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Still White: Attitudes and Aesthetics

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by

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Introduction

A family sits on and around a couch with varying facial expressions. Some look enthusiastic. Others look as if they couldn't be bothered. It is a Christmas card, but it is not a Christmas card that I am used to. Usually there is a uniformity in expression when dealing with these images. Usually there isn't someone who is preoccupied with a cellphone. Usually, the dog is seated and gazing back at the camera, rather than attempting to jump out of frame. Usually, these images are easier to look at, for we know the people in the image, and they match the behavior we would expect. It is because of the inconsistencies of this image that I found the image funny. I have received enough Christmas cards to appreciate that this image is likely an outtake that the imaged family might look back on later and laugh at. But the family will not be looking back at this image, for the family does not exist. Instead of this being a found-image, a recovered throwaway, this is a highly staged work by the contemporary, Los Angeles based photographer, Buck Ellison. Ellison's work, from documentary photographs of women's lacrosse games to images of on-display Range Rovers to staged family portraits, is concerned with the centrality of an upper-class whiteness to power and the way that centrality is hidden or invisibilized in plain sight; his images seek to "uncover" the subtle ways in which an upper-class whiteness is constructed and maintained; teenage girls sitting on marble countertops, two young men putting stickers on the back of a BMW, a child ignoring the photographer of a family portrait to play with an iPhone. Ellison wants us to see these seemingly benign images as indicative of power and centrality.

Originally when I saw this image, I found it to be funny. The "outtake" quality of the image, the dog jumping, the child on the phone, all of this resonated with me. I understood how many shots it could take to get everyone on the same page to present themselves as best as they could. I thought that what the artist was doing was mocking the practice of sending out Christmas cards, a practice usually including a letter with nothing but the best to say of those in the image; though sometimes, when you're close enough to the subjects, you know the letter may have left some things out. Eventually I found out that the images were not necessarily a mockery, but instead were concerned with issues of race. Humor was a secondary concern in this Christmas card. The first concern was whiteness. There is still a humorous element that I find in images like the Christmas card but considering the texts written about Ellison's images one quickly realizes they are about much more. I see a benefit in the text that informs Ellison's images, but I also see a problematic. Any and every image is informed by the context in which it is shown. But that relationship between text and image should be critiqued if there is a noticeable discrepancy between the two.

To return to the image, in this essay I will examine Ellison's practice in contrast to other white photographers who—though not directly examining whiteness—examine things like the American dream, social instability, nationwide political and cultural shifts. This positions their projects as capable of easily being discussed through a mapping of whiteness and its many forms. The photographers are Larry Sultan and Allan Sekula. Sultan was an American photographer known for his documentary family portraits and explorations of the San Fernando Valley and the pornographic film industry. Sekula, on

the other hand, was an American photographer, writer, and filmmaker, included here for his work on the Lockheed Martin aerospace corporation and the effects it had on families, especially his own. The through-line of these projects that materializes the social, political, and economic conditions under which they are produced is simple—the family. There are Sekula's images of his father, Sultan's photos of his parents, and Ellison's staged images of an affluent family, a fictitious iteration of a family out of Marin County. These "families" represent specific socio-politico-economic milieus and how to maintain or sustain status.

By looking at these artists and the thematic through-line of family portraiture as a reflection of social negotiations, I want to consider them as constitutive of an aesthetic approach, contributors to a performative sedimentation.[1] By aesthetic approach, I mean there is a thematic similarity in the artists' work. Repetition of the aesthetic approach contributes to a per formative sedimentation. Performative sedimentation becomes the foundation of embodied memory. The aesthetic approach is thus a practice of embodied memory. I would like to apply this lens to the idea of the white artist. This embodied memory plays out in two ways. First, there is the "artist" as a whole. Ellison's image-practice, by itself, is consistent with artistic behavior dating back at least to Marcel Duchamp and the readymade. The artistic practice is taking something which already exists, recontextualizing it, and asking the viewer to "look harder." Though we can say that Ellison's Christmas cards could be read as found-images, contributing to the artist's

[1] Warren, John. "Performing Whiteness Differently: Rethinking the Abolitionist Project." *Urbana* 51, no. 4 (Fall 2001): 451–66.

connection to this documentary style, we can go one further by discussing Ellison's relationship to stock photography. Since stock photography informs the work, there is a tangential connection to the found-object recontextualized, the readymade. Next, including Sekula and Sultan, there is a concerted effort to use the camera to document issues of status, which I argue are actually issues of whiteness in these projects, and how it is maintained. I continue to use the word maintain because it implies a holding onto that is not promised to last. I will return to this later when discussing the images in more detail in Chapter 1.

How and why these images are made is not the only important part of looking at these projects. In addition, it is important to remember that these images are out in the world. Whether they are about the American dream, or if they are more directly about whiteness, these images are seen, questioned, and no matter what the artist may hope it is, they perform a function. Whether they perform the intended or right function is the subject of the second half of this text.

The issue is that Ellison's images are attributed to an artist that we could say is directing actors to mimic white behavior so to make these images. In that case, the images are merely a reproduction of white behavior, asking the viewer to see in the images something that is not there. Instead of articulating new behaviors, new paradigms in which whiteness is no longer the maintained center, we are presented with images which ask us to see ourselves in representations of whiteness, to notice it critically, without offered solutions. This is in contrast to agitating the viewer, disrupting their social understanding, which is what the work is meant to do. How well and to what effect

these images agitate is what is up for debate in this essay. Mel Chen's meditation on "agitation,"[2] posits that it is a gesture that can have both positive and negative socio-political implications, leading us to ask whether these images agitate the bodies these images reflect? Do these images potentially disrupt and, even if only temporarily, decenter whiteness? Chen's essay is an unpacking of all that is 'agitation,' from the racialized (and therefore problematic) to the revolutionary, but under that umbrella are both literal and figurative uses of the word which are well suited for discussions around Ellison's work.

In what follows, I will demonstrate that Ellison's work only seems direct because of the way it is presented to viewers. It comes across as if the images will resonate as critiques of whiteness, new anti-racist phenomena, regardless of the way they are discussed or written about. The issue, though, is that Ellison's image practice isn't direct. It is asking the viewer to question their complicity in whiteness and to reflect on the way it is structured visually in a very stylized way. What about these images, though, suggests a shift in attitude and viewing? What about these images demand the viewer engage representations they are likely familiar with in new ways? Is it because they feel they have been told to through the way these images are discussed? Is it because they are in the art-space, therefore there must be something more to them? In looking at these three artists, as I have mentioned, I consider the way their projects are written about. Sekula and Sultan, in addition to what was written about their work, present text alongside their

[2] Chen, Mel Y. "Agitation." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no. 3 (July 2018): 551–66. https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-6942147.

images in their projects. This text contributes to our re-viewing these images. Ellison himself does not include text in his project, which is unfortunate since it is common that Christmas cards come with letters from the family sending them. There is usually an update on each of the individuals in the image, sometimes including the dog. There is a whole practice here concerning text and image and the way they interact, the story they want to tell. Perhaps the the lack of insight from the actors in the image contributes to the reliance on the text outside of Ellison's control. But the way his work is discussed is vitally important to our reading and critique of his images.

The relationship between text and image is important in all of these artists work. But the text that accompanies Ellison's work presumes their affective capacity, which raises the question: Do the images do what the texts say they do? In questioning the effectiveness of these images I intend to consider the way whiteness has been discussed since the mid-twentieth century. Whiteness is malleable, ever-changing and its manifestations are numerous. Ellison's images are only one (though important) iteration of whiteness and how it maintains an invisible centrality. But as we will see, there are musings on whiteness which suggest that what Ellison is uncovering has already been seen, noted, and combatted against. This situates Ellison's work in two important ways. First, Ellison's images are reiterative of problems that some are already aware of, making them redundant, providing unnecessary or unfounded success. Second, the images become only important *for* white people. How can we expect engagement with these images in white institutions to resonate beyond the art space? Can we trust white people,

in a vacuum of whiteness, to register the intended sentiment of Ellison and act on it in meaningful ways? I worry.

Because of this, perhaps instead of having the capacity to agitate—and ultimately decenter—Ellison and his images, instead, perform an aesthetic approach indicative of an embodied memory. As a practice of embodied memory, I argue that Ellison is practicing an embodied memory of the white artist. The images borrow from an aesthetic paradigm that limits the ability to decenter or disarticulate whiteness. They are limited in their ability to resonate because of the influence they rely on. The "artist" is a category which has proven to have a practice consistent with the aesthetic approach; materials and social conditions may change, but the approach to imaging and criticizing said conditions persists. Ellison's images continue this practice.

It is important to name whiteness, to mark it, for the purpose of this essay. When I say "whiteness" I do not just mean white bodies, though they are almost always included. Instead, whiteness is figured as unfounded privilege and the way that privilege is maintained. As George Yancy writes, "whiteness is the transcendental norm in terms of which they live their lives as persons, individuals."[3] Yancy, through Sara Ahmed, reiterates that the power of this transcendental norm is that with whiteness "we don't see those bodies as white bodies. We just see them as bodies."[4] Whiteness is thus an embodiment of something *beyond* the body.

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[3] Yancy, George. *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race*. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Pub, 2008.

[4] Ibid.

Putting Ellison and Sekula and Sultan in conversation may seem a stretch considering the amount of time between the artists' projects and their being divided by documentary and staged practices. A way to group these artists is by considering the work of film scholar Richard Dyer. Dyer's *White* asks the reader to see whiteness where we may not have previously noticed it, to look at something like a "family portrait" of white people as a racial image, rather than simply as a family portrait. The group of artists then become an extended history of documenting *white* bodies attempting to maintain status. The shift, though, in that history is that we have yet to see a photographic practice which breaks away from iterating on issues of status. These images, some considered about the American Dream and its fallibility, some about current power, do little in the way of turning in on themselves. Sekula and Sultan's image-practices may seem unrelated, but that does not mean we should refrain from re-viewing them as images of race. In Ellison's case, though, the practice becomes problematic, especially because of the way his images are written about. The images are considered to turn in on themselves, asking white viewers to turn toward (or better against) their whiteness. The images do not seem to actually produce this effect.

Philosopher George Yancy calls for moments of "disarticulation" for whiteness, similar to Dyer's call to make whiteness strange. In addition, bell hooks writes of the way that whiteness is "terrorizing." We then see an outline for possible approaches not only to ways of re-viewing images, adding to Dyer's writings. We also see an outline for new approaches to image-production. Instead of maintaining the aesthetic approach of the white artist, what if the artist adamantly sought to disarticulate, to address terror rather

than reiterate it? These theoretical underpinnings are important especially considering the way Ellison's works are discussed. If we are told how to view these images, what we are to see in them, even if it is *not* in the image, we run the risk of performing affective resonance, rather than *being* affected in effective ways. This sort of behavior is what Sara Ahmed would call the "nonperformative."[5] In discussing institutional initiatives with the intent on effecting change, the newsletter, call-to-action, etc. is nonperformative. It is nonperformative because it does not effect change. Instead, it remains an act which does not work. Considering Ellison's images, and the way they rely on the text of institutions like the Hammer museum (another type of place where Ahmed would certainly expect nonperformatives) the entirety of the project becomes a series of nonperformatives.

