they would not believe me precisely because they would know that what I said was true.’”<sup>10</sup>

8. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 18.

9. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 19.

10. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 97. Mills is quoting from James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, pp. 53-54.

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Thus, one reason so many white people refuse to see the realities of systemic anti-black racism is that the correlate of Mills’ epistemology of ignorance is a type of racial blindness or racial agnosia. This renders the RC invisible and in so doing maintains the racial status quo. But the RC is not invisible in the sense that it is in hiding. As a core ideology of the modern West, it pervades the world and is reinforced in so many ways that the racial hierarchies it is premised upon, and the racial injustices it justifies, seem and feel like reality. This is the matrix of Whiteness. The invisibility of the RC (for many white people) is due less to its absence in the flow of everyday life than to its oversaturated presence. The genius of Mills’ RC is that it can help us to see what has become invisible, to denaturalize what has become naturalized, and in doing so, to gain conscious leverage over it as it operates in our own minds, bodies, and communities, to be conscientized to it, and thereby to awaken to a historical, social, and racial agency through which we take up our responsibilities for undoing or dismantling it.

But waking up, getting conscious, and taking responsibility is, unfortunately, not the most common response among white people to the RC when it is made visible/audible/perceptible. When the RC is made visible, the matrix of Whiteness is compromised. This threatens the sense of reality for those of us caught up in the matrix, and the sense of threat produces strong reactions. In other words, for many whites, the visibilizing of the RC and the compromising of the matrix produces racial vertigo—it throws their sense of themselves and their world into disequilibrium. When the RC is made visible and the matrix of Whiteness gets glitchy, the racial equilibrium of many white people is disturbed—they/we are forced to see race and color, they/we are forced to question ideas about meritocracy, they/we are forced to see how we as white people have been racialized not to think of whiteness in racial terms. All of this can be emotionally upsetting and can call the white sense of self, society, and reality into question, breeding defensiveness, reactivity, and other forms of emotional denial and self-protection.

So, when the RC is made visible, when the matrix is shown to be an illusion, when racial injustice is protested and its realities and

facts are demonstrated, the options for white people are either to wake up to a discomfiting reality (it is more than uncomfortable for those who are not white), or to reactively entrench oneself in defense of the artifice (the matrix, which is taken to be real). As with the red pill / blue pill, a choice is forced.

We see the discomfort of waking up when we see white people showing up at BLM protests. We see reactionary retrenchment when those predominantly anti-violent protests are redescribed as violent riots—but the riotous, heavily armed anti-mask protests at state capitols (almost exclusively white) are described as exercises in free speech. We see the discomfort of waking up when we see educators seeking to teach their students about the history of race in the United States. We see reactionary retrenchment when the teaching of that history is gaslighted as ideological indoctrination into Critical Race Theory.

### *white/White/Whiteness*

The red pill/blue pill choice between waking up to freedom and responsibility or reactively entrenching in the matrix of Whiteness can be aided by a distinction Mills makes between being white-skinned and Whiteness. As it turns out, for Mills, the RC is not finally about white people. Rather, it is about Whiteness, a racial construct/simulation that justifies ongoing racial injustice. In other words, Mills' RC, as a theory, distinguishes phenotypical "whiteness" from the historical politico-economic system of "Whiteness." And this distinction, Mills writes, opens a space in which phenotypically white people can make a choice about Whiteness.

This distinction, and the space of freedom it opens, makes it possible for white people to get free from Whiteness. As Mills describes it:

There *is* a real choice for whites, though admittedly a difficult one. The rejection of the RC and the normed inequities of the white polity does not require one to leave the country but to speak out and struggle against the terms of the Contract. So in this case, moral/political judgments about one's 'consent' to the legitimacy of the political system and conclusions about one's effectively having become a signatory to the 'contract,' *are* apropos--and so are judgments of one's culpability. By unquestioningly 'going along with things,' by accepting all the privileges of whiteness with concomitant complicity in the system of white supremacy, one can be said to have consented to Whiteness.<sup>11</sup>

Consent can be withdrawn. The contract can be repudiated. So, the question to ask ourselves (we who are white) is whether, though we are beneficiaries of the RC, and cannot help but to be so, must we also be signatories to it? When the RC becomes visible and the matrix of Whiteness gets glitchy and begins to deconstruct—for instance, when the racial disparities in policing, housing, health care, and the effects of Covid-19 become glaring, or when the

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racial coding of protests, riots, free speech, and electoral processes become so obvious—what will you/we do? Remain complacent and complicit, knowingly and with agency continuing to sign on to the RC, and thereby remain in bondage to the matrix of Whiteness? Or wake up to the knowledge that, though one has been a beneficiary as a white person, this need not mean that one must continue to consent to Whiteness? Will we remain ignorantly blissful in the matrix of Whiteness, and thereby give our consent to the injustices of the RC? Or will we withdraw from the RC and join up with the freedom struggle on the other side of Whiteness?

The decision to withdraw is an act of refusal that entails further action. It is a choice with consequences and responsibilities. It requires us to refuse the benefits of Whiteness when we can, to interrupt Whiteness where and when we see it at work in our families, our faith communities, our workplaces, in the media. It entails learning to see how the matrix of Whiteness works in the world, that it is not just an inaccurate way of designating skin color but that it has been constructed through a long history of antiblackness. Getting free from Whiteness while remaining white means working toward the racial awareness that will liberate us from the enclosing epistemology of ignorance that keeps us from understanding the world we have created, a world in which white racial privilege and antiblackness mutually entail one another. Getting free from Whiteness is not a denial of the fact that we have white-ish skin; and it is not a denigration of our ethnicity and ancestry, either. Instead, Whiteness, insofar as it is the racial flipside of antiblackness, is something that we, along with the rest of the world, need to be healed from. Getting free from Whiteness is a liberating act of neighbor love.

11. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 107.