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The public life of white affects

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Abstract

The growing political power of racialized groups in white-supremacist societies has unsettled the hegemonic position of whiteness. In the United States, this political shift has led to the linguistic repositioning of whiteness within public discourse as visible and vulnerable rather than unmarked and dominant; such repositioning operates as part of a larger strategy for maintaining white supremacy. Within white publics, which are simultaneously constituted through white public space, white public discourse, and white affects, those who are white-identified linguistically engage in affective performances that reassert racial dominance by invoking claims of wounded whiteness. The article compares the affective strategies of white public discourse found, on the one hand, in ethnographic interviews with white youth in liberal educational spaces in California and, on the other hand, in the mediatized discourse of the US racist far right. The analysis identifies five affective discourse strategies deployed in the white public discourse of both groups: colormute racism; disavowals of racism; appropriations of diversity discourses; performances of white fragility; and claims of reverse racism. This shared set of discursive strategies is part of the larger convergence and mutual dependence of militant racism and mainstream racism in protecting all white people's possessive investment in white supremacy.

El creciente poder político de los grupos racializados en las sociedades supremacistas blancas ha desestabilizado la posición hegemónica de lo blanco. En los Estados Unidos, este cambio político ha derivado en el reposicionamiento lingüístico

de lo blanco dentro del discurso público como perceptible y vulnerable en lugar de camuflado y dominante; tal reposicionamiento opera como parte de una estrategia mayor para mantener la supremacía blanca. Dentro de la colectividad blanca, que a su vez está constituida por el espacio público blanco, el discurso público blanco y el afecto blanco, aquellos que se identifican como blancos participan lingüísticamente en representaciones emocionales que reafirman la dominación racial alegando una herida a lo blanco. El artículo compara las estrategias afectivas del discurso público blanco encontradas, por un lado, en las entrevistas etnográficas con la juventud blanca en espacios educativos liberales en California y, por otro lado, en el discurso mediatizado de la extrema derecha racista estadounidense. El análisis identifica cinco estrategias afectivas del discurso empleadas en el discurso público blanco de ambos grupos: el racismo sin mencionar la raza o palabras raciales; el rechazo al racismo; la apropiación de discursos de diversidad; representaciones de la fragilidad blanca; y la denuncia de un racismo invertido. Este conjunto compartido de estrategias discursivas forma parte de la aún mayor convergencia y dependencia mutua del racismo militante y el racismo corriente en su afán por proteger todas las inversiones posesivas de la gente blanca en la supremacía blanca.

KEY WORDS

discourse, emotion, publics, racism, United States, white supremacy, whiteness

1 | INTRODUCTION

There is a perception within the US commentariat that whiteness has gone wild. Responding to the disruptive political events around the installation of Donald Trump in the US Presidency, mainstream public discourse positions certain current forms of whiteness as exceptional, unruly, and violent. This feral whiteness implicitly contrasts with the normative, genteel form of whiteness that has been hegemonic for the past several decades. For example, establishment critics on the right and left alike decry Trump and his supporters for not only fomenting but also “normalizing” racism. Such formulations, however, do not acknowledge the pervasiveness and ordinariness of white supremacy as a structural principle of the United States from its origins to the present day (Painter, 2010).

The framing of whiteness within public discourse as newly unleashed has many skeptics, particularly among people of color. In a tweet issued in the summer before the 2016 election, Left, an African American scholar, rejects the idea of white supremacy as “whiteness gone wild” and appends a definition of the term (Figure 1).

LEFT
@LeftSentThis

Follow

Folks always want to make it seem like White Supremacy is whiteness gone wild. No. It's a standard 🇺🇸 practice.

white su·prem·a·cy

noun

the belief that white people are superior to those of all other races, especially the black race, and should therefore dominate society.

11:42 PM - 25 Aug 2016

3,618 Retweets 5,062 Likes

1.6K 3.6K 5.1K

FIGURE 1 Left's tweet challenging the idea of white supremacy as "whiteness gone wild"
(source: <https://twitter.com/leftsentthis/status/769062328616845312>)

Rosa and Bonilla (2017) make a similar point in their critique of white liberal panic in response to Trump's election. The authors argue that by positioning Trump as exceptional, white liberal public and scholarly discourse protects its own kinder, gentler form of white supremacy. As they note, this discourse was characterized by affects of horror, trauma, and despair:

[M]any of those who opposed Donald Trump's candidacy felt shocked, betrayed, and depressed by the news of his victory. Political commentators suggested that large swaths of the population were experiencing "collective trauma" and suffering from "Trump traumatic stress disorder."
(2017, p. 201)

However, for many Black Americans, the election was experienced not as an unprecedented trauma but as part of an ongoing historical trauma stemming from enslavement, one in which racism remains an everyday rather than exceptional occurrence (Williams-Washington, 2010).