If these images cannot disarticulate, agitate, defamiliarize, then they run the risk of being proxies, gimmicks, nonperformatives.[6] Not considering Ellison's images reproductions suggests an effectiveness in the image that represents social depth and progress. This comes at a time when far-right aesthetic regimes have an increasing affective potential and are being well-mobilized. To combat such a time with images which can be argued as reproductions, as reiterative, is to feign criticality and engage in an aesthetic paradigm which is not fitting for the conducive change we seek.

It would be too simple to say that in Ellison's identifying aspects of whiteness, investigating the way it represents itself, he is not responsible for decentering whiteness.

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[5] Ahmed, Sara. "The Nonperformativity of Antiracism." *Duke University Press*, 2006, 104–26.

[6] Ibid.

The issue with this is that to invoke whiteness in any other way is to recenter whiteness, to remind people of its centrality, its assumed inevitability. Therefore, to approach whiteness has to be to decenter whiteness. To decenter whiteness is to disarticulate, agitate whiteness; it is to defamiliarize viewers in art spaces when looking at white bodies; it is to avoid being a proxy for anti-racist sentiment, to avoid being a gimmick.[7] These images *alone* do not accomplish this.

Whether or not white people have the ability to create images to do this is a point of contention for Zarina Muhammad. In her essay "Can White People Ever Be Radical?" Muhammad asserts that white people's relationship to power is unavoidable in their image practice; that there is a stasis to whiteness which always informs the work, which is in contrast to radicality, movement. I am not looking to Muhammad to only understand why Ellison's images do not decenter whiteness. Instead, it informs my study as to how white people can contribute to anti-racist sentiment in productive ways. If the question is "can they" then there is room for "how they can." By looking at what Ellison's images don't do, and why they don't do it, I look to offer a suggestion for how to pivot away from that inability toward new opportunities for productive radicality.

[7] Ngai, Sianne. *Theory of the Gimmick*. Harvard University Press, 2020.

Chapter 1

To begin, it is important to qualify these images as constitutive of a unified aesthetic approach. I will begin by doing formal analysis, followed by a discussion of how that analysis creates a history of photographic practices by white artists that has recently pivoted from negotiations of status to “criticism” of said negotiations. The issue, though, is that the pivot to criticism is not without what can be read as a redemptive quality in those images. What happens is that even in attempts to question and re-view whiteness, there is still something there in the image, likely subconscious, that maintains its position of centrality to power, regardless of the artist’s intent. First, we must look at what these images are(n’t) doing. Let us begin with Ellison.

A family of seven, including a dog, sits on and around a couch. Everyone except the young child in the bottom left looks to the camera. There are varied expressions on their faces, indicative of a difference in comfort or attention in front of the camera. Buck Ellison's *Untitled (Christmas Card #2), 2017* (Fig. 1) reads more like an outtake of a family portrait—a trying, rather than an image ready for transmission.

Because of the informal quality of the image, the family doesn't look as connected as one might imagine a family to look in a Christmas card. The oldest woman, presumably the grandmother of the youngest figure on the phone, wears a bright orange blouse which contributes to her centrality in the image. She extends both arms out touching what would be her sons' shoulders on either side of the couch. In between this connection is her husband, leaning slightly forward with his fingers interlocked, wearing

a brown and teal short-sleeve button-up shirt with a giraffe on the front of it. Behind them, a young man sits on the top of the couch, holding what looks like a West Highland White Terrier. The dog looks uncomfortable, ready to jump out of the frame. The foreground of the image includes the disinterested grandchild, preoccupied with an iPhone. On the other side of the foreground, a young woman whose expression reads as ambivalent.

What we are left with, then, is a Christmas card in need of external devices to help transmit what is usually an occasion for self-aggrandizing of the family. It is common that Christmas cards include updates on the lives of those imaged. What would their card say? Do the expressions give us insight? How connected would the family come across in text?

One insight which would benefit us is by looking at other Christmas cards that Ellison has produced. Looking at *Untitled (Christmas Card #6* (Fig. 2*)* and *Untitled (Christmas Card #7)* (Fig. 3) we can see differences between the images, suggesting that there were multiple takes in multiple locations in multiple outfits. It is quite a fictitious production of an image of a family. This helps qualify Ellison's examination of whiteness. There is time that can be spent on something as simple as a Christmas card that upper-class whiteness invests in. The continuity through these images is that they show us the family is *trying*; trying to put together the best image of themselves as a group as possible.

Then there is Ellison's *Sunset*, which is an image of two young men applying a Patagonia sticker on the back of a BMW 328i (Fig. 4). This time, both figures look away

from the camera, focusing the image on the application of the sticker. The figure on the left is dressed in a business casual outfit, his fingers tender on the sticker. The figure to the right is wearing shorts and a tank top, the light of the sun accentuating his back and highlighting his circular bruises; these bruises are left from the alternative medicine cupping therapy used popularly by athletes. His hand, too, is connected to the car, though it doesn't touch the sticker.

This Patagonia sticker is not the first sticker on the car. There is also a The North Face sticker, and one above that which is hard to make out, though it looks like a two-dimensional graphic landscape. All these stickers speak to outdoor activities, though. The car, already a statement because of its branding, is further aestheticized and signifying of a certain performance with these stickers. Then there is the license plate of the vehicle, noting it is from Sonnen BMW which is in San Rafael near Marin county, an affluent area north of San Francisco.[8] Because of this, the license plate situates the viewer both geographically and economically. This shows us that it is not just the Christmas card which is employed to convey status. The car also becomes a site of significance and transmission. The connection of each figure’s hands to the car reiterates their connection to the intent behind applying a sticker for other drivers to see.

These images speak to Ellison's desire to uncover and identify the nuance of whiteness's power and maintenance of that power. Stylistically, though, all of the aforementioned images lend much of their aesthetic quality to the "genre" of stock

[8] U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis. “Personal Income by County and Metropolitan Area, 2020,” November 16, 2021.

photography. As Paul Frosh notes in "Inside the image factory: stock photography and cultural production," genre is "structured conventions and classificatory regimes that link viewers, images, and producers in a common framework of meaning."[9] The individual stock image then "becomes part of an 'intertextual relay' … and reproduces, calls forth and adds to an ensemble of recognizable formal and iconographic features to produce an image-type."[10] For Ellison, this engagement with the genre of stock photography means that his images, to Frosh, can be considered "generic." Frosh follows this by saying that "Each generic image can then act as the representative of this image-type, as its appropriate incarnation in particular circumstances."[11] So, then, according to this dynamic, Ellison's art images are in direct ties with stock photography. Does that mean that in their reference, their "incarnation," that they can only refer to stock photography? Do they not have the potential to refer to, while simultaneously critiquing? We will return to the significance of the "genre" of stock photography as it is used in Ellison's image-practice. For the time being, though, its significance is that it begins to inform the aesthetic approach that Ellison is utilizing.

I argue that Ellison's work activates embodied memory. Embodied memory here means that there is a behavior of the artist which is informed by art history. The artist,

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[9] Frosh, Paul. "Inside the Image Factory: Stock Photography and Cultural Production." *Media, Culture & Society* 23, no. 5 (September 2001): 625–46. https://doi.org/10.1177/016344301023005005.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

like Ellison, approaches the practice with an aesthetic approach that is grounded in the work that came before, like the work of Sekula and Sultan. These behaviors then contribute to a performative sedimentation.[12] Performative sedimentation is what Ellison is drawing from in art history—a way of approaching art practice. By not breaking from this tradition, Ellison contributes to that sedimentation rather than uprooting it. I want to use this theoretical framework to consider the way these images draw from other practices in- and outside art spaces. If the approach consists of gestures which are continually performed, can we not use this framework to discuss the artist doing "artistic" things? What do we make of Ellison's deciding to create these images based on other images while simultaneously being about something different and new? He is a clever artist, an artist like many in Western Art History, who is asking us to look closer, to see something we have seen before but now with fresh eyes. Reproducing representations of whiteness into seemingly low-grade stock photographs feels like an extension of this.

The issue with this is that these images are difficult to read. While Ellison isn't making as sweeping of a statement as an artist like Marcel Duchamp, he is using a trick. The trick being we are presented with is an object that looks too familiar to be art. Does Ellison, knowing or not, have an artistic approach that is in direct lineage with previous clever artists, most of whom canonically would have been white? If this is the case, do these images have the potential to decenter whiteness while they are being made in an

[12] Warren, John. "Performing Whiteness Differently: Rethinking the Abolitionist Project." *Urbana* 51, no. 4 (Fall 2001): 451–66.

artistic tradition which is centered? We know that Ellison is intending to make images which are said to uncover deeply important nuance. Is this approach the way to do so?

If we look at an actual stock image (Title: n/a description: concept of housing and relocation. happy family mother father and kids with roof at a home. Fig. 5) we see a uniformity of emotion in the family. There is a consistency in the color of attire, blue. All their shoes are white. Everyone in the images engages the viewer. Frosh reminds us that these images are used in advertisements to sell the idea of happiness and joy.[13] These images do that. Ellison's don't necessarily, but that is not to say that happiness and joy is not present. Rather, these images speak to the process of creating images, representations of happiness and joy. This is where Ellison's images situate themselves in the practice of giving viewers something they need to look harder at.

Because of the lack of uniformity in Ellison's images, can we consider them to be completely indicative of the genre? There is a series of requisites with stock photography: staging, casting, shooting. These are all included in Ellison's images, which means that he has also asked the actors to use facial expressions he has prompted it is not their own ambivalence or apprehension depicted. This is the same in the smiling faces of the actual stock photograph. Are we truly dealing with a lack of uniformity then in content? Or is the lack of uniformity, then, in salability? Would the agency seeking new images gloss over Ellison's images because they aren't stock enough? Do they have their own market outside of art-spaces, which would make them more salable?

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[13] Frosh, Paul. "Inside the Image Factory: Stock Photography and Cultural Production." *Media, Culture & Society* 23, no. 5 (September 2001): 625–46. https://doi.org/10.1177/016344301023005005.

This is not the only aesthetic approach that Ellison is pulling from, though. There is also something going on about negotiating and maintaining status. As will be shown with the next two photographers, there are practices which seek to document the negotiation of status during struggles of socioeconomic instability. Ellison's project to expose the invisibilized nature of a specific kind of whiteness seems somewhat tangential to this project, as we have already described the figures in his images as enjoying a certain leisure. What I intend to do, though, is group these artists together through their aesthetic approaches to negotiating status since Ellison's images are not extremely different in their intent and execution, even though they are made after a considerable lapse in time with the two new artists to be discussed.

Larry Sultan also has an art practice that is about negotiations of status. Sultan's *Pictures From Home*, particularly those of his father, have been considered "a Metaphor for Dashed American Dreams."[14] As Sultan notes, his project was made during the "Reagan years, when the image and the institution of the family were being used as an inspirational symbol by resurgent conservatives. I wanted to puncture this mythology of the family and to show what happens when we are driven by images of success."[15]

In Sultan's *Practicing Golf Swing* (Fig. 6) the artist's father stands on green carpet with his gaze pointed at a would-be ball, careful to keep his attention. This is a great

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[14] Wiley, Chris. "What Old Money Looks like in America, and Who Pays for It." *New Yorker*, August 1, 2021. https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/what-old-money-looks-like-in-america-and-who-pays-for-it.

