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## **The Monstrous ‘White Theory Boy’: symbolic capital, pedagogy and the politics of knowledge.**

The ‘white theory boy’, or ‘dead white man’ finds himself with few friends in intersectional ‘race’-aware, feminist sociology. A widespread perception of this figure sees him as either perfectly content, or staggeringly unaware, of his own social advantages – a swaggering figure, easy with his hegemonic status, and perfectly willing to insert his voice into debates in which he is neither wanted nor needed. In short, the ‘white theory boy’ is often understood as a mobilisation of hegemonic power. To be a ‘white theory boy’ isn’t just to be white, male, and involved in the study of social theory; it is to perpetuate the dominance of whiteness and patriarchy in academia. The ‘white theory boy’ is not simply powerful, he is also arrogant – he either cannot see, or does not care, that his presence (and the forms of domination he implies), are inappropriate in particular contexts. Take, for example, an account from Sara De Benedictus. Reflecting on her ‘first encounter of the dominance of boy theory and theorists’, De Benedictus notes how she was ‘taken aback to see a majority white, male panel shuffle on to the stage before me’, despite the conference’s ostensibly feminist orientation. De Benedictus continues,

As the closing plenary began I was enraged as slowly, one by one, in some sort of bizarre display of male back patting and camaraderie, the six men began to discuss how fantastic Cultural Studies was citing the ‘leaders’ in the field – all men from Anglophone countries – and just how far the discipline had come. I looked around engulfed by rage and rolled my eyes at my feminist colleagues who sat beside me. Surely, I was not the only one who found this display unbelievable?

(De Benedictus 2014)

De Benedictus neatly encapsulates the frustration, anger, and disbelief at the continuing dominance of white men in the social sciences and humanities. Her observations are not simply about the placement of already-powerful white men in situations which do not require their presence. The corollary of this phenomena is the oxymoronic notion of ‘progression’ being represented on the panel by tradition, and the tacit erasure of voices and faces who are not white, Western, Anglophone, or male. In this article I focus on a specific problem – the often-identified dominance of white European men in contemporary sociology. Building on work which locates this dominance in citation practice (Ahmed 2013) and disciplinary origin stories (Connell 2007), I explore how the teaching of social theory functions as a form of citation practice, which in turn tells a particular story of the discipline of sociology. I argue that the stranglehold of the ‘white theory boy’ is felt not only in social or practical aspects such as the composition of conference panels, but importantly in the foundational epistemologies of the discipline and their inculcation through pedagogical strategies.

However, I want to move away from conventional narratives which position the ‘white theory boy’ as wholly negative, and attempt to bring a textured, intersectional feminist analysis to the figure. Whilst we may have a problem with Eurocentrism, sexism, and racism in the canon of social theory, my suggestion is that conceptualising this through the figure of the ‘white theory boy’ is unhelpful. This is a figure mobilised in order to demonstrate power and dominance; moreover the figure is personified so that white men who ‘do theory’ come to be thought of as ‘white theory

boys' or 'boy theory' – as seen in De Benedictus. But when it comes to actual white men who 'do theory' the story is very different, and they rarely hold the sort of monolithic power we might first assume. Instead of understanding him in a very literal sense and operating as if 'white theory boys' are real, I want to think through what is possible if intersectional feminists extend some space of sympathy to the 'white theory boy'. Bringing an intersectional analysis of gender, class, 'race' and ethnicity to bear on the 'white theory boy' opens a space in which a more critical and fine-grained account of the relationship between power, knowledge, and social status can be uncovered. It is through extending this space of sympathy and mutual cooperation to 'white theory boys' that the practical and conceptual machinations of their power are further revealed. From here a more thorough dismantling of this power becomes possible.