Rosa and Bonilla's discussion calls attention to the vital role of public discourse in maintaining white supremacy by circulating white affects. With the growing political power of racialized groups, the terms of this discourse have changed. A generation ago, the dominance of whiteness could be read from its absence in public discourse—as unmarked, invisible, inaudible, and thus unquestioned in its hegemony (Treichler & Bucholtz, 2001). By contrast, whiteness is now linguistically repositioned as visible and vulnerable (see also Deumert, this issue). Far from reflecting a new sharing of political power across racial lines, this discourse serves to maintain racial dominance. In US public discourse, those of us who are white-identified enact wounded whiteness through affective performances that strengthen rather than dismantle white supremacy. (I use the first-person plural pronoun throughout this article to make clear that I do not stand outside of whiteness and that everything I say

here necessarily applies to me and to all white people in the US context.) White affects, our own and others', enable all white people to materially perpetuate and benefit from racism, whether or not we individually align with overt white-supremacist ideologies.

In this article, I demonstrate that the discourse strategies of whiteness are affectively saturated and that these strategies are used by very different kinds of white people, producing two contrastive but co-dependent forms of whiteness. Through a comparison of ethnographic data from white youth in liberal educational spaces in California and mediatized data from avowed white supremacists, I argue that at the current moment in the United States, as people of color are increasingly gaining political ground, whiteness strategically and affectively positions whiteness as beleaguered in order to maintain the white-supremacist racial order for all white people.¹

2 | LANGUAGE, RACE, AND AFFECT IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE

According to traditional—and much-contested—conceptualizations, publics are political spheres discursively produced via mediatized communication (Cody, 2011). It is less acknowledged, however, that publics are also formed within the geographic and institutional spaces of social and political life (Low & Smith, 2006) as well as within collective contexts of affective density, or what Ahmed terms “emotional publics” (2015, p. 19 n.24). That is, publics are simultaneously constituted discursively, materially, and affectively. As Ahmed puts it, in the production of emotional publics “language works as a form of power in which emotions align some bodies with others...” (2015, p. 195). Recent sociolinguistic work in a range of research settings similarly argues for affects as material and discursive sociopolitical forces (e.g. Borba, 2019; Bucholtz, Casillas, & Lee, 2018; Dlaske, 2017; McElhinny, 2010; Milani & Wolff, 2015; Wee, 2016; Wilce, 2013).

The emotional publics of whiteness involve both white public space and white public discourse. These publics are formed through the affective regimentation of racially differentiated bodies in sociopolitical spaces and discourses. Hence the three dimensions of white publics rely on one another: White public space (Page & Thomas, 1994) authorizes and incubates the affects of white public discourse, while white public discourse affectively delineates and patrols white public space (cf. Hill, 1999).

In their theoretical account of the co-constitutive relationship of racialization and affects, Berg and Ramos-Zayas (2015) further characterize this self-protective quality of white affects. They point out that the “empowering affect” of whiteness is inherently unstable and thus requires regular fortification in the face of historically emergent racial formations that undermine its dominance:

although “empowering affect” perpetuates privilege, such privilege has to be continuously reinvented and even developed in terms of “knowing” and recreating its racialized Other. This continuous attentiveness to changing racialization processes is, in fact, required for “empowering affect” to continue to effectively exert its disciplining power. An example of this would be the “racial paranoia” proposed by John Jackson (2008), which underscores forms of “political correctness” that require that privilege be maintained, not through overt forms of domination but by learning to manage white social anxiety. By becoming proficient in changing racial language and social expectations, fundamental power structures can still remain largely unaltered. (Berg & Ramos-Zayas, 2015, p. 663)

In citing Jackson's (2008) work on racial paranoia, the authors call attention to how white people affectively, linguistically, and materially maneuver within a shifting racial terrain in which overt racism has been relegated to the extremist margins, at least temporarily and partially. Their discussion reveals that the

emergence of vulnerable white affects in the current era is part of a larger historical process. This insight resonates with Bonilla-Silva's (2019, pp. 7–8) discussion of how the racialized emotions of whiteness protect white people's "affective interests" in ways that yield material advantage.

Previous scholarship, then, identifies three key characteristics of affects: They are public and social, they work in conjunction with material and discursive processes, and they are both racialized and racializing. This set of insights for understanding affects and their social effects is necessary for unpacking the current workings of whiteness in public discourse.

3 | THE RACISM OF WHITENESS

Although racism is essential to all forms of whiteness, the term *racism* usually brings to mind a particular type of white person: one who is virulently, violently, and proudly racist, exemplifying what Rosa and Bonilla (2017, p. 203) call "exceptional" white supremacy. Despite the upheaval of the current political period in the United States, militant racism remains discursively exceptional and marked. Indeed, white people, whether politically radical, liberal, or conservative, are remarkably unified in our belief that it is some *other* white people who are racists, not we ourselves.