[15] Sultan, Larry, ed. *Pictures from Home - Larry Sultan*. London: Mack, 2017.

instance of an attempt to "puncture" the mythology. Through the white curtains behind him a yellow light bleeds in, adding an angelic quality to the image. Insistent of the "mirage" of suburban dwellings in the desert, Sultan shows us that the interior of the home reflects that of the exterior. Grass looks like it has been transported *inside* the home. Because of this, the posture of the swing looks right at home indoors, against the carpet. This is all accompanied by the gold wristwatch, the television is playing, a stereo sits at the bottom of the entertainment console. There is a staged comfort in this image.

But the photo also suggests that this is midday; that the father is doing this instead of working. This is the point of Sultan's project; that now, because of his father's unemployment, there is a forced transition to one's twilight. The golf swing now becomes the focus of attention because one has had their work taken away from them. This is in addition to images like *Empty Pool* (Fig. 7) and *Dad on Bed* (Fig. 8). These images suggest that the father is going through a shift in status, trying to find projects to reaffirm the status in question. But this reading is largely informed by the text included with the images.

It is also important to note that Sultan's father does not agree with the way he is portrayed. Sultan's father did not appreciate the way he was photographed, saying that he did not see himself the way he suspected his son did. "All I know is that you have some stake in making us look older and more despairing than we really feel."[16] But Sultan thought that these images were representative of the transitional period his parents were

[16] Ibid.

going through. Sultan shows us images of his father in a suit on his bed, rather than in the office. He shows us an image of his father standing over an empty pool, rather than one filled with water and people scattered around enjoying themselves. These images can be considered a metaphor not only for the dashed dreams of a family. Perhaps more importantly, they are also images about a father's attempt to fight back and maintain a previous status.

Let us now shift our attention to a different photographer. A father kneels between two twin beds tinkering with a lamp (Fig. 9). To the right of the image a young boy focusses his attention on his desk, perhaps doing homework. The father is "working," as much as he can anyway. The image is from Allan Sekula's project *Aerospace Folktales: Days of Trial & Triumph: A Pictorial History of Lockheed, 1969.* Sekula's project is documentary photography, looking at the impact of the Lockheed aerospace corporation. Sekula's father had worked for Lockheed before being laid off, as "the waning of the Vietnam War and of the Apollo space program, along with a recession, brought a sharp falloff in military and NASA procurements … during the early 1970s."[17] Sekula's project then is almost one of redeeming the father from a paradigmatic shift away from space exploration. The fathers laying off signifies a potential shift in status, one that the father's actions are trying to avoid, which Sekula's images themselves assist in.

Drew Sawyer writes that Sekula's project "explores the daily life of this unemployed white-collar worker and his family as their class identity is being thrown

[17] Sawyer, Drew. "Allan Sekula: Aerospace Folktales." *Aperture*, no. 226 (2017): 108–15. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44405237.

into question."[18] I want to think about the ways these images contrast representations of status with that of Ellison's and Sultan. Sekula's images are in the middle of things. Sultan's are after the fact, and Ellison's images are staged and more contemporaneous. Our understanding of Sekula's father is derived from his still working in the images. Rather than taking multiple photos for a Christmas card or contemplating an empty pool, Sekula's father is trying to continue to perform his status by replicating the activity which afforded him (most of) that status in the first place.

We can tell that, though looking over his shoulder, the father is wearing the same outfit he wears in the rest of the images in the project, whether he is in the Lockheed parking lot outside of work, out driving, or at storage units. He is *always* an engineer, regardless of whether class identity is being thrown into question. How then can we read these images if things are drastically changing, but the father seems to be represented with continuity? How does this outfit reflect a desire to hold onto identity, class standing, the life of an employed engineer? The hope is that individual will will reaffirm one's status; that if the work never changes neither will the status. The issue, of course, is that individual will is not powerful enough considering such political shifts in industry. Though Sekula freezes his father in his work uniform in the images, that does not mean that his father can be frozen as an employee of Lockheed, frozen as an employed engineer.

The bedroom with the father on his knees and the boy studying is in stark contrast to Ellison's family portraits-- which suggest nothing but leisure-- and Sultan's

[18] Ibid.

father practicing his golf swing suggesting a holding on to leisure. In contrasting Sultan to Ellison, we can see that Sultan's family is proper middle-class, but this comes with the textual implication that middle-class wasn't enough. In Sekula's image, however, the implication is that the middle-class *is* enough and by any means necessary cannot be lost. These three photographic practices constitute an aesthetic approach of making images intent on negotiating and solidifying one's status. Ellison's images aim to critique, while Sultan and Sekula aim to redeem. Regardless, there is a fascination with shifting social status (to some, whiteness to others) present in all three of these photographer's work.

The issue of whiteness can be mapped onto Sekula's images. I intend to look at Sekula's images both from the perspective of the artist and that of the viewer. By looking at Sekula's images, like Sultan's we see a documentary form that penetrates white middle-class conditions that Ellison's fabricates and claims to uncover. From the jump, Sekula's project is concerned with whiteness since it is concerned with status. Thinking of Sekula's images as such recontextualizes them as images of a man looking to maintain his whiteness.

And, of course, there is text which accompanies Sekula's project, but this text works in a different way than in Sultan's project. Sultan's text is explanatory, a first-hand account of his reading of his parents. Sekula's text is different. The text comes in the form of an image, similar to a PowerPoint slide (Fig. 10). It reads: "The engineer and his old friend stood in the empty Lockheed parking lot while I photographed them. Unable to fathom my motives, they were uneasy." This text suggests that the

documenting of their time in the empty parking lot was one they would rather not have occur. Also, it begs the question: What were the motives? Sekula's work can be broadened to represent the shift away from aerospace importance, but it also could be narrowed down to an homage to a father out of work. Does the unease come from a hunch, that the motive is to try to pity the unemployed father? Does the father know that their status is in question, thus now is not the time to be photographed?

The aesthetic approach that takes shape then is one that is informed by political shifts and how this influenced the family. In the case of Ellison it is different than Sekula and Sultan. Ellison's work included in this essay is from 2017. This means that these images were produced during the Trump presidency. What the Trump presidency brought was a whiteness in peril, considered to be a victim of ongoing efforts of diversity. Ellison's images, then, are instances of negotiating status at a time when whiteness was (and still is) considering itself as victimized.

To pivot now to the way that this aesthetic approach is problematic, it is important to recognize the way that these figures are successful in negotiating their status. The empty swimming pool in the middle of nowhere is still a symbol of success. It is that this symbol reflects the desired effect of whiteness. If there is anything to mourn, it is not a lack of success. Instead, it is that whiteness has an ideological affect which drives expectations it cannot always keep, while still maintaining an ever-present opportunity for success. Considering the way Sultan has contextualized these images, that the forced retirement works as a guiding light in how we view these images, the alternative (better?)

solution would have been to keep working. The reality is that these images are not in stark contrast with a life better lived before the laying off his father experienced.

Sure, we can reiterate that the way the light carries through the sliding glass doors that there is an irony to someone who is practicing their golf swing is an angelic figure. But, simultaneously, does this formal quality not reiterate that things are well?

If we are not careful enough to assert ourselves as viewers, to question the conversation concerning these photographs, then the text and the formal qualities work together to show an ambiguity of American life that is not in in the image alone, that there are rugs beneath our expectations waiting to be pulled. But, considering the story of how this family took a turn, I would consider there to be much to be happy about. And when we reframe these images as persevering, we are reminded of the enduring power of whiteness.

Instead, as Chéla Sandoval points out, Barthes was also "one of the first white Western critical theorists to develop an analytical apparatus for theorizing white consciousness in a postempire world." Sandoval's assertion is due to Barthes's *Mythologies*—in particular, the "figures" or "poses" of rhetoric which the agents of dominant/supremacist discourse perform.[19] One of the poses is that of "inoculation." Sandoval writes that inoculation "provides cautious injections—in modest doses only—

[19] Sandoval, Chela. "Theorizing White Consciousness for a Post-Empire World: Barthes, Fanon, and the Rhetoric of Love." In *Displacing Whiteness*, 86–106. Duke University Press, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822382270-004.

of dissimilarity."[20] Sandoval goes onto say that because they are cautionary and modest, "Difference is recognized, taken in, tamed, and domesticated."[21]

Ellison's images are indicative of the inoculating pose in their subtle investment against whiteness and its centrality. The idea of difference, in this case whiteness as decentered, gets packaged in an image which does not offer a solution or alternative to white centrality. Because of this, the viewer is only asked to reflect on how *a* form of whiteness maintains its status visually. It does not recommend that this whiteness is in trouble. Instead, considering inoculation, it almost provides a point of departure for whiteness. Inoculation becomes a half-baked warning to those who are ardent in their identification with whiteness. And it is just enough to suggest to those looking to work against whiteness that the work is already under way without them. It suggests that enough is/isn't being done depending on which party the image is speaking to.

Sandoval looks to find something to put in contrast to inoculation, a way out. Sandoval finds the solution by going through Frantz Fanon who, in discussing the colonized subject, suggests that the "natural" rigidity promoted by supremacist ideology leads to a "burst[ing] apart" which could prove beneficial when the colonized subject puts back together the fragments of the self.

In imaging whiteness with the intent to uncover its visual structuring, perhaps a form of bursting apart is needed. The colonized subject will "burst apart" from the rigidity of supremacism while the colonizer benefits from it. Because of that, if we are to

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[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

image the visual structuring of whiteness, we must hope (if not expect) that those images make plain the nonnatural hierarchical position of whiteness and contribute to its own bursting apart. It must prompt the white subject to fracture their own self with the hope of a new, reconstructed self.

Ellison's Christmas card is too mild (modest) to have this effect. Ellison's image is more in line with inoculating the white subject than it is in prompting a bursting apart of the self. The images either reflect a life lived by the upper-class viewer, who is still unlikely to see these images as an extreme exposure, or they will inform non-upper-class viewers as a banal practice of representation. Nothing about these images has a "bursting" quality.

But what would images that cause a "bursting apart" look like? In *Regarding the Pain of Others* Susan Sontag writes that "For a long time some people believed that if the horror could be made vivid enough, most people would finally take in the outrageousness, the insanity of war."[22] I want to apply this thinking to whiteness. Unlike images of war, which the viewer may be able to distance themselves from, a geographic distance does not apply to race. Further, the images considered in this essay are by American artists, commenting on mainly American politics. As I will discuss in chapter two, there exist image practices which show how whiteness is complicit and, through that legitimate exposure, may prompt affected responses in ways that images of war or white family portraiture cannot.

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[22] Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York, N.Y: Picador, 2003.