I open with a discussion of the 'white theory boy', and tackle the concomitant demonization of the figure, and continued engagement with 'white theory'. What follows this is a discussion of the structural factors related to the formation of (canonical) knowledge and the role of the dominant symbolic, and symbolic capital with this process. From this position I move to investigate how pedagogical strategies for teaching social theory are linked to these foundational tenets and processes, with a particular focus on reading lists which guide the module. Here, I analyze how these may reinforce bifurcations of knowledge, especially the ways in which the apparent privileging of white men would at first appear to uphold the position of De Benedictus. The second half of the article moves to challenge a notion of the 'white theory boy' as unassailably monstrous, or of the monstering as cohesive, or a complete and accurate representation. Using literature on the figure of the monster I demonstrate how the 'white theory boy' figure adheres to this role, but combine this exegesis with ethnographic observations and material from engagement with ostensible 'white theory boys' in order to expose the vulnerability of this role, and critique the way in which 'white theory boy'-ness is something performed rather than immanently present. Ultimately, what I suggest is that the 'white theory boy' is not really about being white or being a man. Rather it is about being able to demonstrate and perform types of symbolic capital. However, before embarking on an exploration of the 'white theory boy' and his role in pedagogy and knowledge-making I want to reflect briefly on how we encounter the 'white theory boy' as someone both indispensable and off-putting, and why I think it is important to go beyond basic conceptions of the 'white theory boy' as representing a problem, and instead see him as a role to be performed.

### **Becoming familiar with the 'white theory boy'**

'We probably need to separate you somewhat from Bourdieu.  
There are a few too many crusty old white men in your thesis'

The above is said to me rather often by my supervisors. Despite their encouragement and hard work, and my own commitment to work which is feminist, intersectional, and attentive to social inequality, my thesis still remains tightly tied to, and informed by, the work of Pierre Bourdieu. A dead white man – indeed, a classic of the genre in British sociology. It is a small demonstration of a larger phenomenon – that the work of such 'dead white men' or 'white theory boys' remains esteemed within sociology, and is held close to us in both intellectual and affective ways. It is virtually impossible to move through the discipline without engaging with the work of (ostensibly) white men. Whilst the figure of the 'white theory boy' is attacked and derided, he is also one who lives with us, whom we write with and about, whom we are influenced by – even inspired by.

Though De Benedictus and many others (I include myself here) are frustrated and angered by the continuing domination of white men in academia we nevertheless continue to hold them close, at least conceptually and intellectually. This article is not an attempt to rescue a demon – it is not a defence of white men taking up space. It is instead an exploration of why the demon appeared necessary, and how it may be more productive to move forward without him. The ‘white theory boy’ figure stands for something much more than being a white man who does theory: it is a hieroglyph for structural inequality, a by-word for hegemonic epithets in action, but importantly also a space where we can safely express anger at this inequality and hegemony. The ‘white theory boy’ is shorthand used to locate and name a problem, but its popularity and ease of use actually ends up masking the more subtle machinations of domination and power which enable some and not others to be ‘white theory boys’. My suggestion is that thinking through the ‘white theory boy’ as a role to be played, rather than a representational figure, allows greater insight into the forms of power by which he is supported.

There are clear structural and intellectual advantages in ‘performing’ the role of the ‘white theory boy’, and these are linked to the historical construction of sociology as a discipline. Scholarship on the history and formation of sociology points to the epistemological and ontological foundations of the discipline as strongly reflecting the social conditions of its nineteenth century inception. As such, the philosophical underpinnings of sociology have been linked to the British Empire and Imperialism (Steinmetz 2013; Gilroy 2002), colonialism and Eurocentrism (Bhambra 2007), racial segregation (Bhambra 2014; Sitas 2014), and patriarchy and gender inequality (Witz and Marshall 2004; Sorkin Rabinowitz 2002; Barrett and Phillips 1992). Moreover, the work of Bauman (2011) and Magubane (2014) expose how the creation of sociology as a science has enabled already powerful groups and identities to erase other voices from the discipline. Thus the very construction of sociology – the particular values held by, and legitimated through, the discipline -aligns with certain hegemonic social groups. To (be able to) perform the role of the ‘white theory boy’ is a method of demonstrating allegiance to these identities. Owing to the Western, white and male character of the origin story of sociology, the ‘white theory boy’ is arguably the most familiar (and even representative) face of sociology’s history. The figure of the ‘white theory boy’ is ingrained into the fabric of sociology, thus making it appear that he is the most natural person to perform the role of ‘sociologist’. The advantage of this ‘naturalization’ as a sociologist can be seen in key aspects of contemporary formation of the discipline, citation practice and canonicity.

