Almost two decades ago, Critical Race Theorist, Charles R. Lawrence III (1987) remarked that “...a large part of the behavior that produces racial discrimination is influenced by unconscious racial motivation. There are two explanations for the unconscious nature of our racially discriminatory beliefs and ideas. First, Freudian theory states that the human mind defends itself against the discomfort of guilt by denying or refusing to recognize those ideas, wishes or beliefs that conflict with what the individual has learned is good or right.” And second, “the theory of cognitive psychology states that the culture—including, for example, the media and an individual’s parents, peers, and authority figures—transmit certain beliefs and preferences.” Lawrence’s foundational work in the field of CRT seems to reveal the ultimate revelation of Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege, published a year shy of Lawrence’s twenty year cusp.

Shannon Sullivan, an associate professor of philosophy and women’s studies at Penn State University, was brought to Critical Race Theory (CRT) through her work in feminism. Her conversation with CRT began in an attempt to understand how “sex, gender, race, male, and white privilege transact in complex ways” (p.11). As she says on page 11 of the introduction, “my being a woman and a feminist lead me to focus on and hopefully better understand race and white privilege. But another way of explaining this shift in focus is to say that I began to concentrate on race and white privilege because of sexism.” Sullivan’s personal journey to the question of race is the single most clarifying mechanism in the conceptual schema she develops in this work, as she tries to approach race from her psycho-analytic and pragmatist roots.

The introduction of Sullivan’s book both clarifies key concepts and introduces her methodological approach in Revealing Whiteness. In a self reflective tone, Sullivan announces that it is not only her intent to examine how white privilege operates as unseen, invisible and seemingly nonexistent through rational argumentation, but also highlights the role philosophy can play in performing “subtle emotion work that richly engages the non-reflective aspects of white privilege” (p. 1). Sullivan’s exposes whiteness in its two most fundamental aspects: (1) whiteness as an unconscious habit and (2) white privilege’s ontologically expansive tendencies. These two aspects of whiteness divide Sullivan’s book into two corresponding sections. The first section is “Unconscious Habit,” while section two is “Possessive Geographies.”

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Sullivan analyzes whiteness as an unconscious habit, not in the traditional psychoanalytic sense, in which a habit is isolated from the conscious mind (p.8), but in the sense that a habit is “constitutive of the self” (p.2). Sullivan holds that habits, whether those of race or other characteristics of contemporary human existence, such as gender, sexuality, and class are not some sort of veneer lacquered onto a neutral human core. They are dispositions for transacting with the world, and they make up the very beings that humans are” (p.2). Given Sullivan's understanding of habits in relation to race, gender and class, it is not surprising that she concludes that “it is important to retain the concept of race even though it originated in practices of racism and white supremacy” (p.3). In Sullivan's work, race captures the historical and contemporary relationships between certain groups of people in America, and as such becomes an important analytic and liberatory tool in Revealing Whiteness. Given Sullivan’s assertion that race as a concept is needed to understand the relations between groups and the individuals that make up those groups, it seems that Sullivan will inevitably have to confront the dangers of suggesting that a liberatory white identity is not only possible but a fundamental requisite in redefining the idea of race progress in America.

The first chapter of Sullivan's book, “Ignorance and Habit” begins with an attack on the innocence of white racism. Sullivan goes for the throat of the standard multiculturalist line arguing that white privileged ignorance; the “ignorance that benefits and supports the domination of white people” (p.18), cannot be overcome but simply filling in white people’s gaps in knowledge of racialized peoples. Sullivan believes that the mistake of many people of color is that they believe that the “problems of racism are solvable with straightforward hard work and persuasive rational argumentation” (p.19). This naivety not only diagnoses the ailment of many critical race theorists, but as Sullivan points out has been an historic weakness in many African American philosophers account of race, including the hero of this work W.E.B. DuBois. Sullivan argues that early in DuBois career (1897-1910), he held that white people were fundamentally moral and personally good (p.20). This apparently changed in 1920, with DuBois' publication of Darkwater. According to Sullivan, DuBois’ shift came when he recognized “what had initially seemed to him like an innocent lack of knowledge on white people’s part revealed itself to be a malicious production that masked the ugly terrible of white exploitative ownership of non-white people and cultures” (p.20). This revelation in DuBois’ thought caused him to abandon his faith in liberalism and develop the idea of unconscious racist habits. It is this turn in DuBois’ writings that drive