Precisely because these images of the family seem banal, the images cannot undermine Sontag's argument. They do not even address the horror or insanity of whiteness. If we are thinking about the harm whiteness has caused, ignoring it completely is not the solution. So, then, how can we imagine a new image practice which identifies that harm, instead of ignoring it, while creating images which do more than make us aware or the harm? We know it exists, much the same way we know that war exists. Is there a solution to this problem? Is there a way to identify the perpetrator in ways that prove complicity and are effective?

Believing the horror or insanity of whiteness does not result in action against whiteness. There must be something that motivates the white viewer and makes their complicity undeniable. It can be said that there is an excess of images which make whiteness vivid, regardless of whether the image maker's intent was to do so. But that does not constitute an aesthetic approach worth pulling from in furthering anti-racist endeavors.

One place to start is in acknowledging how this aesthetic approach came to exist in the first place. Educational theorist John T. Warren borrows from and recontextualizes Judith Butler, writing that "Race is constituted through a 'stylized repetition of acts, '"[23] much the same way that gender is. Warren speaks also of a "performative sedimentation,"[24] meaning that there is a historical force, made up of layers and layers of

[23] Warren, John. "Performing Whiteness Differently: Rethinking the Abolitionist Project." *Urbana* 51, no. 4 (Fall 2001): 451–66.

[24] Ibid.

past performances, behind the present "performing" of whiteness that one inherits. It is not strictly individual will which perpetuates whiteness. Now, thinking of repetition and performative sedimentation, I want to keep these terms in mind when thinking of the artist. Ellison's images, though subversive in intent, add to the sedimentation of representations of whiteness. We can see images like the Christmas card, outside of an art space, being constitutive of a family's attempt to perform a stylized, repetitive act. Though the Christmas card itself may not be a strictly white fixture, it is a subtle form of performing and attempting to maintain whiteness. However ignorant to this history of representation the family may be, the instance of the Christmas card adds to it. I speak as if the image were meant to be circulated as a real Christmas card because Ellison does little in the way of legitimately pulling back the curtain on whiteness. It is too invested in both of the aesthetic approaches I have stated Ellison is pulling from to work against the performative sedimentation of whiteness. As I will discuss in Chapter 2 it is how the image is discussed in reviews, interviews and catalogues that situates the image as a subversion; the image itself, as has been mentioned, merely looks like a throwaway. The viewer is not met with immediate dissent.

The troubling question, though, is whether the white artist can undermine this performative sedimentation. As Warren notes, "my white subjectivity is not something 'I' underwent, but rather, by undergoing the process of white subjectivity my 'I' was formed – an 'I' that is, in and of itself, a product of social, political, and cultural possibilities generated through history."[25] Perhaps this is why Muhammad suggests that white artists

[25] Ibid.

cannot be radical. The white artist is coming from a position which, to a large extent, has been prefigured. How, then, can the artist push towards new performances of whiteness? How can white subjects perform legitimate anti-racism in their viewing? Warren writes of reflexivity,[26] which does seem to be what Ellison is doing. The attempt alone to uncover whiteness is an attempt to decenter it, which is a subversive performance. The question is whether that performance is capable of legitimate change when there are still other modes of performing whiteness involved (i.e., like *being* the artist who enjoys the appreciation of the Art institution). And, it is important to ask, does that institutional acceptance stem from the identity or the artist or the affective capacity of the artwork? Can we reconcile attempts to uncover whiteness as legitimate when they take place in historically white institutions which allow, if not commodify, institutional critique? What are we to make of images meant to create change that take place in historically problematic institutions? Ellison is starting to work against the performative sedimentation, starting to hint at new approaches to art that have subversive potential, but the images reflect that it may be his identity as the one who turned his back which is more important to the institution than what is *in* the images.

The result of what these images "aren't" doing, even in the explicit attempts, is to reaffirm whiteness. Whether it is Sekula who is almost aiding his father in a maintaining of status, or Sultan trying to use his father as a metaphor for the *other* side of the American dream, or Ellison's investigations into the hidden quality of an upper-class

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[26] Ibid.

whiteness, these images do not out-and-out speak against whiteness. Whiteness, as something already abstract, becomes further obscured when we consider American dreams and markets and status. What we aren't getting at is whiteness. Because of this, these images ultimately add to the performative sedimentation, the archive, of performing whiteness.

To briefly shift gears, another part of this aesthetic approach can be found in the naming convention. The Christmas cards all begin their title with "untitled." There could be an unresolved quality to the images which Ellison illustrates in his naming scheme.[27] This could be interesting, suggesting that the outtake is indeed an outtake; that the image selected for the final Christmas card has not been chosen yet. It is also interesting, considering that whiteness, too, is unresolved. By acknowledging that whiteness is unresolved as such, these images then become new iterations for sorting it out. But don't we need to *name* whiteness in these images?

Rebecca Aanerud's essay "Fictions of Whiteness: Speaking the Names of Whiteness in U.S. Literature" looks at how whiteness has transitioned from racially unmarked to marked in American literature. Though moving from one to the other, Aaneurd notes that marking is not sufficient for the project of displacing whiteness, for authors like Allan Gurganus and Joanne Brasil can "self-consciously locate whiteness," but they ultimately present stories about guilt and rationalization.[28] By retaining the

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[27] I want to thank Judith Rodenbeck for this insight.

[28] Aanerud, Rebecca. "Fictions of Whiteness: Speaking the Names of Whiteness in U.S. Literature." In *Displacing Whiteness*, 35–59. Duke University Press, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822382270-002.

"Untitled" naming scheme, Ellison's Christmas card lacks the marking of Gurganus and Brasil, though it does not result in guilt or rationalization. Instead, there is a limbo state the image rests in, that of identification. Ellison, via readings of his images and his own interviews, notes that the images are about the construct of whiteness. But the images do not offer a theory for deconstructing whiteness. Instead, they just are. There is a truthfulness to the images, as if the artist is saying "This is how they do it."

So not only do the images pull from an artistic aesthetic approach in their "untitled" naming, they also suggest that whiteness is unresolved without offering a solution. The issue with drawing from this aesthetic approach is that it puts the onus of responsibility on the viewer; that is, the responsibility to discern rather than the responsibility to act.

Where these images are shown to viewers cannot be overlooked either in considering the aesthetic approach. Does inhabiting books or art-spaces contribute to the reason we appreciate these images as they intend to be appreciated? Is there a performative sedimentation of viewing that we all perform as viewers to qualify the ingenuity of the work presented to us? Do we enjoy the work because it is in spaces where images are enjoyed? The performativity I arrive with is not one of absolute critique. Instead, it is one of interest. I arrive at Ellison's images ready to read between the lines. As I do, the performance gets reinforced, simultaneously reinforcing the image and its intentions. I leave feeling better about myself. I feel that I have done a good job at looking, and I feel that the images have told me something important. But these images

are meant to critique whiteness, to uncover hidden forms of power that whiteness maintains. In so doing, these images are inherently meant to disrupt whiteness' central position. Do they do that if I leave enjoying these images?

Now, Ellison states that he does not like "overtly political art,"[29] and what he means by this is that he enjoys art which can change and resonate over time. While this sentiment suggests that these images could (hopefully) shift with time and take on new meanings, it also helps situate Ellison's practice within an approach that appreciates a similar aesthetic paradigm. Because of the covert nature of Ellison's images, there is a lacking affective capacity. The images are trying too hard to be art, to be images that require meticulous viewing, trying too much to reiterate the performative sedimentation that influences them.

Shouldn't whiteness feel compromised when we look at these images? I noted that my initial response to these images was that of humor, entertainment. Does that not reinforce the center that whiteness holds? That we can see images of whiteness being uncovered while simultaneously feeling comfortable when viewing those images? I have now spent much time with Ellison's images, and I have become agitated. This is not for reasons the image likely desires, though. My agitation has grown out of my initial liking, my first impression of the image. My initial response to these images was due, in part, to the performative sedimentation these images refer to. I appreciated the clever nature of

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[29] "Comfort Is Tricky: Marina Pinsky and Buck Ellison — Mousse Magazine and Publishing." Accessed November 23, 2021 https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/comfort-tricky-marina-pinsky-buck-ellison.

the photographs; that they were indications of whites and that someone had begun identifying the way it holds its center. But that does not mean that identifying and decentering are complete performances. To agitate, the image's identification needs to be strong enough to disrupt as quickly as possible. Ellison's aesthetic adoption of stock photography means that these images are referential to an aesthetic approach that we might either gloss over (as it is just another image) or possibly reject (as it is an image-type we know to be meant for advertisement and sales). This may be too coy to be effective.

Daniel Blight is the only scholar I have found writing on Buck Ellison and his assessment of Ellison's work is the perfect pivot to the following chapter. Considering Ellison's art practice, Blight writes that "white people are ghosts, invisible to themselves."[30] Blight is suggesting that Ellison is forcing us to look at ourselves in his images to see what we cannot or have not seen before. Blight continues that "We, as viewers, do not know who these people are, but we can suppose who they remind us of, if not directly ourselves." This is all true, that there is a quality in Ellison's work which is attempting to show whiteness to white people. Blight continues, stating that it is through the details of the image that Ellison winks at us as he shows us who we are.

> One of Ellison's visual references is 17th century Dutch painting. As Martha Hollander notes in her *An Entrance for the Eyes,* Dutch painters designed a complex and thoughtful series of signifiers into their images which in equal parts documented and allegorised the lives of the subjects featured. Ellison has made a series of photographs that work similarly to reveal various tropes and details. An

[30] Daniel C. Blight. "Perfect White Family." *Vogue*, December 21, 2020, PhotoVogue edition. https://www.vogue.com/article/perfect-white-family.

> American war of Independence drill manual, a First World War cannon, a diamond engagement ring, a phone call made or taken in the Ritz-Carlton.

As I will continue with in Chapter 2, how important is it that we see these tropes and details? Do we not already have an understanding that this is how the ultra-wealthy carry themselves? Blight suggests that "whiteness is capitalism, and we barely know it." Is this a true statement? It does serve us to acknowledge that in my assessment of Sekula and Sultan mistaking whiteness for success or the American dream, that we indeed do not know it. But, again, these projects are rather dated. There is an understanding of race now that is different than at the time of those projects. And, as will be discussed later, there is a multiplicity to whiteness which allows it to adapt. "White people are ghosts, invisible to themselves."

Chapter 2

In 1997 film scholar Richard Dyer published *White*, a collection of essays looking at White as a racial identity in need of investigation. Dyer's method of doing so was by looking at existing representations and practices of whiteness in film and reinscribing race onto them. As Maxime Cervulle writes in the foreword of the 2017 edition of the text, Dyer's work is not about "giving sight to the blind," but rather about "learning to see differently, decentering and reorienting the gaze."[31] One of the ways Dyer accomplishes this is by looking at the cinematic apparatus itself, considering the way in which white subjects set the paradigm for lighting techniques, while non-white subjects pose a "technical challenge." Dyer also recognizes the monopoly that white people have had over how they are represented, while simultaneously attempting to claim universality. Dyer even considers the way that white men have created an idea of "closeness" to angels through terms of light. These moments are attempts to show that whiteness has been naturalized, and Dyer is seeking to reinscribe whiteness as a racial category. Dyer's hope, by acknowledging whiteness as a racial category is as such:

> The point of seeing the racing of whites is to dislodge them/us from the position of power, with all the inequities, oppression, privileges and sufferings in its train, dislodging them/us by undercutting the authority with which they/we speak and act in the world.

