



# Geographies of race and ethnicity I: White supremacy vs white privilege in environmental racism research

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**Abstract**

In this report I compare two forms of racism: white privilege and white supremacy. I examine how they are distinct and can be seen in the environmental racism arena. I argue that within US geographic scholarship white privilege has become so widespread that more aggressive forms of racism, such as white supremacy, are often overlooked. It is essential that we understand the precise dynamics that produce environmental injustice so that we can accurately target the responsible parties via strategic social movements and campaigns. Using the case of Exide Technologies in Vernon, California, I argue that the hazards generated by its longstanding regulatory noncompliance are a form of white supremacy.

**Keywords**

environmental racism, white privilege, white supremacy

**I Introduction**

In 2000 I published an article in the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* that sought to recast how we think about racism in the environmental arena (Pulido, 2000). In it, I argued that white privilege accounted for at least some of the racial disparities that researchers were finding. I was responding specifically to debates within US scholarship over whether environmental inequities were due to racial dynamics or economic processes. Interrogating the underlying conceptions of racism informing these debates, I showed how most US researchers conceptualized racism as a highly conscious and deliberate set of acts infused with racial animus or intent. In short, they saw racism as a form of personal prejudice rather than in structural terms. In an effort to move beyond such a narrow conceptualization and drawing on

critical race theory, I suggested white privilege as an alternative understanding of how racism functioned in producing urban geographies of environmental racism.

In hindsight, I believe the article was useful to the environmental justice literature for several reasons. First, by acknowledging that racially unequal environments are not necessarily produced by racial animus, but rather as the ‘naturalized’ decisions of millions of whites in a racialized society, I provided a different way of understanding racism. Second, by focusing on the urban region, rather than the individual polluter, I illuminated how racism constituted

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urban space, including class formation. In turn, this challenged the notion of 'nonracial' economic processes, which reproduce impoverished conceptions of both race and class.

Over the years many people have told me that the article helped them better understand racism. While I am gratified that my work has been useful, I wish to revisit a key concept of that article: white privilege. Not only has my thinking changed, but I worry that I have contributed to an over-reliance on the concept to the detriment of other forms of racism, including white supremacy. Though I still believe that white privilege is a powerful force in creating and explaining urban inequality, it is not sufficient to explain all forms of environmental racism. Since environmental racism is produced through various means, it should not be surprising that there are multiple forms of racism at work (Walker, 2009; Pulido et al., 1996). For example, settler colonialism may best capture native peoples' relationships to environmental problems (Preston, 2013), while white privilege may explain some communities' proximity to industrial zones, but neither addresses uneven patterns of regulatory enforcement (Kohl, 2014).<sup>1</sup> In this essay I explore environmental racism and white supremacy by focusing on regulatory noncompliance.

The violation of environmental laws and regulations merits our attention for several reasons. First, regulatory noncompliance is an important cause of environmental racism and in many cases (re)produces it (Gordon and Harley, 2005).<sup>2</sup> Second, while the polluter is the primary culprit, the state is also intimately involved, and thus non-compliance illuminates a larger regulatory culture that is mutually constituted by the racial formation (Hagan et al., 2010; Kurtz, 2009; Fredrickson, 2013; Holifield and Heynen, 2007; Gerber, 2002; Strong and Hobbs, 2002). Third, while one could argue that environmental non-compliance is simply a matter of maximizing profits, many factors enter into such a decision. Intersectional theory, which requires that we

consider multiple axes of difference when analyzing social phenomena (Crenshaw, 1989), is a useful tool in this regard.

## II White supremacy vs white privilege

In the US in the 1990s, the concept of white privilege emerged as a popular way to explain how white people benefited simply from being white (McIntosh, 1988; Harris, 1993; Lipsitz, 1998). This was a major advancement in our understanding of how racial inequality was reproduced. White privilege revealed how, despite softening racial attitudes and practices, the US was still characterized by massive racial inequalities. White privilege highlighted how the individual decisions of whites were not necessarily driven by racial animus, but often were simply a desire to create the best opportunities for themselves and their families, which, in a highly racialized society, reproduced racial inequality.