But far more common—and far more dangerous—than the militant white racist is the mainstream white racist, whose racism is often covert, well-mannered, and sometimes even unintentional; this is the kind of racist that I am and that I am trying to learn not to be. This form of white racism, which Rosa and Bonilla (2017, p. 203) call "quotidian" white supremacy, denies its own existence, and it is often invisible to "nice" white racist people like me. Yet these two forms of racism are in a relationship of mutual dependence. On the one hand, mainstream racism provides militant racism with an aspirational model. As many militant racists have openly stated, their goal is to be perceived as mainstream rather than extremist (Daniels, 2018). On the other hand, militant racism provides mainstream racism with plausible deniability. The existence of militant racism allows mainstream racists to convince ourselves that we are not racist at all—because at least we are not doing the terrible things that those *really* racist white people do.

White supremacy, then, is not only an explicitly stated or tacitly held ideology of racial superiority, as in Figure 1 above, but also the structural fact of racial domination (Leonardo, 2004). In the United States, the structural advantages of white supremacy have been vouchsafed in the period from the post-Civil Rights era until the beginning of the Trump era not so much by militant racism as by mainstream racism, and especially by one particular form, colorblind racism, which denies the relevance and significance of both race and racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Under colorblind racism, white people regularly assert that we don't see race, we don't notice it, it doesn't affect us, and more importantly, it doesn't affect people of color, so any social disparities must be due to something other than race. With the rise of the Trump regime, militant racism has once again come into view and into earshot in public discourse in ways that are difficult even for avowedly colorblind mainstream white racists to deny or explain away. But as militant racism regains a foothold in the center of public life, it borrows some of the discursive strategies of colorblind racism. That is, in its current form, militant racism incorporates rather than contradicts mainstream racism. What sustains both white supremacy as a system and white racism as individual and collective participation in that system is therefore not a particular form of racism, which is variable across time and place, but rather something more fundamental: the feelings of white folks.

White people literally talk ourselves into whiteness both because of the massive material benefits that accrue to us (Roithmayr, 2014) and because of the equally sizable symbolic advantages that whiteness confers (Harris, 1993; McIntosh, 1989). We are deeply affectively attached to these benefits; in Lipsitz's (1998) resonant phrase, white people have a "possessive investment in whiteness." As Lipsitz and other

scholars have pointed out, both historically and in the present day, the emotional investment in whiteness is often strengthened precisely when the material benefits of whiteness are diminished.

Numerous white affects sustain the project of white supremacy, including white rage (Anderson, 2016), white fear (Ioanide, 2015), white guilt (Sullivan, 2014), white mourning (Hochschild, 2016), white laughter (Corella, 2018), and white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018). Underlying many of these affects is a stance of white innocence (Gutiérrez, 2005/2006), which discursively absolves white people of racist responsibility. White innocence and its animating affects are therefore central to the reproduction of racism, particularly within the public discourse of white emotional publics.

4 | WHITE PUBLIC DISCOURSE ACROSS TIME AND SPACE

In this article, I focus on how white affects are deployed in public discourse by two different groups of white people across age, time, and space. The first of these is white California youth, most of whom participated in research I conducted in the 1990s in a liberal California community (Bucholtz, 2011). At Bay City High School, the majority of students were not white, but the school was both materially and discursively organized as white public space. The ethnographic interviews that I conducted also worked to reclaim the school as a white space; for this reason, I understand the interviews as a form of white public discourse, albeit of a very different kind than that traditionally understood as public discourse. The second data set comes from militantly racist white men in the US public sphere in the period surrounding the 2016 Presidential election. In comparing the discourse of these two very different groups, I do not mean to elide the important differences between them but rather to demonstrate that a wide variety of white people—young and old, liberal and conservative, today and in the past, in different parts of the United States (and probably in other parts of the world as well)—rely on similar discursive strategies to maintain our uncritical positionality within whiteness.

This project emerged soon after the 2016 US Presidential election, when I noticed that the public discourses of militant racism circulating in mainstream news media closely resembled the discourse strategies of white California youth in my own and others' ethnographic research. In collecting mediatized data for this article, I searched online for mainstream news stories in which public figures who openly espouse white-supremacist ideologies enacted white affects. I then identified the discourse strategy at work in each case and its accompanying affective stances, as enacted both lexicogrammatically and, where possible, indexically, particularly via prosody.² The following analysis focuses on five discourse strategies found both in data sets and their related affects. This focus excludes certain white affects from the analysis: White rage, hate, and pride are present in the mediatized data but not in the ethnographic data, and white guilt is present in the ethnographic data but not in the mediatized data. I have also excluded certain affects, such as white laughter, that are present in both data sets but which I lack space to analyze.

It is necessary to point out that those who uncritically document white public discourse, whether journalists or researchers, are ourselves complicit in the reproduction of white supremacy. This problem is evident both in the mainstream media's recirculation of militant racist talking points (Bell, 2018) and in my own interview data from the 1990s. As a novice ethnographer, I struggled—and failed—to reconcile my own anxious researcher affects with the conflicting demands of the positivistic social science model of traditional sociolinguistics in which I had been trained and the more critical, reflexive approach of linguistic anthropology to which I was drawn. I raise the issue of my own white complicity here and throughout the article neither to confess my white liberal guilt nor to

display my white liberal political correctness, but because uncomfortable white affects—both our own and others’—are analytic tools for identifying and undoing the discursive strategies of white supremacy (DiAngelo, 2018).