What Dyer hopes will come of this "point of seeing" is a whiteness that has been made "strange." To do this, Dyer charts the way whiteness has viewed itself, so-to-speak. Dyer

[31] Dyer, Richard. *White*. Twentieth Anniversary Edition. New York: Routledge, 2017.

notes that whiteness tries to claim that there is "something that is in but not of the body." This leads to the "white spirit" which Dyer claims takes on imperial pursuits: "The white spirit organizes white flesh and it turn non-white flesh."[32] This organization is what eventually gives precedent to the aforementioned monopoly on representation of the self.

The issue with Dyer's work is that we cannot rely on acknowledgment. Noticing the "boundaries" between those inside and outside of whiteness does little in the way of affecting change. It is an important beginning, but it is not an end in and of itself. As Dyer himself notes, "A shifting border and internal hierarchies of whiteness suggest that the category of whiteness is unclear and unstable, yet this has proved its strength." Because we are dealing with multiple whiteness's it is important that we are able to identify each of them and acknowledge how they continue to shift. But, it is equally important to only view such acknowledgments and chartings as introductory behavior. "Whites win either way" writes Dyer, for "either they are a distinct, pure race, superior to all others, or else they are the purest expression of the human race itself."
All of this suggests that it is not only the way white people begin to view themselves, but also, more importantly, how white people begin to represent themselves. If we are talking about spirits and how this lends "credibility" to hierarchical thinking and practice, we cannot retain representational practices which persist in their contributions to these negative effects. Dyer acknowledges this issue, by noting that "it is complicated to represent white people visually."

[32] Ibid.

One maneuver Dyer sees that has potential to disrupt whiteness, and its heavily heterosexual connotation, is in interracial heterosexuality for it "breaks the legitimation of whiteness with reference to the white body." Dyer continues that "if white bodies are no longer indubitably white bodies, if they can no longer guarantee their own reproduction as white, then the 'natural' basis of their dominion is no longer credible." This is an understandable position, with a broader implication that diversifying representation is a solution, and to some degree it is. The issue, though, is that representational practices are only one factor of affective change. I do believe that the opposite approach would enjoy a dialectic trajectory which could benefit representational practices and affect, but in identifying whiteness as a racial category we are identifying much more than representational practices. As Dyer acknowledges, the image of white people has a socio-politico-economic reach which can be reflected on in representational practice. But it is not enough for different types of representation to be propped up as a means for restructuring if the white people who have reflected on themselves have not looked hard enough.

If we keep Dyer in mind we can reflect on the images of Sekula and Sultan. We can now look at these images as images of racial figures that demand the race of the figures be noticed. In Sekula's case, we can see a post-war economic shift which allowed someone to attain (and then attempt to maintain) whiteness through their success (and eventual "failure") in employment at an aerospace corporation. In Sultan we can see that, though the images were a commentary on unemployment, mirages, and attempts to maintain status, that these images are actually about a persisting success of whiteness.

These two photographers, doing mainly documentary work, show us a post-war attitude of white men in underwhelming circumstances. But, tied to all of it is a desire to maintain whiteness. In Sultan's images, I argue that the attempt to maintain the status of whiteness is successful.

Buck Ellison is presenting us with a different type of image in a much different milieu. Ellison's images, as has been mentioned, are not documentary; they are staged. But the work that Ellison does, especially in his Christmas cards is an extension of this attaining and maintaining of whiteness.

We can continue to keep Dyer in mind, though, in looking at Ellison's images. Ellison is asking them to look harder, and his image practice feels like it is in direct response to Dyer's hopes. Ellison's images racialize white people while also suggesting that these representations help hide their race. For all intents and purposes, considering the way Curvelle says that Dyer's work is about "learning to see differently," Ellison presents images which would be a solution to what Dyer sees as a problem.

Reflecting on Dyer's idea of the spirit, we can see quite it deliberately in Sekula's and Sultan's images. Dyer considers it to be "get up and go, aspiration, awareness of the highest reaches of intellectual comprehension and aesthetic refinement." I want to refine this quote, questioning the "intellectual comprehension and aesthetic refinement, for they may apply to Sekula's and Sultan's subjects in a way different than how they read. For the time being, though, it is important to note what Dyer considered the other side of the spirit of white people, which is "the non-white soul" that "was a prey to the promptings and fallibilities of the body." So, while we may not think that the "intellectual

comprehension and aesthetic refinement" is explicit in the noticeably working, middle-class images of Sekula and Sultan, the idea of becoming "prey" to the "fallibilities of the [non-white] body" would certainly inspire certain intellectual and aesthetic responses. I am thinking here of the green carpeting in the Sultan's home or how Sekula's father is never imaged without a white button up tucked-in and his hair done. These are engagements with a visual understanding of "success" (as whiteness).

But, to continue to chart the difference between these photographs from the late sixties to the early nineties and Ellison's images from the 2010s, we can also see how the "spirit" is much different in the more recent images. Part of this shift is because we are looking at two different forms of whiteness. Another shift is that in the case of Sekula and Sultan is that we are mapping whiteness onto those images, whereas in Ellison's case we are being asked to notice the whiteness in the images. The "spirit" is something that we can understand the family trying to preserve in their images *while* they have it. In Sekula's and Sultan's images, the spirit is in question. Ellison's images then become reflections of white subjects enjoying their spirit. Even when we do not have people in the images—I am thinking here of *Untitled (Cars) 2008* where two Land Rovers are perched on steep terrain, suggesting their rugged maneuverability—we can see the persistence of "spirit."

Ellison's images are reliant on an enduring quality of whiteness that is reflected in the images. This is where Ellison's images become further problematic. Considering the image production of the photographers of the past, along with Dyer's assertions during the eighties and nineties, shouldn't Ellison's images depart from these visual

manifestations of spirit? In our ability to now map whiteness onto images that were originally about the American Dream, should we not expect an image practice now that is more conducive to anti-racist sentiment on a deeper level, something more than a visual representation of Dyer's writings? Is it too soon to expect this? What this questioning leads to is a consideration of what could be done differently.

Ellison's images, though this point is contested,[33] rearticulate representations of whiteness. Instead, they should attempt to disarticulate. Philosopher George Yancy calls for moments of "disarticulation" as a means to confront and, ultimately, decenter whiteness.[34] Those afforded the privileges of whiteness have worked hard for and appreciated a hidden centrality which must be exposed for anti-racist sentiment to be visible and resonant. Therefore, when considering the conventions of the artist, there must be a departure from traditional practices if one is hoping to put forward an image (of white subjects) which is meant to affect the viewer in new, socially resonant ways. To present us with images of Christmas cards or young men putting stickers on the bumpers of cars is not to disarticulate the white body, whiteness.

Notably, in Ellison's *Untitled (Christmas Card)* there is *some* disarticulation, but it is not whiteness which is disarticulated. The bodies which make up the family portrait are not uniform; the image does not look like the one that would make the cut to be distributed to friends and family. There are two key segments in the image which speak

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[33] "Made in L.A. 2020: A Version." Hammer Museum, n.d.

[34] Yancy, George. *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race*. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Pub, 2008.

to this. First, there is the boy in the front of the image, his gaze fixed on the iPhone rather than the camera. Second, the dog being held behind the couch looks to be trying to wrangle free from the boy holding it.

These moments of "disarticulation," though, are minor. First, it is a dog and a child who are "disarticulating." Of the family they are the least likely (if at all) to understand the tradition they are participating in. The other six figures in the image are poised and, though there are varying facial expressions that we could further look into, they look aware of the "task" at hand. To briefly consider the facial expressions, there are two which do not match the rest of the group. The younger woman's and the man in the blue sweater.

Thus, the figures who are "disarticulating" are a child, likely not yet old enough to understand the importance of the moment, and an anxious animal. How, then, can the image be poised as a legitimate instance of disarticulation? It cannot, for the disarticulation is only formal rather than theoretical. And, while uncovering the visual structuring of whiteness may be on display, by providing us with an image of *how* subtle forms of whiteness are instanced, whiteness itself is never disarticulated.

All of this, though, comes with the caveat that disarticulation *is* included in the images because of the artist's intention. Thus, the images do need to be acknowledged as attempting to do a certain kind of social work. It is a first step. This moment of disarticulation in the figures lends itself to Ellison and Dyer's hope will look closer. It is a trigger to acknowledge that something is off. But it is not a disarticulation that has yet to be accounted for by others.

And, aside from disarticulating, do these images agitate? Gender and Women's studies scholar, Mel Y. Chen looks at agitation as a racialized gesture that has both positive and negative connotations. Chen writes: "The term *agitation* has broad use and a broad range of value, crossing domains such as medical pharmacology, securitized educational and child developmental spheres, and political movements, where it is seen as a fundament of revolution."[35] Thus, agitation can be "something to treat or suppress from the point of view of a system of control," but it can also be reinscribed as a weapon for working against that system of control.[36] Agitation, then, is something that if it becomes too cultivated can have an adverse effect on hegemonic systems.

But Chen reminds us that "scripts for gestural conduct are, and have been, racialized."[37] This means that there are agitations which have been coded as white and therefore non-threatening. Is that what is happening in the "outtake" image we are presented with in Ellison's Christmas card? Is it an acceptable form of agitation? Again, it seems that the agitation we are presented with, much like the disarticulation, is purely formal. To agitate in ways which go against the "script" would be to present images which are more than reproductions of an already problematic identity. To agitate would be to present images which affect the viewer in new ways, to disarticulate what it means to be white and to defamiliarize what one feels in the presence of art.

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[35] Chen, Mel Y. "Agitation." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no. 3 (July 2018): 551–66. https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-6942147.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid.

The late writer and activist bell hooks reminds us that whiteness is terrorizing, that whiteness induces terror in others.[38] All the while, though, it figures itself as natural. hooks says "If the mask of whiteness, the pretense, represents it as always benign, benevolent, then what this representation obscures is the representation of danger, the sense of threat."[39] Because of the hold whiteness has on power, we cannot feign criticality when looking at images of whiteness. There are two things that come to mind when looking at Ellison's images with ideas of terror in mind. First, images like *Untitled (Christmas Card)* perpetuate representations of whiteness which are terrifying. The image is casual, festive, posing as an image that isn't doing much work. The seemingly banal image of a family gearing up for the holidays is the exact image which terrifies and terrorizes non-white subjects. The image is another instance of the leisurely, natural dominance of whiteness. Second, when considering how white viewers will engage this image, it does little in the way of criticizing whiteness. Whether or not we know of Ellison's intent, when we look at the image, we see something familiar, something safe. Now, Ellison's goal is to ask us to consider the structure of power in images like the Christmas card with a more discerning eye. The issue with this, though, is that it presupposes a certain type of viewer, one that is also, importantly, white. Non-white subjects cannot count on images like the Christmas card to resonate with white viewers.

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[38] Hooks, Bell. "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination" In *Displacing Whiteness:Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism* edited by Ruth Frankenberg, 165-179. New York, USA: Duke University Press, 1997. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822382270-006

[39] Ibid.