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3 What is most disturbing about Sullivan's work is her interpretation of Critical Race Theory. Throughout her book the reader is never given a definition or tradition to gauge Sullivan's self-proclaimed conversation with Critical Race Theory. Even a preliminary survey of the two foundational anthologies in CRT—Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement and Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge give the reader a very different account of CRT's progress in the study of whiteness than Sullivan presents. Derrick Bell's “Racial Realism,” Gary Peller's “Race-Consciousness” and Dudziak's “Desegregation as Cold War Imperative” illustrate a vision of whiteness and white benevolence that is questioned at the very beginning of Critical Race Theory's investigations. A quick read of the introduction of Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic's 2001 work, Critical Race Theory: An Introduction paints a similar picture. CRT as a method presupposes whiteness and racism as a permanent and unchanging American tradition. Sullivan's work seeks to contribute to CRT, by writing out its methodological and philosophical underpinnings. Stated simply, Sullivan is not engaging in Critical Race Theory, nor conversing with its foundational theorists.
Sullivan’s claim that DuBois use of the term ‘unconscious habit’ is a synthesis of Freudian psycho-analysis and a pragmatist understanding of habit passed on to DuBois from his study of James (p.21).

The following chapters in section one of Sullivan’s book develop the connection between pragmatism and Freudian psychoanalysis and its contributions to CRT. In chapter 2, “Engaging the Isolated Unconscious,” Sullivan criticizes Freud’s atomism as the most problematic aspect of psycho-analysis which prevents this tradition from making positive contributions to CRT (p.46). In an attempt to extend Freudian analysis of the unconscious, Sullivan attempts to reformulate the Freudian tradition through a pragmatic lens arguing that the unconscious should be understood “transactionally” (p.62), as functioning as a dynamic socializing force (p. 89). This process of socialization is explained in the “Seductive Habits of White Privilege” (Chapter 3) through an appeal to Laplanche’s theory of seduction. Sullivan, invoking Laplanche, believes infants’ unconsciousness is formed in the communication or passing of unconscious habits from the adult to the infant. In Chapter 4, “Global Habits, Collective Hauntings,” Sullivan extends the fruits of Laplanche’s theory of seduction from the relationships an infant has with their parents to the cultural habits an individual gets from all the relationships they share as a member of society (p.94-95). Sullivan explains that the cultural habits that make whiteness possible have a zebra striping effect on the Black unconscious. Utilizing Fanon’s insights, Sullivan contends that the effects of racism on the Black mind are fundamentally connected to the trauma of the Black body (p.100-101).

In section two of Sullivan’s work; Possessive Geographies, the reader is lead to examine the phenomenon of “ontological expansiveness” or the tendency of white people to act and think as if all spaces—whether geographical, psychical, linguistic, economic, spiritual, bodily, or otherwise—are or should be available to them to move in and out of as they wish” (p.10). “Appropriate Habits of White Privilege” (Chapter 5), begins with an exploration of the claim that “whiteness is the ownership of the earth” (p. 122). This exploration considers not only the economic and geographic aspects of white imperialism but the observations of ontology and psychology that Sullivan suggests are inseparable from the actual practices of white domination. Sullivan credits DuBois for first understanding the exploitative nature of the white psyche, but it is not until the end of the chapter that we get the full force of Sullivan’s argument when the reader is forced to consider what it means to be colonized. Borrowing from Fanon and Native American thought, Sullivan argues that the “occupation of land tends to result in the occupation of psyches” (p.136), which make psychical space of equal importance to geographic space.

“Race, Space and Place” (Chapter 6) is the closest account of whiteness given in Sullivan’s work that resembles past literature in Critical Race Theory. Space is not neutral; in fact the supposed neutrality of space already exposes its infection with white privilege, and racial exclusivity. The racialized bodies of non-white people are expected to be confined and isolated from the spaces of whiteness. In this sense, Sullivan is correct in stating that “space, race, and place are constituted transactionally such that space is raced and bodies become raced through their lived spatiality” (p.143), thus human beings “have” space because they “have” bodies, but in the United States, Europe and elsewhere,
human beings embody particular kinds of spaces because of the racing of bodies” (p.166). This contention ultimately spins Sullivan’s theory “In Defense of Separatism” (Chapter 7). The final chapter of Revealing Whiteness is an attempt to read Jane Addams against the criticisms of Rivka Lissak in Pluralism and Progressives. Lissak argues that Addams held a two tier process of assimilation in which “the deliberate (but temporary) preservation of new immigrant cultures should precede their disintegration” (p.170). Sullivan contends that Lissak’s analysis is incorrect because Lissak assumes Addams is speaking of assimilation in an atomist tradition. “Understood transactionally, Addams’ pluralist desire for cross-fertilization allows her both to respect the distinctiveness of different racial groups and to attempt to develop continuities across them (p.171). This is the intellectual foundation of Sullivan’s closing thoughts in Chapter 7. She argues that “understood transactionally, self segregation and separatism would be practices that attempt to make greater room for the voices of dominated and oppressed groups in their transaction with dominant culture (p.177). Sullivan recognizes that the unfortunate consequence of racism is the isolation of particular races, but believes that these spaces of isolation can genuinely challenge and resist white privilege.