5 | STRATEGIES OF WHITENESS IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE

In the following analysis, I examine five strategies that mobilize white affects in white public discourse across times, places, and identities: (1) colormute racism, (2) the disavowal of racism, (3) the appropriation of the multicultural concept of diversity, (4) the performance of white fragility, and (5) the claim of reverse racism. These five strategies are particularly frequent and persistent across contexts, given their shared ideological commitment to framing whiteness as weakened and disempowered. Together, such strategies work to undergird white supremacy in public discourse in the current sociohistorical moment, when racial hierarchies have become increasingly unsettled.

5.1 | Colormute racism

The first discursive strategy of whiteness, colormute racism, combines Pollock’s (2004) concept of colormuteness, or reluctance to talk about race, and Bonilla-Silva’s work on colorblind racism. It is an irony of colormute racism that this silencing strategy entails an incitement to racial discourse (cf. Foucault, [1978] 1990): That is, language users must invoke race precisely so that they can condemn its mention or deny its relevance. Colormute racism is discursively manifested either by treating racial topics and terms as taboo (Deumert, this issue) or by rejecting the possibility that racial inequity could be rooted in racism. I consider below two instances of the latter phenomenon, which Bonilla-Silva (2003, pp. 62–63) characterizes as the “anything-but-race” strategy.

In Example 1, two white girls at Bay City High, Josie and Zoe, explain to me why they don’t have any Black friends. Josie states that this is because there aren’t many Black students in her advanced placement classes, the academic track for students considered by the school to be college-bound.

FIGURE 2 Trump’s tweet illustrating the discursive strategy of colormute racism
(source: <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/912280282224525312>)

Example 1 (slightly adapted from Bucholtz, 2011, p. 183)

- 1 Josie: But I just think that that's—
 2 I don't think it's a race thing.
 3 I just think it's an economics:,
 4 like,
 5 [s:ocial thing more.]
 6 Zoe: [Unconscious kind of thing] too.=
 7 Josie: =Unconscious.
 8 Mary: Yeah.
 9 Josie: A:nd,
 10 I think,
 11 um,
 12 (0.8)
 13 It just so happens in Bay City that the majority of people whose parents are pushing them,
 14 the majority of people whose parents like,
 15 <lower volume> {who've gone to co:lllege,
 16 are ↑ white.}
 17 And it's just-
 18 Zoe: Yeah.
 19 Josie: I don't know,
 20 I mean I—
 21 I just think that's tr-
 22 I—
 23 Zoe: Yea:h.
 24 Josie: I think it's ↑true.

In line 2, Josie rejects the possibility that race is a factor in how she and Zoe select their friends. Zoe aligns with her, suggesting that any racial division is an “unconscious kind of thing” (line 6); Josie reinforces this denial of deliberate culpability by implying that the racial composition of their friendship groups is merely a coincidence (line 13). As a white researcher, I am complicit in this colormute framing by aligning with the girls’ position rather than problematizing it (line 8).

It is in Josie’s and Zoe’s interest as white teenagers not to see the structural connection between race and barriers to educational opportunity—and it is also in their interest to blame Black students’ lack of access to college on their parents (lines 13–16). In this example, white affect is enacted through a stance of white innocence, which Josie linguistically performs by using rising pitch and focal stress on two key words—↑ *wh*ite (line 16) and ↑ *tr*ue (line 24). This prosody treats her statement as common sense and conveys mild surprise that anyone could imagine otherwise. Through these indexical resources, white innocence gives discursive sanctuary to white supremacy.

The colormute strategy can also be seen in political public discourse—for example, in the tweets of Donald Trump. In Figure 2 from 2017, Trump condemns National Football League professional football players who kneel during the US national anthem to protest anti-Black police violence. He tweets, “The issue of kneeling has nothing to do with race.”

Trump's outraged affect, marked by a lack of hedging, extreme-case formulation (*nothing to do with race*), and deontic verb use (*must respect*), diverges sharply from Josie's and Zoe's milder stances. Nevertheless, both cases indicate that white affects as different as wide-eyed innocence and hectoring outrage participate in the same project of dismissing race from further consideration. In this way, the strategy of colormute racism benefits those who employ it as well as all other white people.

5.2 | Disavowal of racist intent

A second white discursive strategy is the disavowal of personal racist intent. Underpinning this strategy is the fallacious "personalist ideology" of white racism (Hill, 2008, p. 89), namely, the belief that racism resides in individuals with evil intentions, not in systems that benefit white people. Such denials perpetuate the illusion of white innocence. This strategy has traditionally been associated with mainstream white racism, which instead deflects racist responsibility onto working-class, uneducated white Others. A striking new discursive development, however, is that now even openly and militant white racists also reject the label of racism, which many formerly embraced with pride.