The image must also remove terror, for "Without the capacity to inspire terror, whiteness no longer signifies the right to dominate."[40] So, while Ellison's images may inspire questioning in the white viewer, they still occupy space on the wall as instances of dominance which can create terror in non-white subjects. hooks notes that in "Theorizing black experience, we seek to uncover, restore, as well as to deconstruct, so that new paths, different journeys are possible."[41] If we do not further theorize and, more importantly, practice new representations of whiteness, then whiteness will find a way to reiterate to maintain centrality. In doing so, we cannot perpetuate traditional representations of whiteness and ask the viewer to rethink them. This can easily lead to a sense of righteousness in the white viewer while maintaining terror in non-white viewers. Instead, we need to theorize and produce representations of whiteness that make clear the denouncement of hegemony, normativity, and supremacy. If not, Ellison's Christmas card becomes an image of a family in waiting; waiting to further terrorize in the "unseen movements" that Benegal mentioned.

One of the reasons we cannot expect white viewers to engage with Ellison's images in meaningful ways is because the figures in the image get labeled as "bad" white people. Media scholar Raka Shome writes that there is a film thematic about "bad white guys" which ultimately leads to them being supplanted by a "good white guy." Shome provides the example of this substitution is in the films *Murder at 1600, Dave, Primary*

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid.

Colors, My Fellow American.[42] These films begin with a "bad white guy…who occupies the site of presidency who at the end is rooted out by a good, regular, average, everyday 'white guy' who saves, salvages, and restores the Presidency and the 'people.'"[43] Shome writes "This is an interesting strategy of contemporary whiteness: the identification and acknowledgement of a part of itself as bad, corrupt, oppressive, and needing to be fixed, and a separation of itself from that part by denying identification with it."[44] My fear is that we then frame Ellison's images as *of* bad white people and, in turn, replace them with the figure of the artist who identifies the bad white people for us or ourselves who acknowledge that we are aligned with the artist and not the bad white people who are imaged. "White people are ghosts, invisible to themselves." Regardless, much like in identifying with the hero in films, we identify with a hero-of-sorts in the struggle against racism, disregarding our own complicity in the problem.

We can see that in replacing the bad white guy with the good white guy there is a distancing that takes place. The viewer is allowed to distance themselves from the problematics of whiteness. This isn't a new phenomenon. Feminist philosophy scholar Shannon Sullivan discusses this distance in depth in her book *Good White People*. Sullivan asserts that the "good white liberal" think that only lower-class whites, "white

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[42] Shome, Raka. "Outing Whiteness." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 17, no. 3 (September 2000): 366–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/15295030009388402.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid.

trash," are racist.[45] The distance that the middle-class white person sees between them and the lower-class is "through race-class etiquette," considering white supremacy's vigor to be lower-class behavior.[46] Seeing as this book was published in 2014, it is recent that there were still considerable fears that white people saw racism as something purely linked to lower-socio-economic white people.

Considering Sullivan's argument, we can see how Ellison's images attempt to provide insight as to how to look critically outside of sanctioned art spaces. It is not that Ellison's images are meant to inform us of racism in upper-middle-class whiteness, though that can be discerned to some extent. Instead, Ellison's images want to point to a whiteness complicit in white supremacy by its hidden persistence, its seemingly invisible centrality. Ellison is looking to show the hidden-in-plain-sight visual paradigm of whiteness. These images, then, want to show that racism is not contained in lower-socio-economic white communities. Ellison attempts to represent that the other end of the economic spectrum is complicit as well. The images alone do not do this, though.

Two issues persist, though, in Ellison's images. First, the good white liberal, as art viewer who I imagine engages Buck Ellison's work, not only then sees overt racism in lower-class white communities. They then see the upper-middle-class white people as the other end of the spectrum; the upper-middle-class becomes the covert community of privilege. This all sets up a perfect opportunity for the viewer to engage the work,

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[45] Sullivan, Shannon. *Good White People: The Problem with Middle-Class White Anti Racism*. SUNY Series, Philosophy and Race. Albany: SUNY Press, 2014.

[46] Ibid.

place themselves within it, and contextualize themselves as privileged subjects in need of transformation. But, considering the writing of Shome, there is a history of replacement. There are now two options the "good white liberal" can choose to see themselves replacing. The middle-class is thus not in the lower end of the spectrum with an overt, unfounded hatred, nor do they inhabit a tax bracket which enjoys "hidden" benefits.

There is also the issue of where viewers will engage images like Ellison's. Sullivan asserts that "Rather than avoid the white places and identities that white supremacists are attracted to, white allies can work for racial justice from within them."[47] I'm not sure if the museum or gallery is the space for this intervention, though. Sullivan notes that there is a systemic nature to whiteness and racism which cannot be undone purely by the individual. How, then, does the work of art, engaging individual after individual invoke antiracist behavior? The art-space would be a place of comfort for the good white liberal. Though it would be a great opportunity for an artist to disarticulate the art space with images that defamiliarize the viewer in said spaces, the images Ellison presents do not seem to have that much affective potential.

Sullivan offers a way forward for whiteness to be an identity aligned with racial justice: "Rather than try to flee their whiteness, white people need to embrace it more tightly. Rather than despise their whiteness, white people need to learn to love it."[48] It is

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid.

not an affirmative love that is suggested by Sullivan. Instead, "A white person's loving herself as a white person means her critically caring enough about the effects whiteness has in the world to work to make it something different and better than what it is today."[49] This is a difficult ask when the idea of loving oneself seems far removed from the political imperative of anti-racism. Additionally, there is much room for white people to replace the bad white person they see with a good white person. This doesn't allow for enough critical reflection to embark on loving oneself meaningfully.

There are multiple issues at stake if we continue to appreciate these images as doing important work against racism. First, I want to consider what artist and writer Hito Steyerl calls the "proxy."[50] The proxy, similar to the replacement of bad white people with good white people, is a place-filler. Our online profiles, complimented by avatars, are online proxies of the self. To be direct, Steyerl writes that "An image becomes less a representation than a proxy, a mercenary of appearance, a floating texture-surface-commodity."[51] The image then has trouble becoming a signal of anti-racist sentiment. Instead it can become noise.[52] Following the image, engagement that is dishonest means that we issue a proxy of ourselves in response by understanding the

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[49] Ibid.

[50] Steyerl, Hito. *Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War*. London; New York: Verso, 2019.

[51] Ibid.

[52] There is a fascinating discussion in the text about content moderators having to take over for algorithms when trying to distinguish faces from butts. All of this points back to issues of clarity, legibility.

intent of the image but not acting accordingly afterward. Then, the "floating texture-surface-commodity" becomes another cell of data for consumption. We do not engage with the image to be affected in provocative ways; instead, we engage so that we can say that we've engaged. In our performative engagements we contribute to the noise that Steyrl would rather we wade through to get to the signal. We have not missed out on the new, crazy, important work of the artist, but that does not mean we are engaging with a signal.

Steyerl opens up the proxy further: "Proxy politics happens between taking a stand and using a stand-in. It is in the territory of displacement, stacking, subterfuge, and montage that both the worst and the best things happen."[53] Steyerl sees possibility in the proxy when it is not tied to things like bot armies spreading misinformation. The idea of the proxy lending itself to subterfuge is using a stand-in for disarticulation and agitation. But, again, when we consider the way that Ellison's images are proxies of anti-racist intent, and, if we are not careful of and attentive to our participation in the attention economy,[54] we become proxies for subjects in search of affective resonance.

Whiteness is always already a gimmick. In Ngai's terms it works "too hard" at maintaining its centrality, but it works "too little" simultaneously, by seeming like that

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[53] Ibid.

[54] Odell, Jenny. *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*. Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2019. This text deserves an introduction here as it informs my understanding of the attention economy. Additionally, this is a precursor for more to come from Odell in this text.

centrality is natural, unmediated.[55] Whiteness then functions as a gimmick before and during its visual representations. The image practice should reflect this. Part of the images we have discussed hint at whiteness as a gimmick; that there is the child on the phone and the dog jumping out of the arms indicating the outtake. That Sultan's father, even in his "despair" is primarily concerned with his golf-swing. But, considering the time elapsed between the practice of Sekula and Sultan then and Ellison now, we are moving at a slow pace. So far, we have moved from projects seeking to redeem whiteness to projects hinting at whiteness. Thus, instead of using this opportunity to render whiteness as a gimmick, Ellison's images themselves become the gimmick. They work too hard in their claims to not be reproductions of whiteness, instead being critical examinations of it. They also work too little, in how the images themselves do not contain the qualities to disarticulate whiteness and affect/effect the viewers as such.

Though I will not offer a historiography of the discourse on affect, I do intend to qualify it, since it is pertinent to include in a discussion of an image's effectiveness. Antonia Hirsch writes that "Affect, while a common enough term, describes, in fact, a difficult-to-grasp phenomenon that alternatively could be described as an "intensity" resulting from sensory input. It is pre-Symbolic, not yet culturally coded, and based in embodied experience."[56]

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[55] Ngai, Sianne. *Theory of the Gimmick*. Harvard University Press, 2020.

[56] Hirsch, Antonia. "Intangible Economies: An Introduction." *Fillip - Folio B*, n.d. https://fillip.ca/content/intangible-economies-an-introduction.

Hirsch's remark that affect is "difficult-to-grasp" is resonant. Whatever may be disarticulating or agitating becomes that which is difficult to grasp. Now, there is something happening in the difficult to grasp that also resonates with the request for the viewer to look closer. This is where affect gets murky. The idea of looking closer says that the image has an affective potential. But, in the use of "look closer," we are immediately, incidentally told that the image itself does not possess the affective potential discussed. So how "intense" are Ellison's images? They do not match the intensity of Kara Walker's silhouettes. And intensity does not inherently mean being explicit. The lacking intensity in Ellison's work is due to their leisure. The Christmas card may have a dog jumping out of a boy's arms and a child may be on the phone, but the image is one of comfort. Comfort in the home; comfort in front of the camera; comfort in one's whiteness. Again, one could claim that it is this comfort which Ellison is trying to get at. But what good does that do? Do we not now know that there is a comfort which is appreciated by occuppying whiteness? Isn't that comfort what makes the terror of whiteness so terrifying? We know the ways whiteness is articulated. In response, we need solutions instead of reminders.

The "reminder" feigns criticality and does not prompt the viewer to legitimately act. Rather, these types of images request a performance of sentiment. We see something complimentary in institutional efforts to work against anti-racism. Sarah Ahmed discusses the nonperformativity of institutional antiracist speech acts: "Such speech acts do not do what they say: they do not, as it were, commit a person,

organization, or state to an action. Instead, they are nonperformatives."[57] The nonperformative is constituted precisely because it does not commit someone to do something.