We have, then, a situation in which white men are ingrained into the fabric of sociology, and able to exert power - but concomitantly also provide necessary and valuable intellectual engagement. The creation of the ‘white theory boy’ is a method of negotiating difficult ground where one is compelled to engage with hegemonic positions that seem to uphold inequality. It allows us to express discontent in a simple succinct reference. This negotiation may seem helpful in the first instance, but it misses how whiteness and maleness/masculinity are slippery sites of performance, and elides the role of class, nationality, and language in producing social, educational, and intellectual advantage. What was born as an aid to exposing domination in effect functions to hide the modes of this domination.

### **The structural inequalities in the social theory canon**

There is a commonly held legend that the canon of social theory is populated by (dead) white men. Being a white theory boy is not only about being commonly present, or having greater ease of

movement within social theory or academia, it is about being *intellectually legitimate*. Discussions of canonicity provide ample evidence for this assertion. Not only is there clear evidence that the canon – supposedly the paragon of the best, most useful, and most widely applicable social thought – is comprised mainly of white, European men, but further to this the very qualities a piece of work must possess to enter the canon – that of making generalizable and universal grand theory (Outhwaite 2009; Connell 2007; How 2011) – works in itself to exclude people from non-hegemonic identity groups. It is possible, then, to make capital from performing as a ‘white theory boy’: you fit into the category most likely to deem a person canonical, valid, legitimated.

Witz and Marshall tackle the reproduction of male privilege in the canon, identifying that ‘[i]t is a procession of men, of “founding fathers” ... the canonized “masters” ... of sociological thought’ (2004: 1). This notion of ‘founding fathers’ is oft-repeated in accounts of sociology’s history. Outhwaite, for instance, refers to Marx, Durkheim and Weber in these terms, also designating them a ‘holy trinity’ (2009: 1029). Similarly Osborne et al (2008) use the term when detailing the presentation of the discipline in contemporary text books. Like Outhwaite, they use rhetoric of valour and esteem, terming these ‘founding fathers’ both ‘great’ and ‘sovereign thinkers’ (Osborne et al 2008: 521). This language aptly demonstrates reverence in which the canon of sociology – and classical theory especially – continues to be held.

Beyond issues of gender, the focus on Europe and the West in the social theory canon manages to ignore entire continents worth of academic scholarship; as Simon Susen questions ‘What about Asian, Australian, Latin-American, or African social theory? Do they actually exist? And, if so, why does hardly anybody seem to take them seriously in the Anglo- and Eurocentric world of contemporary academia?’ (2013: 86). The suggestion here that not only is non-Western social theory ignored, but is actually not viewed as a serious contribution to sociological thought is telling. It indicates an internally-oriented and elitist quality to social theory and provides ground for questioning the types of identities which are able to feel that they belong in sociology.

The focus of the canon on Anglophone/European, white, middle-class men is arguably related to a key condition of entrance into the status of canonical. To take one example, Outhwaite’s analysis of how one becomes canonical rests on the idea that ‘It is probably essential for canonical status to be categorized as a general theorist, rather than one specializing in class, gender, ethnicity or in a specialism such as work, education or medicine’ (Outhwaite 2009: 1036). It is worth considering here what it may mean to be a ‘general theorist’ and what might be obscured in the use of this term. Outhwaite sets up a dichotomy between those sociologists who do things ostensibly linked to ‘identity politics’ – class, gender, ‘race’ – or a particular ‘speciality’, and those who work on much broader narratives – the ‘general theorist’. Initially this may seem a logical distinction to make, but if we scrutinise what a ‘general theorist’ does more closely we begin to see cross-overs with the dominant symbolic. The analyses in grand narrative social theories tend to take place outside of social structures and issues of identity that have been asserted as crucial to understanding power relations in the social world. Arguably then, the only people that these grand generalizable theories may apply to are those whose identities are elided with the hegemonic: the ‘general’, by and large, is applicable only to those who are able to conform to a generalized, dominant standard. This means that, realistically speaking, the ‘general’ is a heterosexual middle-class white Anglophone man. As Bourdieu notes ‘the tradition is silent, not least about itself as a tradition’ (1977: 167). The white man is so universal as an exemplar of humanity that he is able to travel unseen; he is the convention and implicitly understood as such to the extent that he can pass himself off, in a