The disavowal of racism was common among white teenagers at Bay City High. Example 2 is the beginning of Josie's explanation of why she doesn't have any Black friends; this talk occurs before Example 1 above.

Example 2 (slightly adapted from Bucholtz, 2011, p. 178)

1	Josie:	<u>Pe</u> ople.
2		Like,
3		whose <u>pa</u> rents go to ↑college,
4		who:.
5		who live in like—
6		And I'm <u>no</u> t saying,
7		I'm <u>no</u> t—
8		I <u>do</u> n't mea:n—
9		<smiling quality> {And I,
10		know it sounds really like,}
11		<u>ra</u> cist when I say that,
12		but-
13		that-
14		<u>an</u> d,
15		<u>um</u> ,
16		that like-
17		people-
18		other people <u>do</u> n't-
19		par-
20		whose parents <u>do</u> n't go to college?

Just as colormuteness incites racial discourse, so too does the denial of racism. Thus Josie's acknowledgment that her statement can be heard as racist (lines 9–11) is a way of asserting that in fact it is not

racist at all. This denial is underscored by the light-hearted affect with which she produces the first part of her utterance, indexed through a smiling voice quality that implies the absurdity of such an accusation. Yet this joking tone may also belie an anxious affect, which is also evident in her stumbling speech in the remainder of her turn. Here Josie enacts the colormute strategy of avoiding naming race as she skirts the term *Black* in favor of an inarticulate and inaccurate circumlocution (lines 17–20).

Disavowing one's own racism is also a widespread strategy of militant white discourse. Trump is the most prominent conservative user of this strategy, which has been documented among his supporters as well (Subtirelu, 2017). Example 3 is from a 2015 interview with the CNN news anchor Don Lemon. In light of Trump's calls to ban Muslims from entering the United States, Lemon asks Trump whether he is a racist. In response, Trump emphatically declares, "I am the least racist person that you have ever met" (Example 3).

Example 3 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XRDmWPAthiA>; 02:01–02:15)

1	Lemon:	A:re [you racist?]
2	Trump:	[I am] the l:ea:st.
3		<u>Racist.</u>
4		<u>Person.</u>
5		That yo:u.
6		Have <u>ever.</u>
7		<u>M:et.</u>
8		I am the ↑l:ea:st.
9		<u>Racist.</u>
10		<u>Person.</u>
11	Lemon:	Are you <u>bigoted</u> in any way,
12		[you think.]
13	Trump:	<higher pitch> {[I don't] think so.
14		No:.
15		I don't think so.}
16	Lemon:	Islamo[phobic?]
17	Trump:	[<higher pitch> {I'm a] person—}]
18		No.
19		Not at all.

Trump's forceful prosody, with emphatic stress on almost every word (lines 2–10), here indexes moral righteousness. He has produced very similar formulations of the same claim—with similar prosodic features—in numerous media interviews, political rallies, and other settings. Trump also draws on other indexical resources, such as raised pitch in response to Lemon's next question (lines 13–15), which sonically echoes Josie's performance of white innocence in Example 1. These vehement disavowals of racism, however, are refuted by Trump's extensive and well-documented history of racist remarks and actions (Leonhardt & Philbrick, 2018; Lopez, 2019), producing a discursive gap between racist practice and the claim of nonracism.

Perhaps the most egregious example of such a discursive gap is a high-profile incident that took place in the summer of 2016, when a mob of openly militant racists wielding tiki torches and chanting racist slogans marched on the University of Virginia campus in Charlottesville as part of a "Unite the Right" rally. The rally resulted in the murder of an antiracist counterprotester by an avowed white

FIGURE 3 “Unite the Right” white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia

(source: <https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/peter-cvjetanovic-along-with-neo-nazis-alt-right-and-white-news-photo/830617844>)

supremacist. Yet when marchers who appeared in news coverage were publicly identified, they often rejected the near-universal representation of them as racists. For example, one widely circulated iconic photo (Figure 3) was often likened to an image from a Ku Klux Klan or Nazi rally.

The man in the foreground, a Nevada college student, claimed in a news interview, “I’m not the angry racist they see in that photo” (KTVN, 2017). Yet he also stated that he had attended the rally in order to “preserve” “white European culture” and “white heritage”; in addition, he paraphrased the “fourteen words,” a racist slogan associated with white supremacist ideologies (Sheth, 2017). Here a white person who publicly participated in an openly racist event, holds overtly racist beliefs, and was photographed in an embodied expression of white rage attempts to disavow his racism by denying the white affect that saturates his image.

These examples illustrate that disavowals of racism traffic in affective claims to white innocence, perpetuating a kind of no-fault white supremacy. This innocent stance is also enacted in the next three discursive strategies, which in different ways ideologically reverse racialized power relations.