A compelling feature of white privilege is that it does not require racial animus – an accurate reflection, I believe, of many whites' attitudes. Consequently, white privilege does not trigger high levels of discomfort among whites (Leonardo, 2004: 140), as they are not being blamed individually, nor is racial hostility being inferred. It is precisely these elements, however, that have contributed to the contraction of what is publicly recognized as racism in the US. Producing a more restricted conception of racism is not only in keeping with the US's general history, but part of a much larger and more recent racial project linked to neoliberalism. In the US today, both racial consciousness and animus are increasingly required for an act, speech, symbol, or person to be acknowledged as 'racist' by the dominant society (Jones, 2014).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the words 'racism' or 'racist' are rarely heard in mainstream discourse any longer. Instead, far more antiseptic language is used, including 'racial slurs' and 'bias' (see,

for example, Mendez and Grose, 2014). As formal structures of white supremacy were dismantled after the Second World War (Winant, 2001), US society developed other ways of ensuring the privileged place of whites. Indeed, as formal discriminatory structures and practices were eroded, discourse and ideology became even more important. It was through the civil rights movement, for example, that overt acts of racial hostility became unacceptable and equated with 'racism'. By condemning a small set of acts, attitudes, and speech, a vast terrain was left unchecked that has been effectively claimed and harnessed by conservative forces.

Consequently, while the bar for racist behavior is continually being raised, racial inequality persists. This is partly due to neoliberalism, in which, as Melamed (2011) has argued, the free market is embraced as the best way to organize society. In order for neoliberalism to be considered legitimate, the social formation must not be seen as racist. Thus, there is a refusal to grapple with structural racism and an insistence on reducing racism to personal prejudice and racial hostility (Lipsitz, 1998: ch. 1). This dynamic corresponds with a popular national narrative: the US has moved past racism. Accordingly, there is a continual contraction of the domain of 'racist' and a simultaneous proliferation of racial concepts that support neoliberalism, including colorblindness, multiculturalism, and the post-racial (Bonilla-Silva, 2001).

Melamed (2011) argues that we are in a neoliberal multicultural era, in which white supremacy is obscured by such events as the election of President Obama. Obama's presidency does indeed signal powerful changes in the racial formation. While his election does *not* mean that the US is in a post-racial era, it does indicate the degree to which racial barriers have declined for elites and how communities of color are increasingly divided by class – similar to whites. This is one of the greatest shifts of the

neoliberal era: growing fragmentation within communities of color based on economic and social status, including citizenship. This is also why an intersectional analysis has become essential.<sup>4</sup> While nonwhite elites enjoy unparalleled opportunities, the vast majority of people of color confront shrinking options.

While some may argue that nonwhite mobility is evidence of the declining significance of race (Wilson, 1978), I believe that is an overstatement. Besides overlooking the fact that there has always been variability within racially-subordinated populations, this position ignores the important ideological work that race continues to perform. This can be seen in numerous ways, two of which I will mention briefly. First, racist ideology rationalizes the economic plight of the vast majority of people of color. Among conservative activists in the US, such as the Tea Party, for instance, scholars have documented 'racial bias' (Parker, 2010). While people may be drawn to the Tea Party for many reasons, there is no denying that it is funded by billionaires intent on eradicating obstacles to greater profit. Thus, while the Tea Party's primary objective may not be racial subordination, activists employ racism in their quest to dismantle the remnant safety net and uphold the existing distribution of wealth and opportunities. Activists know the power of such narratives because many whites already view people of color as undeserving and responsible for their own poverty. Here, racism is extremely important to movements seemingly not about race.