seemingly benign and mundane manner, as the general and universal. Outhwaite's claim that to be canonical one must write 'general theory' is, under these terms, to be understood completely differently (see also Meer and Nayak 2013; Frankenburg 2001).

The inequalities invoked in the canon by the demand for universality are further highlighted by post-colonial scholars. Ari Sitas, writing about the lack of African sociology in the mainstream, rejects the notion that this is related solely to economic forces and deprivation in African universities, and the continent more widely. Sitas ties this to an institutional and organisational dislocation, noting that the interdisciplinarity of African sociologists meant that they 'veered further away from the sociological canon, from the sociological community and from the post-Second World War epistemic communities like the International Sociological Association' whilst the 'rest' of Western sociology 'remained inside the cage of its original ideal types, proscribing movements across the conceptual moat that surrounded it' (Sitas 2014: 459). What is pointed to here is how abandoning the traditional (and dominant) modes of studying sociology has seen a shift in the role and operation of African sociology which has marginalised it on a global stage.

Gurminder Bhambra, too, outlines how the contributions of Black sociology have 'come to be defined as being about race, rather than about sociology and the broader politics of knowledge production' (Bhambra 2014: 486). Bhambra asserts that part of this disempowerment relates to 'mechanisms of exclusion from the sites of institutional knowledge formation and dissemination, exclusion from the canon and, more importantly, from the processes of canon building' (Bhambra 2014: 474), thus foregrounding the way in which political and social domination of certain groups has led them to be less valued in knowledge formation. Bhambra's analysis opens up the notion of value and merit to show the artificial quality of these categories and the way in which social structures of power operate to include and exclude in academia and knowledge formation.

### **The role of citation and pedagogy in knowledge-making**

One method of upholding and perpetuating the structural inequalities identified in the social theory canon is citation practice. This reproductive technology replicates certain identities and types of social theorist through the necessity of repeatedly citing them as authorities. In this section I discuss the practice of citation as one which preserves the dominant symbolic, and explore its relationship to the pedagogy of social theory. My contention is that the reading lists around which social theory teaching pivot are themselves a form of citation practice. These reading lists replicate a particular version of social theory which is largely canonical, and often presents it in a unproblematic manner – i.e. one which rarely explicitly discusses why specific (white, male, middle class) male theorists are the subject of such close study, above all others (on this see also recent campaigns such as 'Why is My Curriculum White?', UCL: 2014). Where social theory teaching moves away from teaching canonical (white male) authors and into postcolonial or feminist theory, the form of the module specifically divides these non-canonical authors from the mainstream topics, and so ingrains the idea that gender, 'race', and ethnicity are peripheral 'identity politics' and not (able to be) part of the grand theorising universal canon. I begin with an overview of citation practice, before introducing the link to social theory pedagogy, and the empirical work underpinning my analysis.

Citation practice has two particular aims which are significant here: i) reproduction of bodies and voices, and ii) demonstration of allegiance and credentialism. Citation practice is ostensibly about

