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### On Epistemology, Whiteness, and Sexual Politics: Personal Reflections on Standpoint and White Supremacist Discourse

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**Preface to *White Lies* (Routledge: 1997)  
by Jessie Daniels**

***On Epistemology, Whiteness, and Sexual Politics: Personal Reflections on Standpoint and White Supremacist Discourse***

"The sociological imagination," C. Wright Mills writes, "is the intersection of biography and history" (1959). Over the last two decades, feminist scholars in a variety of fields have proven the truth of this insight, and taken it to dimensions Mills could not have envisioned (and probably would not have embraced), by arguing for the importance of the personal in understanding the political.

Standpoint, as so many feminist scholars have noted, is important to epistemology and to the theory we develop; claims to "objectivity" are but obfuscations of stance whether acknowledged or not. The analysis of white supremacist discourse which follows here has been influenced by my standpoint; and, at the same time, my understanding of that standpoint has been influenced by my analysis of white supremacist discourse. During the course of doing research for this book, I learned that my paternal grandfather was, for a brief period of time, a member of the Ku Klux Klan in Texas during the 1920s. In the time that has passed since discovering this, I have pondered how to come to terms with this information in the context of this book. The debate I was having with myself involved whether or not I should publicly "disclose" that he had been a Klan member. On the one hand, his membership was very brief (the story goes that he joined because he found the idea of being part of a 'moral crusade' appealing, but dropped out when he saw that the group was intent on racial violence), and remains an unpleasant, and little discussed, artifact of my family history. There were no Klan robes that were handed down as part of a family legacy, and I discovered the fact of his membership quite by accident. Furthermore, by exposing this obscure detail of personal history, I would certainly risk being dismissed by critics as either a white liberal, consumed by guilt, trying to atone for the sins of my grandfather; or worse still, I would somehow be labeled an apologist for white supremacist ideology, which I most definitely am not. My experience has been that many people assume that a white person doing research on white supremacists must be sympathetic to their cause. So, it seemed this fact was better left out. It was not relevant, after all, and revealing this seemed an act of disloyalty to my family. I finally decided, however, that the "disloyalty" was not to my family, it was to "whiteness." As Mab Segrest puts it, "The white supremacists had it right, in some ways, I was in fact, a 'race traitor,' disloyal to the cause of whiteness" (1994).

But there was another, more difficult issue that I grappled with about telling this family secret. If I were to reveal that my grandfather was a Klan member, should I go on to reveal that he was the very same grandfather that molested me as a child? I think not. Surely, this is much too personal, and not relevant. But the debate continued in my mind, and I wondered why I considered it relevant to reveal one and not the other. And, further, doesn't this perfectly illustrate my point about race, gender and sexuality being intertwined? I then realized the importance of including this narrative here. The further irony is that this Klan member and child-molester raised my father, who was most

certainly not abusive and who, for his generation, held astonishingly egalitarian views of gender. He, along with my mother, raised me -- a girlchild born in the early 1960s of Texas, where "feminism" was a dirty word -- to believe unreservedly in myself and in my abilities, to believe that I could be or do anything. And yet, my gender-egalitarian father could simultaneously harbor and espouse ideas about, even argue enthusiastically for, Black inferiority and Jewish corruption. It was not until many years later that I understood that, in large measure, the belief in my ability that pervaded my girlhood was predicated on being white and middle-class. It was based on the conviction that I would grow up to occupy that space of complete agency and privilege that my maternal grandmother referred to as being "free, white and twenty-one."

Part of the privilege of my girlhood was that I was considered at a relatively young age (9, 10, 11) a full, intelligent human being; and, at that age, I enjoyed, almost more than anything, debating ideas with my father into the wee hours of the night. As he would attest, I began disagreeing with my father about racial politics (and doing so vehemently) early on. For reasons that are still not clear to me (perhaps I sensed that I could somehow be excluded with such thinking; perhaps I had absorbed the cultural messages from outside my home about the civil rights movement; perhaps I identified with my oldest brother, eleven years my senior and a bona fide, long-haired, hippie radical; perhaps I just wanted to disagree with my father), I argued against his views, primarily of Black inferiority. Those late-night discussions gave me special insights into white supremacist thinking; after all, I grew up trying to think and argue against it.

My standpoint has influenced my analysis of epistemology, whiteness, and sexual politics, and my analysis has influenced how I view my standpoint. Thus, my personal experience of privilege (being white and middle-class) and oppression (being a woman and a lesbian) has given me a particular angle of vision for analyzing white supremacist discourse and has also deeply affected me. It has made me more aware of my own position as a "subject" or target (as a "race traitor") of white supremacist attacks (whether symbolic or physical), and the ways that subject position is connected to others. My analysis has also made me even more aware of my own privilege, and how this, too, is predicated on the complicated nexus of race, class, gender and sexuality.

In the course of writing this book, after spending hours reading white supremacist literature, I would have (and continue to have) nightmares. In these night visions, I transgress boundaries of race, class, gender, and sexuality. In one dream, it is nighttime and I am covered with sweat, exhausted from running, and hiding in a ditch; the sweat is pouring down into my eyes. My heart is pounding so loudly I am sure it will give me away. And then, from the cover of the ditch I am in, I see them, the men who are after me. They are night-riders, men on horseback in white hoods, illumined like specters by the torches they carry. I know that if these white men come upon me -- the black man they are hunting -- if they catch me, they will torture me, castrate me, burn me alive, then hang my body from a tree on the courthouse lawn. I wake with a start and wonder if I escaped.

In another dream, I am sitting on a park bench in Brooklyn, crying hot tears of anger, talking to a Black woman whom I soon realize is my grandmother. She is telling me that it won't do me any good to cry, that I have to live with the consequences. My feeling sorry for myself won't make it any better, so I should just hush my crying. I tell her that I'm not crying because I'm feeling sorry for myself; I'm crying because I'm angry. Angry because I've just come from the Upper East Side where I've seen a white woman, pregnant like me, encircled by her white friends. As I walk by them, I see that they are laughing, talking, giving her gifts -- a baby shower, perhaps? I smile with recognition, anticipation at the joy of a new life, but then that smile goes away as these white women turn to look at me -- young, Black and obviously pregnant -- their eyes fill with hatred, anger, disgust. "Why can't those people learn to control themselves?" one says. Another says, "Tsk, tsk, such a pity." And finally, "What a waste." I am back on the park bench, talking to my grandmother again, telling her that I'm angry because I know the world will welcome that white woman's baby and not mine. And, in yet another dream, I have just come out to my class as a lesbian, and the students rise from their chairs, approaching me at the lectern. As they approach, I realize that they have all brought baseball bats with them to class (perhaps because they had their suspicions about me?) and they begin to pummel me with their bats.

For me, this kind of terrorism exists primarily at the level of the subconscious. But this awareness of being the "subject" of white supremacist discourse has given me, as much as anything else, an even deeper realization of my own privilege within a white supremacist context. Through the course of my daily life, I do not encounter racial hostility or overt threats of homophobic violence or more than the usual amount of gender oppression; instead, I can often coast on the privileges of middle-class whiteness and the presumption of heterosexuality.