5.3 | The discursive appropriation of *diversity*

The third discursive strategy of whiteness is the appropriation of the discourse developed to combat racial inequity and advance racial justice. Perhaps the most rampant example of such appropriation is the word *diversity*. This word has undergone appropriation once before: From its origins in racial justice activism, since the 1990s it has become a buzzword of neoliberal higher education both in the United States and globally. As Urciuoli (2009) has shown, the white public discourse of colleges and universities deletes the inconvenient fact of racism by replacing the language of race with the language of culture and diversity and its accompanying “happy” affects (Ahmed, 2012).

The most recent white appropriation of *diversity* exploits these positive affects to displace race by invoking entirely other bases of difference. I found this discourse among white teenagers in the 1990s. In Example 4, another Bay City High School student, Claire, explains that, although most of her friends are white, they are in fact a “diverse group” on other grounds.

Example 4 (slightly adapted from Bucholtz, 2011, p. 180)

- 1 Claire: Everyone has really different groups of friends.
 2 (0.7)
 3 Actually I shouldn't say that.
 4 Most of my friends have,
 5 (1.6)
 6 really:,
 7 (1.4)
 8 diverse group of friends.
 9 Mary: Mhm.
 10 Claire: And I don't mean diverse as in,
 11 (0.9)
 12 ethnically,
 13 but just diverse as in,
 14 everything.
 15 Mary: Hm.
 16 (0.6)
 17 Claire: You [know?]
 18 Mary: [Like] interests and-
 19 Claire: Yeah.
 20 You know.
 21 Completely diverse.
 22 (1.4)
 23 [But-]
 24 Mary: [Is it] also ethnically diverse or is it,=
 25 Claire: =↑U::m,
 26 Mary: (How would you describe it?)
 27 (2.4)
 28 Claire: S:omewhat.

I am complicit with Claire's redefinition of *diversity* by helpfully offering her an alternative characterization based on personal interests rather than ethnoracial or cultural background (line 18). With my collusion, Claire redefines *diversity* using the colormute principle of "anything but race." In this effort, she employs contrastive and emphatic stress, projecting a confident, positive affect that valorizes her own definition of *diversity* over the term's traditional meaning (*I don't mean diverse as in, ethnically, but diverse as in, everything*, lines 10–14; *Completely diverse*, line 21). She thereby works to protect her self-presentation as a good white person, even as her lengthy pauses hint at a more anxious underlying affect.

The positive affective associations of *diversity* account for the otherwise surprising appropriation of this term by militant racists. Example 5 took place not long after the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, in another Virginia city, Arlington. A small group of middle-aged neo-Nazis from the hate group New Order held a ceremony in a shopping center parking lot commemorating the assassination of a neo-Nazi leader, George Lincoln Rockwell. The *Washington Post's* report (Miller, 2017)

includes two starkly different diversity discourses: one from a former resident, Matt Garcia, and the other from a New Order leader, Martin Kerr (Example 5).

Example 5

Garcia, who is Mexican American, lives in New York City but grew up around the corner from [the shopping center]. He was home visiting his parents and had gone to the barber-shop with his mother and 5-year-old son.

“I always thought of Arlington as a diverse and welcoming place,” he said. “Seeing a Nazi flag go up in your neighborhood is shocking and disturbing, especially after what happened in Charlottesville.”

Kerr, who attended the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, said his group did not hesitate to pay tribute to Rockwell at such a fraught time and scoffed at any suggestion that it was inappropriate.

“There are lots of things in society that offend and disgust me. That’s part of living in a diverse society. You have to put up with it,” he said.

His group’s antics were a “test,” he said.

“It shows whether or not [those who oppose fascism] can tolerate us,” he said. “It shows their commitment to diversity.”

While Garcia offers the conventional understanding of *diversity* as rooted in ethnoracial multiplicity and acceptance, the neo-Nazi retools the term to include those who openly hate ethnoracial multiplicity; in other words, *diversity* means hating diversity. At the same time, the two men display divergent affective relationships toward this concept: For Garcia, a nonracist community is one that is “welcoming” while racism is “shocking and disturbing.” Meanwhile, for Kerr, many aspects of “a diverse society” “offend and disgust” him, and therefore nonracists should have to “tolerate” racism in the name of diversity.

In both of these examples, the positive affects associated with *diversity* are appropriated to expand white public space and serve white supremacy. Although diversity discourses have rightly been critiqued as politically limiting (e.g. Ahmed, 2012), this strategy suggests that they may have found new life in safeguarding white power.

5.4 | The performance of white fragility

A fourth widespread strategy of white public discourse is the performance of white fragility. This involves claiming a position of social marginality in racially diverse contexts, with an accompanying affective stance of emotional suffering. This strategy is a form of racial reversal (Bucholtz, 2011) that trivializes the widespread marginalization of people of color within white public space and the very real emotional harm it inflicts; indeed, these are key design features of racism. The use of the discourse strategy of white fragility thus frames uncomfortable affects as weightier than the structural advantages of whiteness.