referencing work in academic writing, but more pertinently, concerns the way in which a sociologist demonstrates *allegiance* to certain thinkers, epistemologies or groups. Put differently, citation has the potential to be the academic equivalent of status-driven name-dropping. Owing to the structural issues noted above, it not only reproduces dominant intellectual traditions, but also dominant social groups. As Sara Ahmed asserts, citation is ‘a way of reproducing the world around certain bodies’ (2013). I would add that it also demonstrates a fidelity and commitment to these bodies. What we are left with is a situation in which a particular intellectual tradition is presented as the guiding intellectual tradition. Ahmed develops this notion, describing how she was ‘once asked to contribute to a sociology course, for example, and found that all the core readings were by male writers. I pointed this out and the course convener implied that “that was simply a reflection of the history of the discipline”’ (2013). Ahmed’s reply that ‘this is a very selective history!’ (2013) is indicative of the way in which certain presentations that conform to, or uphold the power of dominant groups can be made to seem natural through long-term, ongoing forms of citation. What appears as tradition (or talent) is in fact the result of quiet processes of orthodoxy. Further to this, the credentialising function of citation practices has the effect of supporting the dominant intellectual tradition. We are taught as sociologists that our argument should be contextualised by citing certain relevant literatures or theorists, we orientate ourselves intellectually through allegiance to this or that theorist - we are Bourdieusians or Foucauldians, or whomever else we may wish to align ourselves with, and they are mostly usually (dead) white men. This not only demonstrates our intellectual heritage, but also lends us legitimacy, borrowed from the dominant intellectual tradition our dead white male theorist is associated with. Thus the practice of citing our pedagogical origins in sociology becomes a process of credentialising us as thinkers. We can borrow (and perform) a little of Foucault’s power, and thus be understood as part of an intellectual authority, through orientating our sociology around him.

In order to explore a possible link between the canon, citation practice, and social theory pedagogy, I carried out a small empirical study of social theory courses in UK universities. I focused on the 39 departments which returned a submission to the 2008 RAE Sociology panel and their Honours-level social/sociological theory modules. I examined the types of authors represented, concentrating especially on ‘race’/ethnicity and gender. In addition to this, I spoke extensively with ostensible ‘white theory boys’ who teach social theory. Below I focus on these accounts and reflections, as well as modules from three institutions; though this is undoubtedly a small number, they are indicative of a wider trend. What I present is a rich, detailed assessment of the relationship between pedagogical strategies and inequalities within knowledge formation. The three institutions chosen from the 39 who returned a submission to the 2008 RAE were selected because they represent diverse types of institution, but were all ranked in the middle of the table. They therefore represent an ‘average’ RAE score, but simultaneously show commonalities across different types of university institution. I have anonymised the three institutions, and refer to them as Institution A, Institution B, and Institution C. To provide some contextual detail on each, Institution A is an ancient university based in Scotland and a member of the Russell Group. Though it has a large number of international students it is situated in a predominantly middle-class, white locality and this is reflected in the student intake. Institution B is a multi-ethnic, ‘plate-glass’ university based in central London. The intake is highly international, with 60 per cent of its students coming from outside the UK. Institution C is a nineteenth century ‘redbrick’ in a largely white working-class city in the North of England. It is also a member of the Russell Group. Its student composition reflects its local position, though there is a high intake from private education institutions. All the academics teaching these courses are white, multilingual, European men.

I began by looking at the representation of women and people of colour in terms of the number of authors on the 'essential' reading lists for the modules. In Institution A the honours-level social theory module was a general course moving from classical to contemporary periods. Thirty authors were listed on the 'essential' section of the reading list. Of these 17 were white men and 10 were white women. There was listed one man of colour and two women of colour. In Institution B social theory teaching was split by classical and contemporary periods. In the Classical Social Theory module 43 authors were listed as 'essential' reading. Of these, 37 were white men and 6 were white women. No authors of colour appeared on the 'essential' reading lists in this course. The Contemporary Social Theory module listed 38 authors; of these, 29 were white men and eight were white women. One woman of colour was listed. Finally, Institution C taught another general social theory module, encompassing work from the nineteenth century onward. The 'essential' reading list here contained 40 authors. Of these 31 were white men and five were white women. One man of colour and three women of colour appeared on the lists.