The second example centers on whites' anxieties as the US transitions to a nonwhite nation (Huntington, 2000). Whites have responded with visceral anger to a black president, growing numbers of Latinas/os and Asians, and a more general multicultural set of values (Jones, 2014). Their hostility is manifest in the phrase 'taking back our country', which conservative activists are fond of. Speaking on southerners' antipathy towards Obama, one radio

commentator confessed, ‘My left friends all like to point to race as an issue, and I’m not going to deny that. There is a percentage of it that is race’ (Mascaro, 2014). This fear and anxiety is an important backdrop that not only helps explain certain behaviors, such as hysterical reactions to immigration, but also fuels larger right-wing activism and politics.

Thus, the US is characterized by a shrinking anti-racist discursive space and persistent levels of racial inequality and palpable racial tension that are largely unspeakable in mainstream circles. Bonilla-Silva (2006) has addressed these contradictions by posing the question: if everybody is supposedly colorblind, how do we account for continued racial inequality? One answer, according to Leonardo (2004), is that dominant racial ideologies and concepts, including white privilege, have essentially eliminated all agents. White privilege highlights the benefits that whites receive while overlooking the process of taking or appropriation, including the taking of land, wages, life, liberty, health, community, and social status. As Leonardo notes, *somebody* must be responsible for racial domination, or ‘taking’ from people of color. This taking is not only necessary for white privilege to exist in the first place, but it clarifies how and why people of color are still subject to ‘group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death’ (Gilmore, 2007: 28).

While there is a limited understanding of white supremacy – largely because it has been caricatured – one of its defining features is the belief that white people are superior to people of color.<sup>5</sup> While very few will actually own this, such a belief is widespread in the US and manifest in numerous ways. Indeed, it is precisely the caricaturing that masks how white supremacy circulates, which can be seen in fears of a nonwhite nation, whites’ sense of ownership and the right to exclude, and deeply racialized thinking that systematically undermines the well-being of people of color (Rattan and Eberhardt, 2010). Though some may question

the supremacist content of such attitudes and beliefs, at their root they are predicated on the belief that whites are entitled to *more*, which, in turn, is predicated on the belief that they are more deserving, or ‘better’ than other groups. While white supremacy is a vast and complex concept, I will focus on three elements that are evident in one particular incident of environmental racism: awareness, taking, and a belief in the inferiority of people of color.

### III White supremacy and regulatory noncompliance

Exide is a battery recycling facility located in Vernon, a heavily industrial city adjacent to Los Angeles. Although it houses very few people, it is surrounded by large numbers of low-income Latina/o immigrants in the neighboring cities of Bell, Maywood, and Huntington Park. Exide uses 88 different regulated chemicals, with lead and arsenic posing the greatest hazards. Exide has been out of compliance with state and local environmental regulations for decades. It has been operating with a temporary permit from the California Department of Toxic Substances and Control (DTSC) for 37 years (Garrison, 2013a, 2013b).<sup>6</sup> And since 2002, regulators have found serious violations almost every year (Christensen and Garrison, 2013). The community, working with churches and local politicians, has mobilized to pressure the facility to clean up or close down.

The depth of Exide’s pollution and contamination is extremely serious. According to a Health Risk Assessment (HRA) based on 2010 data, over 110,000 local residents face an elevated risk of cancer (Environ, 2013) – 44 times the legal limit. Over 80% of the impacted residents are Latina/o (Pulido, 2014). According to regulators, Exide ‘pose[s] a higher cancer risk to more people than any of the more than 450 regulated facilities in Southern California in the last 25 years’ (Christensen and Garrison, 2013: A10).

Exide cannot claim ignorance of the law and regulations. The South Coast Air Quality Management District (SCAQMD) has told Exide what is necessary for compliance, including infrastructure requirements (SCAQMD, 2013, 2008; Nazemi, 2013). Altogether, the SCAQMD has issued 44 citations and sought to close Exide. Rather than complying, Exide has sued the SCAQMD. While there may be many good reasons to challenge regulatory agencies, given Exide's history, one cannot help but see the lawsuit as another path to avoiding compliance. The DTSC has also sought to close Exide (Garrison and Christensen, 2013). On two separate occasions, however, judges have reversed those decisions, compelling the regulatory agencies to accept some kind of 'settlement' (Garrison and Christensen, 2013). For example, in October 2013 Exide remained open in exchange for \$7.7 million worth of improvements. It is not clear, however, whether the required improvements would actually bring the facility into compliance. In short, Exide *knows* it is polluting and poses a major risk to local residents and the environment, yet it has consistently and consciously chosen not to comply with state and local regulations.<sup>7</sup> Nor have the regulatory agencies been able to force Exide to comply.<sup>8</sup>