Example 6 comes from ethnographic research by Jamaal Muwakkil (2019) on the discourse of mostly white and male conservative undergraduates at the University of California, Santa Barbara, which

had been recently designated a Hispanic-Serving Institution. Here Muwwakkil has just asked Alex, the leader of a campus political organization, how it feels to be conservative at the liberal university.

Example 6 (adapted from Muwwakkil, 2019, pp. 32–33)

1	Alex: ... so how does it f <u>ee</u> l to be conservative.
2	Um,
3	it's <u>ve</u> ry,
4	<u>i</u> :solating.
5	U:::m,
(0.5)
6	A:nd I wouldn't j <u>u</u> st say for m <u>e</u> ?
7	I would say for a <u>lo</u> t of the people <u>arou</u> nd me?
8	U::m.
9	I spent my whole f:irst year here basically staying alone in my
dorm.
10	Uh,
11	not-
12	not because—
13	not <u>j</u> ust because I had like views that were different than other people.
14	.h But because I didn't have good ways to ↑expre:ss it to those p-
15	other people without worrying that they were gonn <u>a</u> :,
16	p- say,
17	“No,
18	you're not r <u>ig</u> ht,
19	nah,”
20	like,
21	“Ah,
22	you're a bigot.
23	Ah,
24	leave.” .h

Alex describes his (and other conservative students') experience as “i:solating” (line 4)—not because of his beliefs (line 13), but because he wanted to be able to express those beliefs without challenge (lines 14–24). This discourse appropriates and displaces the far more isolating experiences of many racialized students within the white public space of most American university campuses, including UCSB, where individual students of color are often the only member of their group in a particular class or program.

The discourse of wounded whiteness surfaces not only among young white California conservatives but also among groups that one might not expect to admit to such feelings. Example 7 involves a group of white men in a suburb of Dallas, Texas, who in 2017 stormed the local mosque with guns and Islamophobic signs. A member of the mosque, Muslim American Ali Ghouri, decided to meet with the men, including Christopher Gambino. As reported in the *Washington Post* (Samuels, 2017), they met at a fast food restaurant; both sides brought guns.

According to the *Post*'s report, Gambino complained that Christians felt that their culture was being "usurped" by Muslim Americans (Example 7):

Example 7

"Why does it matter?" Ghouri asked. "Why do you have to feel superior? Are we forcing them to speak another language or do another thing? No. You do whatever you want to do. We are living in a growing and thriving community, and we are going to do what we want to do."

"It can make some people uncomfortable is all I'm saying," Gambino said.

"The best way to handle that is to get to know each other," Ghouri said. "I can understand it's uncomfortable, but you have to be courageous. Otherwise, this cycle of hate is going to continue and the fear we have of each other will never go away."

"But it makes us uncomfortable," Gambino said again.

"Yeah," Ghouri said. "That's multiculturalism."

Gambino's repeated complaint of feeling "uncomfortable" around Muslims is an unabashed expression of white fragility. Ghouri, meanwhile, expresses empathy but reframes these delicate white affects in more negative terms, as "hate" and "fear." As with Alex in Example 6, Gambino appropriates a discourse of emotional harm. Ironically, such a stance is widely criticized in the public discourse of white conservatives when taken by minoritized students calling for safe spaces and trigger warnings on US college campuses to help them cope with past and ongoing emotional trauma (Lockhart, 2016; VanderStouwe, 2015). These armed white men instead seek a safe space for whiteness, a white public space where they can be free from the discomfiting experience of not being the unmarked majority.

Both of these examples of appropriative white fragility are striking because they involve white men who position themselves as tough and powerful (whether by engaging in political debate or carrying a gun); indeed, they are precisely the sort of conservative men who are likely to accuse liberals of being emotionally weak "snowflakes" (cf. Prazmo, 2019). This affective performance of fragility is strategic, however: In displaying emotional vulnerability, both Alex and Gambino reterritorialize racially diverse spaces as white public space.

5.5 | The claim of "reverse racism"

The final strategy of white public discourse that I consider is the charge of so-called "reverse racism"—the ideological belief that white people face discrimination and oppression from people of color and their supposed institutional benefactors (cf. Bax, 2018). Reverse racism is in fact impossible within the racial system of white supremacy. Because racism is designed to support structural power, it cannot be exercised by racialized groups, who by definition lack such power. Yet many white people are convinced that reverse racism exists and that they have been its victims (Norton & Sommers, 2011).

In Example 8, Claire characterizes Bay City High's required multiculturalism course as promoting reverse racism.