In contrast to the nonperformative Judith Butler writes, "performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names."[58] Ellison's images are reiterative and, as the portrait of the soldier behind the family on the couch suggests, even citational to some degree. The images *alone* are performative whiteness. They articulate the way that an upper-class whiteness represents itself without disrupting that representation. What is the proper response of the viewer when engaging these Christmas cards? I understand that this work asks the viewer to consider the nuanced, miniscule details of their behavior; that hopefully that reflection will reveal the farce of whiteness. But, as has been suggested, there are too many opportunities for the viewer to better associate their relationship to whiteness without turning on it and participating in its disarticulation. Therefore, these images are performative of whiteness while also being anti-racist nonperformatives.

The Hammer's write-up on Ellison's work is not a nonperformative, for they say the work is "a deep *inquiry* into how whiteness and privilege are sustained and

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[57] Ahmed, Sara. "The Nonperformativity of Antiracism." *Duke University Press*, 2006, 104–26.

[58] Ibid.

broadcast."[59] (Emphasis added) By doing so, they absolve themselves from any guilt of *not* attempting to invoke change in the viewer, where the nonperformative would be to say that these works decenter whiteness. This "inquiry" that the Hammer promotes is important because it is ambiguous.

What occurs now is difficult. How does one perform a new whiteness while grappling with the aforementioned performative sedimentation, while avoiding actions which are nonperformative? The answer lies in what the images "commit the viewer to do." Commiting the viewer to "identify" the machinations of whiteness's representational practices results in the nonperformative. "I know that whiteness constructs itself visually as such." How does this help? What does a response, indicative of the resonance of affective images against whiteness, look like that proves performative of anti-racism?

It is understandable that there would be a critique of my project if I continued claiming that Ellison's work did not decenter whiteness without offering a project which does decenter whiteness. To be honest, I am not sure what decentering whiteness yet looks like. Therefore, I cannot with certainty suggest how Ellison's project could have accomplished this. What I do know, though, is how the work does not decenter whiteness. It does not agitate or disarticulate or acknowledge the history of terror that whiteness evokes. With these two concepts in mind, I can direct us to a project which might better inform us as to how to decenter whiteness in art practices.

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[59] "Made in L.A. 2020: A Version." Hammer Museum, n.d.

One possible image-practice to look at as a guide for decentering whiteness is Kara Walker's silhouettes. Literary scholar Anna Ioanes reminds us that, initially, "the silhouette reflected an emerging ideology of the individual as fully knowable and categorizable through careful examination of the body."[60] In the case of Walker, though, the use of silhouettes "render[s] act of violence ultimately unknowable, and prompt[s] a wide array of affective responses."[61] To Ioanes, the "unknowable" is a space for interpretation. But, the way the work is interpreted is tied to how the viewer is affected by the images. Affect not only becomes an inherent quality in the work, it also permeates in a multiplicity of possibilities.

Walker's tableaux are obviously different than Ellison's images, as they are far more expansive. But, even though the viewer attempts to follow Walker's work in the gallery space, hoping to find a narrative to follow, "the tableaux avoid signifying cause and effect or other temporal relationships between characters."[62] In a way, then, we are not too far off from the way we view photographs. We can isolate moments in Walker's tableaux in the same way the camera isolates moments. Moving to a later portion of Walker's work does not indicate that there is a narrative connection. This is okay, though, as the isolated nature connecting the silhouette to the photograph is beneficial to this

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[60] Ioanes. "Disgust in Silhouette: Toni Morrison, Kara Walker, and the Aesthetics of Violence." *Journal of Modern Literature* 42, no. 3 (2019): 110. https://doi.org/10.2979/jmodelite.42.3.07.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Ibid.

argument. This connection allows us to think through affective responses of similar viewing experiences. It also allows us to question the potential impact of Ellison's images as they are in stark visual contrast to Walker's intensely affective tableaux.

Ioanes states that "the silhouette both outlines and erases the scene of violence that could potentially disgust viewers."[63] One of the main ways the silhouette does this is by removing most of the individual expression of each figures face. There are some allowances for individual expression in the silhouette, but it is always already much more limited in detail than in photography. This calls for invested looking at and engaging with Walker's work. So if we juxtapose the Ellison's photographs and Walker's silhouettes, we can see that the amount of information in the image does not amount to the amount of affective response. We can see the smiles, smirks, stares in Ellison's image, but the discrepancy in expression that the photograph affords does not amount to a more insightful viewing.

Walker's silhouettes work so well as an option for art-practice that can decenter whiteness precisely because they are not centered on whiteness to begin with. As Ioanes writes, Walker's work is "obscuring and emphasizing representations of anti-black violence."[64] In the obscuring, the viewer is asked to examine how much they read violence onto the black body. Though there are figures which are easily identifiable as white, the request is not limited to whiteness. And, because there are identifiable white figures in the images, there is a cause-and-effect relationship. Whiteness becomes

[63] Ibid.

[64] Ibid.

complicit in the anti-black violence, and it resonates with the viewer because of their complicity in projecting violence onto the black body. Now, it is fair to suggest that the work may not have the affective potential suggested; that the viewer will not see that they are complicit. The issue with this is the juxtaposition between representations of white and non-white figures in the silhouettes. Who is inflicting and who is inflicted upon is noticeable. Therefore, if the image does not resonate, it is a decision that it does not resonate. The image still has what it wants to do inside of it.

Walker's images do a better job of exposing the performative sedimentation of whiteness and our current complicity in it.

If we look at one of Walker's tableaux, we can see that there is an auction of sorts at hand. All of the figures have chains around their wrists except for the man with the cane and the tophat standing on top of the dock, extending a fishing rod with money on the hook towards those chained. Many of the figures extend their chained hands upward, highlighting the complicated position of the enslaved, looking for work rather than not. Two of the figures, though, are looking for an alternative way to the pile of money behind the man in the tophat. One figure has reached the fishing line, but he hangs still as someone behind him as grabbed him by the ankle.

This example is exemplary of Walker's ability to obscure the way we read black bodies while also maintaining how whiteness is complicit. White people do not need to worry that the fishing line will extend toward them, for they know they have had the privileged position of the figure in the top hat. In showing the precarity of the chained figures, that some extend out while some fight back, there is an implicit precarity

demanded of the viewer. If you are not the figure in the tophat then you must show it. Regardless of financial standing, the white viewer in the art space knows who they are more likely to be represented by in an image like this. Therefore, they must question how they will respond to such an image both in- and outside of the art-space that they view it.

Another option may come from a critique of Deanna Lawson's photographic practice. Deanna Lawson is also a contemporary photographer staging, among other things, images of families in their homes. Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw notes, though, that viewers may not be entirely aware that these images are staged, that these images are not documentary.[65] There is a key problematic in this which is that Lawson seems to be constructing a representation of blackness that "continue[s] a tradition of degradation and exploitation that may not be easily recognized as problematic by those who are distanced from it by virtue of their class position or racial identity."[66] Further, Shaw writes that "Lawson has adopted a specific kind of power that historically operated exclusively within dominant White male artistic culture."[67] The power which Lawson has adopted, to Shaw, is the control over the sitter; that Lawson can put black subjects through "abject objectification."[68] An example of this is mentioned in Shaw's article when the author

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[65] DuBois Shaw, Gwendolyn. "The Many Problems with Deana Lawson's Photographs." *HyperAllergic*, September 23, 2021. https://hyperallergic.com/679220/the-many-problems-with-deana-lawsons-photographs/.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Ibid.

discusses reactions to the work *Deleon? Unknown* (2020). Shaw notes that her former student, attending the art space with her, looking at Lawson's work, objects to the state of the sitter's hair. The student says "Look at her hair. No Black woman that I know would *ever* let anyone take her picture with her hair sticking up like that. It's so clear she has no idea what's going on. What about consent?"[69] This response to the work suggests that there is a power that Lawson wields over her sitters.

Ellison, too, exerts power over his sitters. In an interview with Rebecca Bengal, it is said that Ellison "shot nearly four thousand frames, purposefully exhausting his subjects until they stopped acting." This quote signifies two things. First, the actors that Ellison hired are *worked.* Ellison, then, in his attempts to critique whiteness, makes his actors feel the work he is intending to create. This implies that the actors are put through a series of poses which reflect whiteness, in turn tiring them of whiteness, a foreshadowing of the intended effect on white viewers. But they eventually "stop acting," suggesting that even when direction falters, they will resort to a noticeable whiteness that Ellison can reliably image. Ellison's reliance on duration then is both presumptuous and delayed. It knows whiteness lingers, but it reiterates that one must wait, look harder, for it to appear more directly. It also signifies that whiteness cannot hide. Though these are hired actors, Ellison assumes that there is a whiteness within them that will eventually show itself if he tires them out enough. This isn't to say that it is inherent in any white subject. Instead, Ellison

[69] Ibid.

functions under the premise that the learned behavior is something the actors will eventually fall back on. Getting them beyond acting may get them back to their regular performance. Ironic that I'm the tiring nature of a four thousand photo shoot that eventually tire will activate a whiteness worth imaging. Meanwhile, it is whiteness that many of us are already tired of. Instead of early portraiture where shutter speeds required that the sitter be open to discomfort, Ellison forces discomfort on his sitters when it isn't technically necessary.

This is also in contrast to agitating the viewer, disrupting their social understanding, which is what the work is meant to do. How well and to what effect these images agitate is what is up for debate in this essay. Qualifying Ellison's images as something more than reproductions is what makes them gimmicks. Suggesting that exposing the centrality of whiteness will lead to adequate shifts in one's performance or appreciation of whiteness is naive. Furthermore, it is not the images which would have this effect on viewers; instead, it is the text that accompanies these images which does that work.

So, it is not necessarily the exact White male artistic culture that Shaw speaks of that Ellison is drawing from, but it is certainly tied to the aesthetic approach he is using. What does it mean that a white artist meant to be critiquing whiteness asks his sitters to act white? Does there not need to be an inversion, an approach more in line with Lawson, if we hope to decenter whiteness? Does Ellison not enact his own exploitation by showing us images which "examine" whiteness, which we then celebrate, all the while whiteness maintains centrality and another white artist is celebrated as such?

Shaw writes that "real damage may be done if an artist is using her own blackness as a tool of false solidarity to entice working-class Black subjects into a visual order that perpetuates the exploitation of their bodies and cultural forms."[70] False solidarity is key here, as Ellison presents us with images which are meant to give us an inside look into the way whiteness is constructed (creating a hierarchy of viewer's understanding), performing solidarity while really appreciating success from imaging representations of whiteness which lack any legible attempt to displace that whiteness.

It is now important to revisit Sekula and Sultan as well. While the catalyst for this work is revisiting them through Dyer's lens, it is not enough. To situate these works under Dyer is merely to rearticulate them as issues of whiteness rather than issues of success and status. But it is important to think of these as works that do not disarticulate. Instead, they try to retrieve a status they have lost. Now, there is no way to go back so that these images can become images that disarticulate. Instead, we need to view these works as not disarticulate so to better inform the way we consider Ellison's art practice, which is ongoing. Because these images do not disarticulate, and they are prime examples of images which we could use Dyer's lens to revisit, Ellison's images have no excuse for participating in a similar aesthetic paradigm. The time passed in which artists were conscientious of fluctuating status and how white people attempted to negotiate that transition is now something charted roughly fifty years prior to the work of Ellison. Is it enough that we continue to document how people negotiate status?