Though these figures are striking, what is more pertinent is the way in which different groups are represented. The type of inclusion extended to non-hegemonic groups demonstrates their particular pedagogical function. The majority of these three modules pivot around the accomplishments and influence of individual thinkers: Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and to a lesser extent, Bourdieu, Habermas, and Mead. All of the thinkers taught in this individual manner (with the exception of 'Institution A where Harriet Martineau and Jenny P. d'Hericourt are given named status) are white men, and usually of the classical tradition. The valourization of the individual on display here further underscores and emphasises the way in which the canon of social theory allows already-dominant white Western men to stand as individuals, but homogenizes groups such as women and people of colour. Setting apart certain male theorists (who are Western and white), and giving such exclusive and sustained focus to their ideas performs yet more credentialisation of certain forms of thinking. Indeed, in discussing the necessary aspects of social theoretic thought with social theory academics, I was alerted to the 'danger' of not teaching students the classical triumvirate of Marx, Durkheim and Weber, or more contemporary figures such as Foucault, Bourdieu, and Habermas. One social theorist I spoke to advocated for the continuation of social theory teaching pivoting upon these male thinkers because, 'they really shape a body of thought which...unless you think the social is an outdated category is something which needs to be thought about. And I think they've asked pretty much the right sort of questions, and mapped out the options for social theory'. There is, here, a clear sense that the white men at the centre of the canon are doing the job of social theory perfectly well, and there is therefore little reason to make changes.

That is not to say that the 'white theory boys' I talked with were unaware of institutional sexism and racism, and its replication via certain forms of knowledge in social theory pedagogy. It was admitted by a social theorist that, 'there's an institutional sexism I suppose, any time your canon is white and male' and that in the content of the social theory canon and module reading lists, 'there's a danger that you reinforce the idea that all the heavy lifting is being done by white men'. But despite this clear dissatisfaction with the whiteness and maleness of the canon, they nevertheless felt that students would be at a distinct disadvantage were they not to learn about these dominant men, whereas to not focus so closely on the different epistemologies of women, feminists, disability theorists and people of colour, was in no way as detrimental. This demonstrates the power of hegemonic white, male, Western theory, that despite frequent identifications of it as partial and unequal, it remains 'vital' to teach students of sociology, above all other epistemologies.

Certainly, from my discussions with social theory teachers, they felt it far more vital that students learn about the ‘main’ or ‘primary’ theorists such as Marx, Durkheim and Weber, than to study feminist or post-colonial theorists such as Judith Butler, Simone de Beauvoir, or W. E. B. DuBois.

These social theory modules did, however, contain a week’s study on both feminism (sometimes presented as ‘Intersectionality’) and global sociology (sometimes referred to as ‘Post-colonial sociology’). Without exception, the majority of women authors were found on the week pertaining to feminism, and all of the authors of colour were found on the week covering post-colonial or global sociology. The remaining weeks’ topics were filled with the standard canonical, Western, white, male theorists. The implication of this bifurcation is that non-hegemonic people are allowed into the realm of social theory solely to talk about being non-hegemonic. Often this is even explicitly framed via the concept of ‘theorizing difference’ or ‘diversity’, thereby setting up a dichotomy whereby white men are the norm and everyone else is the ‘other’. The danger of this homogenization is in the implication of what it means to stand for ‘difference’ and to do diversity work, whether as part of an institution or part of a pedagogical programme. As Sara Ahmed has asserted, ‘the distribution of [diversity] work is political’ (2012: 4) and notes that, ‘if diversity and equality work is less valued by organizations, then to become responsible for this work can mean to inhabit institutional spaces that are also less valued’ (2012: 4). It is possible, then, to link this back to the presentation of white, Western men in social theory as individuals who represent universal grand theory, where women and people of colour are present to stand as markers of difference and diversity. From this we can question whether there is a subtle notion that the really important work worthy of being individually commended is that which pertains to the West, to whiteness and to maleness. The non-hegemonic bodies that are dealt with in topics about gender or ‘race’ come to function as ‘representing diversity’; this treatment can be ostensibly claimed as progressive (“we’re taking account of diversity”) but it simultaneously continues to set the non-hegemonic apart as alien. The alien here function to shore up the powerful position of the mainstream or the non-alien centre-ground position. As Sara Ahmed asserts: ‘Aliens allow the demarcation of spaces of belonging’ and enable the familiar to be established as the universal. In bracketing out ‘race’ and gender as ‘doing diversity’ or ‘theorizing difference’ social theory allows itself a close encounter with the alien and uses this to harden boundaries between the ‘us’ and the ‘them’.