Example 8 (slightly adapted from Bucholtz, 2011, p. 191)

1	Claire:	<whisper> {Multiculturalism,}
2		oh my go:d,
3		...
4		Te <u>a</u> ch people how to ha <u>t</u> e white kids.
5	Mary:	Oh yeah?
6	Claire:	I'm really <u>b</u> itter [about that class.]
7	Mary:	[@ @ @]

Claire's dramatic negative affect is indexed by a wealth of indexical resources, from whisper voice (line 1), to the reaction token *oh my go:d* (line 2) to her extreme lexical choices (*hate*, line 4; *really bitter*, line 6) to her emphatic stress throughout. Indeed, her affect is so dramatic that I interpret it as a humorous exaggeration and respond with unreciprocated laughter (line 7). Once again, my role is one of white complicity, as I respond to Claire's claim of reverse racism with only mild curiosity in line 5 rather than skepticism or a direct challenge. Dubious tales of racial danger and victimhood were a widespread discourse genre among white teenagers at Bay City High School, and the ideological inscription of such narratives overwrote the much greater dangers faced by Black students, especially from local police. Through these narratives, white youth like Claire not only protected but loudly proclaimed their white fragility.

But it is not only white teenagers in California who discursively appropriate the charge of racism. As with other white discourse strategies, claims of reverse racism are widespread even, and perhaps especially, among groups that have a great deal of structural and racist power—such as police officers. Example 9 is taken from a controversial video issued by a New York City police union the week after the hate rally and murder in Charlottesville. The purpose of the video is to decry what it calls “blue racism”—that is, racism enacted on, not by, the police. The video opens with a (likely white) male narrator speaking over a slideshow of images of police officers of diverse races and genders.

Example 9 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8IjdBnfhW0>)

What do you see? Son, Daughter? Mother? Father. Aunt, uncle, or cousin? Neighbor, coach, member of your church congregation, community volunteer? The average person doesn't see those things that make me human. They don't even label me based on being African American, Lati:no, A:sian, Cauca:sian and so on. They tend to see: an even broa:der stereotype, through an even more racist lens. When they look at me:, they see blue.

This antipolice prejudice, the video suggests, is “an even more racist lens” than actual racism. Toward the end of the video, a misstatement of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous quotation appears on the screen:

“I have a dream,
that my four little children will one day live in a
nation where they will not be judged by their
color, but by the content of their character.”

Martin Luther King

The video replaces Dr. King's key phrase *the color of their skin* with the vaguer phrase *their color*. In this way, it equates wearing a police uniform with the experience of racialized oppression. This astonishingly brazen act of racial reversal discursively appropriates the experience of racism and delegitimizes the very real racism that people of color confront daily, including at the hands of the police. In arguing that antipolice bias is more harmful than racism and in cynically using images of police officers of color to make this demonstrably false assertion, the video coddles white fragility and buttresses white supremacy.

6 | CONCLUSION

The five discourse strategies examined in this article—which erase racism, appropriate the experiences of racialized others, or both—preserve and promote the longstanding and persistent inequities of the US racial system. What unifies them as a set of strategies is the affective positioning of whiteness as both visible and vulnerable, in contrast to earlier historical moments. The fragile affects that operate within these discourse strategies are in turn modulated by other affects that constitute mainstream and militant white positionalities (e.g. white liberal guilt, white-supremacist rage). But despite these apparent differences, both forms of white racism rely on the same delicate white affects. In this way, white people of all kinds seek to discursively undermine the growing political power of people of color by denying that white supremacy lies at the very heart of whiteness.

As this analysis has illustrated, the discursive strategies used by white California youth in liberal educational spaces are shared by conservative and extremist white adults, including police officers, gun-toting Islamophobes, neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and a US President. My purpose has not been to equate the mainstream racist discourse of white youth with the militant racist discourse of committed white supremacists. Rather, my goal has been to highlight the ways in which whiteness of all kinds is abetted through these discursive strategies and the sheltering white affects that they mobilize.

White publics are emotional publics, combining material, discursive, and affective resources to defend the political position of whiteness. Anxious white affects regarding the growing sociopolitical power of racialized groups, of which Trump's election is a symptom, have led militant and mainstream racism to collaborate even more intimately than in previous historical periods in the affective project of reproducing white supremacy through white public discourse.

To reiterate, as a white person I am by no means detached from the white discourse strategies and affects examined in this article. Although we cannot step outside of racism, white scholars can and must critically interrogate the ways in which our own work contributes to racist processes, often in complex and unresolvable ways, and we can and must listen to, learn from, and collaborate with scholars of color in confronting white supremacy (Bucholtz, 2018). As Rosa and Bonilla (2017, p. 205) note, anthropology—and, I would add, sociolinguistics—has “failed to find relevance in public debates” in great part because of a failure to engage with the ongoing racist legacy of the field. A central goal of sociolinguistics, then, must be to challenge the white affects that discursively and materially shore up white supremacy in our own and others' public and scholarly discourse.

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ENDNOTES

¹For similar discursive claims of embattled whiteness in other parts of the world, see Emejulu (2016), McIntosh (2016), and Nelson, Hynes, Sharpe, Paradies, and Dunn (2018).

²Establishing the role of indexical cues such as prosody in affective performances draws on ethnographic understandings of local indexical fields and practices (e.g. Eckert, 2008; Ochs, 1992).

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