[70] Ibid.

When we look at Sekula's images, the problematic is that the time his father was employed by Lockheed ended abruptly, which just as quickly changed his status. It was an unfounded status to begin with, though. To consider Sultan's images, what more could the family have wanted, all things considered? Those images look more like the way that whiteness can persevere in the face of forced transition. Those images could easily be read as images promoting his father's success and comfort. It is only the text, mainly from Sultan himself, which suggests that these are images of despair. This is just as true in Ellison's images. Not all of Ellison's Christmas cards look like "2." If we look to Christmas cards "6" and "7" we can almost see a departure from the outtake quality of "2." We see monochrome outfits, tuxedos, a lot of ankles (?). We can gather that the family is trying things on, trying on representations of success (i.e., whiteness) so to pick the best one at the end, the one that ties everything together for the perfect, white, package. Figures who weren't smiling in "2" are now smiling in number "7." This nullifies the attempt at disarticulating whiteness. Yes, we could read the process of taking the perfect picture as an uncovering of an upper-class whiteness. But we are still presented with images which indicate that there is a leisure to this "family;" that there is a comfort in having the time to take the perfect picture in multiple outfits and locations. The multiplicity of Christmas cards also undermines the disarticulate bodies in "2." Those disarticulations now become fodder; the child who was on the phone in "2" becomes the child hiding behind a tuxedo jacket in "7." It now becomes a marker of humor, childish impatience, rather than an adamant neglect of the process.

But these playful rearticulations are not how the image is considered by others. ARTSPACE writes that "[Ellison's] work functions like a mirror directed not just at the social world in which he was reared, but also for the privileged art consumer that is his presumed audience."[71] But how do these images disrupt privilege? What do images of children eating hummus, or families during the holidays do to the viewer? Do they not just reflect back the life of many privileged art viewers? We can say that looking at these images can provoke insight, as they can incite embarrassment in the viewer. One can easily imagine a viewer with a Patagonia sticker on their car being thought of in this way. But how impactful can these images be if they are inside the institution, meant to stir something in the viewer at home in the institution? Does the act of putting the sticker on the back of the car not speak to a greater issue of identity in this fictitious viewer that reflecting this behavior back to them is not equipped enough to change them in a meaningful way?

It is important to note that Ellison has reflected on his project: "We live in this over-photographed world, yet there is a whole class of people, the ultra-wealthy, who, for the most part, disclose only what they want."[72] Daniel Blight continues this line of thought saying,

> In a period of ludicrous economic inequality, the photographic representation of this type of domestic space provides a seldom-granted look in to a 1% culture

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[71] This can be found in a simple artist biography at: https://www.artspace.com/artist/buck-ellison

[72] Tatol, Sean. "Why Does The Whitney Biennial Suck So Much?" The Manhattan Art Review, n.d. http://19933.biz/whitneybiennial.html.

> which owns 90% of American dollars. Ellison visually documents this space, and at the same time renders it artifice, fiction.[73]

The questions I have that stem from this comment are: Do we need pictures of the ultra-wealthy to understand them? Don't these images run the risk of humanizing people with an inhuman amount of power? What is to gain from seeing these? What am I supposed to do next? Because there is an implication that something necessarily needs to follow. In Sontag's words, do we need to regard the wealth of others? We know that this level of wealth is out there; I don't need it to take the form of family portraits, or cars on display, or men making fresh pasta with their asses out to remind me. I think that the idea that this work renders this space as fiction is presumptuous. There is a material quality to the "ludicrous economic inequality" that Blight references. So while it the "natural" quality whiteness tries to uphold may be a fiction, its effects are very much real. If the intent is indeed to humanize, to make the viewer aware of their complicity in the act of viewing and acknowledging their own envy of those imaged, this does not separate the art-practice from ad campaigns of already ultra-wealthy corporations. Again, the result of which is an appreciation for the artist's turning of his back on his social circle, rather than anything substantial in the images.

Art reviewer, Sean Tatol sees this type of appreciation of the artist as a current trend in curatorial practice. Writing on the Whitney Biennial *Quiet as It's Kept,* of 2022, in which Ellison is included:

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[73] Daniel C. Blight. "Perfect White Family." *Vogue*, December 21, 2020, PhotoVogue edition. https://www.vogue.com/article/perfect-white-family.

> "Meaning cannot be sutured onto a work by simple facts such as the artist's biography or identity, because such things have no inherent tie to the quality of the work. The entire objective of art is to represent affective phenomena, and if it becomes possible to experience that representation through background details about the artist then art becomes effectively useless."

This suturing is equivalent to the substitution of the bad-white-guy with the good-white-guy. The same way the work is confounded with the artist's biography is the same way the viewer can distance themselves from the bad-white-people in Ellison's images and suture themselves to the artist. The affective phenomena of Ellison's work is twofold. First, it is because we know that the artist has turned his back so-to-speak on upper-class whiteness. Second, we have been told to do so by places like the Hammer, in their reminding us that these works of art are *not* reproductions of whiteness.

Tatol's position not only has to do with the artist; it is also a direct attack on the institutional nonperformative. It reminds us that even though we can complain about an artist's half-baked attempt to discuss whiteness, it is also the institution that we need to direct our attention toward. For without it, our frustration with the artist would at least be limited. The institution uses the identity it sutures to the artworks as an attempt to perform diversity and change. But, as has hopefully been demonstrated in my response to Ellison's work, that performance of diversity and change is without resonance, for I cannot find those qualities *in the image.*

Yancy also writes that "the white body is also fundamentally symbolic, requiring demystification and exposure of its status as the norm, the paragon of beauty, order, innocence, purity, restraint, and nobility."[74] This is where Ellison's images can become a

[74] Yancy, George. *Look, a White! Philosophical Essays on Whiteness*. Philadelphia:

negotiation. For there is a demystification occurring in Ellison's work. The issue is that the images need to be accompanied by text which explains they do said work. Ellison's want to be covert instead of overt means that his images *will* look like they are reproducing that which they critique: "beauty, order, innocence, purity" etc. If that is the case, how can we demystify the symbolic white body by reproducing it? This is where the additional text can be provocative, for it contributes to Ellison's point that we need to look harder to demystify. It is in the very "naturalness" of whiteness that whiteness further constitutes itself. The issue with this, though, is that while it identifies, it does not decenter. There are plenty of people who know that the "naturalness" of whiteness is a farce. We need images which do more than reiterate existing knowledge.

Temple University Press, 2012.

Conclusion

A thematic has been established. Ellison, Sekula, and Sultan make up a set of photographers taking to the family for broader concerned insights. Whether documentary or staged, these artists see something in the family that is indicative of a macro politics. With Sekula and Sultan it was more tied to industry and a middle-classness; Sekula's father dealt with aerospace initiatives falling out of favor while Sultan's father dealt with a younger generation coming of age. Regardless, both artist's projects come to represent cultural shifts and the impact that they had on the "family." I use quotes to suggest that the family is inadvertently considered universal in these two projects, when what is really being documented and considered is the white family. Buck Ellison takes this as his subject matter. It is through these considerations of "family" that Ellison sees the whiteness persisting. Ellison uses parody to make his point, creating images that attempt to reflect the nature of an upper-class whiteness. The issue is that the reliance on parody results in images that are closer to reproductions than they are to insightful and inciting images. Ellison's images end up performing similarly to Sekula's and Sultan's—images which were never intended to tackle the problem of whiteness. This attempt at parody that results in reproduction speaks to Muhammad's assertion that white people cannot be radical.

Perhaps one option for white artists at this time is to do nothing.[75] Artist Jenny Odell looks at the productivity of doing nothing. Doing nothing is a means to avoid the attention economy, to avoid the could-be farces of proxies and gimmicks. I have argued that in their attempts to document negotiations of status, Sekula and Sultan have actually documented the persistence of whiteness. Ellison, in attempting to parody whiteness, has created reproductions of it. What may be the best course of action is to do nothing. The hope is to engage in more intimately interior ways, rather than focusing on materializing the process of understanding whiteness' seeming invisibility. Part of the way Odell sees this in her own practice is by not making something new, but instead by cataloguing things that already exist, giving credit, attention, appreciation to things already in the world. Should we not take whiteness as our object of attention and take a step back from running true risk of reproducing it?

What I mean by this is to retreat from making and to engage in listening and thinking. Warren notes that "To do whiteness differently requires an enactment of self that is reflexive, critical, and responsible."[76] For all intents and purposes, this is what Ellison is doing in images like the Christmas card, but it is not direct enough to provide the reflection suggested by Warren. Perhaps we need to spend more time with our whiteness, begin to define what it means to decenter it, figure out whether Sullivan's

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[75] Odell, Jenny. *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*. Brooklyn, NY: Melville
House, 2019.

[76] Warren, John. "Performing Whiteness Differently: Rethinking the Abolitionist Project."
Urbana 51, no. 4 (Fall 2001): 451–66.

appeal that we love ourselves is a legitimate action before we materialize our initial efforts in images. These images will continue to contribute to an archive which has done more harm than good. Maybe in doing nothing we can find ways for radicality to emanate from white artists' work; maybe we can find a way for affect to always be present.

(Figure 1) Buck Ellison. *Untitled (Christmas Card #2)* 2017

(Figure 2) Buck Ellison. *(Untitled Christmas Card #6)* 2017

(Figure 3) Buck Ellison. *Untitled (Christmas Card #7)* 2017

(Figure 4) Buck Ellison. *Sunset* 2015

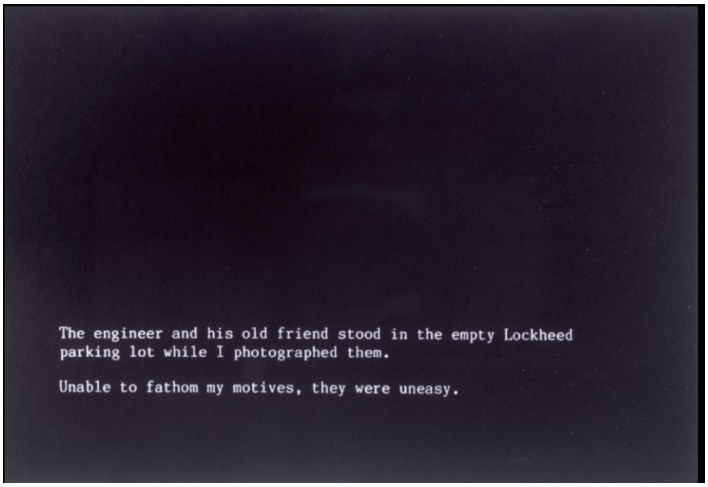
(Figure 5) Stock Image.

(Figure 6) Larry Sultan. *Practicing Golf Swing* 1986

(Figure 7) Larry Sultan. *Empty Pool* 1991

(Figure 8) Larry Sultan. *Dad on Bed.* 1984

(Figure 9) Allan Sekula. Aerospace Folktales-'Days of Trial & Triumph: A Pictorial History of Lockheed, 1969'



(Figure 10) Allan Sekula. Aerospace Folktales-'Days of Trial & Triumph: A Pictorial History of
Lockheed, 1969'