In the end, the ultimate evaluation of Shannon Sullivan’s text rests not in the question of whether her work is sufficiently correct, but rather a question of whether it is sufficiently destructive. "Ultimately, the analysis of whiteness that Sullivan gives the reader is a watered down version of decades of research done by Critical Race Theorists, Black psychologists and Afro-centrists. The danger of Sullivan’s work in light of her alternatives, which demand the inclusion of people of color in course syllabi and activism against whiteness (p.197), is that the reading of Africana philosophers are conceptually incarcerated by the methods and discourses of Eurocentric understandings and are treated as if their integrations with white philosophers are the ameliorating invigorations needed to both extend European traditions to people of color and save imperial philosophic practices. While this text will be useful for students and scholars of Continental and American philosophy, it will be of little use to Critical Race Theorists or theorists in Africana studies who start their investigations with the alleged revelations achieved in Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habit of Racial Privilege. Unfortunately, this work is a testament to the trend in philosophy that allows conversations and scholarship about people of color to be entertained without a survey or competence in the work of Black scholars who specialize in race and its effects on people of color.

4 Sullivan’s work is too vulnerable to the temptations of whiteness. The interpretations of Black authors and the subsumption of Africana thought under the rubric of pragmatism and psycho-analysis erases the cultural distinctions Africana thinkers made in their breaks with European thought. A more salient critique of whiteness through the materiality of the white body would be Ken Stikker’s account of “Methodological Afrocentrism” which accepts the African centered interpretation of Africana philosophers precisely as a means to dislocate the epistemological constraints placed on Africana intellectual thought through the use of Western philosophic traditions—in the conceptual incarceration—of Black thinkers.


Over the past ten years, Sami Pihlström has proven to be one of the most refreshing young philosophers contributing to current debates in pragmatism. From his early, comprehensive work on problems of realism to his more recent writings focused on the moral life, Pihlström has shown a keen insight into how pragmatism can be mobilized for current philosophical concerns. *Pragmatic Moral Realism* continues Pihlström’s project of framing realism in pragmatic terms.

The book’s overarching theme is the ubiquity of morality and its entrenchment in human forms of life. Early on, Pihlström embarks on a discussion of Putnam’s variety of moral realism alongside a number of other related approaches, including those of Iris Murdoch and John McDowell. The reader is introduced to some similar ways of understanding the notion that values permeate human existence and that there is no deeper justifying groundwork for particular moral answers than those practices inherent in human life itself. The center around which these discussions revolve is Putnam’s own project of recent years: the undermining of a strict dichotomy between facts and values. Against a Wittgensteinian backdrop, Pihlström argues that since we engage life in the midst of practices and an entire form of life, and since our perceptions and understandings are just as permeated with value judgments as more explicitly moral considerations, pragmatic moral realism does best in offering a way to understand morality’s binding nature without reducing values to some other, more “basic” essence.

Pihlström differentiates his version of pragmatic moral realism from the Peircean kind advocated by philosophers like Cheryl Misak. The problem with this approach, according to Pihlström, is that it aims at “saving” morality by placing it in the same domain as any other science, establishing ends of inquiry that serve as references for truth and falsity. Pihlström pragmatic moral realism has a more Wittgensteinian and Putnamean flavor, and thus he holds that there are no clearly determinable moral answers until first one enters into a way of life that provides moral dimensions with genuine moral answers. Inquiry itself occurs within a way of life, and is simply another instance of the undermined distinction between facts and values: it is a practice already framed within human concerns that have inherent moral features. At this stage, as is the case with many pragmatic approaches, relativism looms. In light of this, Pihlström likens his approach to Kant’s empirical realism, noting that “morality is a human phenomenon, something that emerges from human life in a human world, instead of being anything pre-existent ‘in itself’ or handed down to us from above, as it were” (33). A more Wittgensteinian move that Pihlström hits upon is the idea that any talk of relativism already occurs within a moral framework, or at least in light of embedded moral sentiments about value-laden practices such as tolerance of differing views and procedures of reason-giving and