This is not a case of white privilege: we are not talking about whites availing themselves of convenient opportunities. Rather, Exide has systematically and consistently chosen to disregard laws designed to protect human health and the environment. Indeed, filing a lawsuit is a significant *inconvenience*. I believe that Exide's actions can best be understood as white supremacy, three aspects of which I will highlight: awareness, taking, and an attitude of racial superiority.

### Awareness

As noted, Exide is not only aware that it is breaking the law, but has consistently chosen

to do so. While awareness is an important distinction between white privilege and superiority, it is not always cut and dry. Awareness is actually a vast terrain. To help us navigate I distinguish between intentionality and animus. I argue that white supremacy embodies some level of awareness – although not necessarily true clarity. This lack of clarity is due to the general muddiness most people bring to questions of race, as well as the fact that real honesty might lead to social ostracism, and thus has a cost. Intentionality refers to the degree of awareness and deliberateness that informs one's actions. In contrast, racial animus is the hostility one may harbor towards a particular group of people. It is entirely possible for a white person, group, or institution, such as Exide, to act deliberately to enhance the well-being of whites at the expense of people of color without wishing them harm. It is also possible, however, for whites to enhance their own position *and* consciously seek to harm people of color out of fear or malice. Examples of the latter include 'self-deportation' – the policy of making the social reproduction of unauthorized immigrants so difficult that they choose to leave. Self-deportation is meant to cause harm while serving the interest of the white nation. In contrast, Exide is fully aware of what it is doing and does not wish to harm its neighbors, but the financial well-being of the institution, which overwhelmingly benefits whites, is prioritized.

### Taking

The second way in which white supremacy is operating is through taking. Exide has decided to shift the cost of doing business onto its neighbors. Neighbors are losing the right to breathe clean air, which is essential to their health and well-being. As a result, local residents are experiencing greater levels of respiratory problems, discomfort, higher levels of cancer, and death. By employing a strategy of noncompliance, Exide

avoids the additional costs and effort of upgrading its facility so that it is in compliance. This kind of taking is different from a firm moving into an industrial zone, adhering to the law, and still contaminating the local air. Both are takings, but one is transgressing the state's boundary and therefore violates the minimum quality of air allocated to a particular population.

### *Racial superiority*

The final manifestation of white supremacy is an attitude of racial superiority. While few will concede that whites are superior, far more will agree that at least some nonwhites are inferior (Parker, 2010). But more telling than words are actions, and Exide's actions suggest that it deems its neighbors racially expendable (Marquez, 2013). In some communities, firms *must* pay attention to the local community because of the potential consequences. Not so in Vernon. Assuming that Exide does not wish to poison anyone, the question becomes: *why* does Exide treat its neighbors this way?<sup>9</sup> One possible reason is that Exide's management views them as inferior and not worthy of full consideration. It could be that Exide believes that locals lack the political clout to force compliance, and thus it does not matter how they are treated. Alternatively, Exide may consider its neighbors to be expendable and does not care if they get sick or die. While this may sound harsh, corporations consciously choose to jeopardize and kill thousands on a regular basis. They do this both legally and illegally. While Exide's failings are not as spectacular as, say, Bhopal, it is silently killing people every day. These are not high-value people and they are largely distinct from Exide's management in terms of class, nativity, race/ethnicity, and other social axes.<sup>10</sup> Research has shown that people have a harder time empathizing with those perceived to be different from themselves (Forgiarini et al., 2011; Nickols and Nielsen, 2011).

Local residents have a low social status for three reasons: 1) they are Latina/o, 2) they are low-income, and 3) they are mostly immigrant. Three axes of difference and hierarchy intersect to create a population that is viewed as disposable. Exide is fully aware of both the surrounding demographics and the social value of the residents. Although I emphasize white supremacy, Latina/o immigrants are constituted by multiple forms of difference and hierarchy, and thus, using an intersectional approach, one could argue that Exide's actions are also a form of class warfare. In this case, capital – Exide – is seeking to displace the costs of doing business onto the working class, with the goal of accumulating greater profits. However, we cannot forget that the working class is also racialized. Latina/o immigrants do not exist outside of a global system of labor, or (trans)national racialized class structures (Chomsky, 2014; Robinson, 2006; Ngai, 2004). The Latina/o working class, generally speaking, exists subordinate to the white working class.

Finally, one could also argue that this is a case of anti-immigrant discrimination, as a large percentage of local residents are immigrants. Latina/o immigrant communities have less political and social power than native-born Latina/o communities (Ochoa, 2004), because a portion of the population is unauthorized, and therefore highly vulnerable. Thus, multiple forms of hierarchy and difference articulate in southern California to create a community that is subject to deliberate and extreme forms of environmental racism.

## **IV Conclusion**

I have contrasted white privilege and white supremacy as two distinct but related racist dynamics that can produce environmental injustice. Because environmental racism is produced through diverse actions at multiple scales, there are multiple forms of racism at

work. I have identified several key elements of white supremacy that can be seen in Exide's actions: awareness, taking, and an attitude of racial superiority.

While not all places are shaped by such intense racial dynamics as Latina/o immigrant communities in Los Angeles, one of the merits of using white supremacy as an analytic is its ability to target the offending parties – something that is difficult to do with white privilege. In this era of global environmental crises, we desperately need to be able to identify culprits and name names, so that the global community will understand who the guilty parties are and how we should respond to them. Such detailed analyses can help us do that.

## Notes

1. The specifics of each mode of environmental racism also vary by spatial and temporal scale. See, for example, Boone et al. (2014).
2. I do not wish to imply that regulatory compliance will resolve environmental racism or environmental problems more generally. Indeed, environmental laws and regulations may create the illusion of safety (Baker, 2007) when, in fact, they may be more accurately conceived of as state-sanctioned violence: Consider that the vast majority of industrial chemicals are never tested by the EPA; that the pollution of small emitters is not counted (Los Angeles Collaborative for Environmental Health and Justice, 2010); that most regulations center on individual facilities, rather than cumulative impacts (Sadd et al., 2011); and that many firms disregard regulations because of negligible sanctions (Kates, 2014). Nonetheless, environmental (non) compliance is one indicator of responsible environmental behavior.
3. For example, in *Alexander v. Sandoval* 332 US 275 (2001) the court rejected racially uneven outcomes as evidence of discrimination under Title VI. Racial intent must now be proven.
4. This is not to suggest that an intersectional analysis would not have been appropriate earlier. See Ferguson (2012).
5. On the various logics that have produced US white supremacy see Smith (2012).
6. Clearly, it is not solely Exide's fault that it has been operating with a temporary permit. California's DTSC has been plagued with serious problems (Garrison et al., 2013).
7. Exide has polluted other communities as well (Christensen and Garrison, 2013).
8. The state's inability to compel compliance deserves its own analysis, which is beyond the scope of this essay.
9. I have chosen to give Exide the benefit of the doubt and assume it does not have malicious intent.
10. A perusal of Exide's Board of Directors (<http://ir.exide.com/directors.cfm>), insider stock ownership, and management shows an almost all-white and male set of persons. There is one female in management (<http://ir.exide.com/management.cfm>) and one Spanish-surnamed person, Lou Martinez, who is an insider stock owner (<http://ir.exide.com/ownership.cfm>; accessed 21 July 2014). In terms of racial differences in wealth ownership see Oliver and Shapiro (1995) and Keister (2004).

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