### **Challenging ‘white theory boy’ inequalities: the man, the myth, the monster**

One tool for representing and negotiating the hegemony of white, Western men in social theory is the creation of the ‘white theory boy’ figure. In this section I discuss the invocation of the ‘white theory boy’ as a figure; in the following section I counter this and suggest how conceptualising the ‘white theory boy’ as a role or performance may in fact be more productive.

Instead of being a textured and nuanced concept, the ‘white theory boy’ is a vessel – a two dimensional figure which stands for a multitude of problems of inequality, and means of expressing discontent and anger at these. Its older cousin, ‘dead white European men’ has its own entry in the *Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory* (Macey 2000: 82). Other scholars have also identified this figure in social theory. Simon Susen draws attention to ‘a central problem of both classical and contemporary social theory: the ‘white theory-boys syndrome’, that is, the ethnocentric, Anglocentric, androcentric, and heteronormative nature of mainstream social theory’ (2013: 85). Likewise, William Outhwaite, discussing the canon of social theory acknowledges that, ‘[a]s in

literary study, the “theory boys” tended to be ... boys’ (2009: 1036). The function of the ‘white theory boy’ is twofold: first, the creation of such a figure works to summarize a problem in social theory: that of the skew towards white men from Europe/North America. The ‘white theory boy’ is essentially personification without individualization; through him we are able to talk about people in the discipline (who are taken to exist in reality), without targeting specific individuals. Secondly, the ‘white theory boy’ figure provides an important conceptual space to attack the ethnocentric and androcentric problem of social theory. Though figurative language and metaphors are useful in expressing a problem and it is vital to challenge inequalities in academia, my suggestion is that mobilising the ‘white theory boy’ as a figure against which non-hegemonic scholars can pinpoint criticisms of ‘race’, gender and class bias has turned this figure into a monster. This monsterring is ultimately unhelpful to a nuanced understanding of the dominant figures in social theory knowledge formation and pedagogy.

The monster is a complex figure, and draws on scholarship from psychoanalysis, film studies, literature, and sociology, to name but a few. Importantly for the comparison here, the monster is often understood as a form of metaphor, usually for the beastliness of humanity (Gilmore 2003). However, monsters are not only the ‘aggressive, man-eating...gruesome, atavistic’ (Gilmore 2003: ix) fiends we expect – though this aspect is also important to my case here; they are also both a demarcation of the ‘boundary between the human and the non-human’ (Creed 1993: 5), as well as being objects of ‘veneration as well as repugnance’ (Gilmore 2003: ix). The monster fits rather neatly with the way in which the ‘white theory boy’ figure is mobilised, particularly in feminist discourse. For example, the way De Benedictus sets up the oxymoronic nature of conventional or traditional white men talking about the future or progression of cultural studies demonstrates how the ‘white theory boy’ is seen as a relic of the past, and her evident disgust at the scene pulls in notions of atavism. The ‘white theory boy’ here is a bodily revenant of a past academia – a horrific academia of a time before feminist theory, critical race theory, disability studies, and so on. They represent a darker time (for non-dominant groups), and their presence in the context of discussions on progression and the future signifies the grotesque possibility of these atavistic beings returning the space of academia to a pre-intersectional time. There is always the possibility, when one is non-hegemonic, of being swallowed up by a ‘white theory boy’. It is possible to see this intellectually – one has only to look at the necessity – already identified above – of citing certain white male theorists, or being defined by the white male theorist tradition. As Sara Ahmed perceptively notes, ‘Not to cite white men is not to exist; or at least not to exist within this or that field’ (2014). It is possible, in the demand to cite one’s allegiance, to be eaten up by the tradition of the white male theorist who dominates your field. It is important to distinguish between the ‘white theory boy’ and the tradition(s) he represents. The invention of the ‘white theory boy’ figure is one which helps negotiate the continued need to engage with canonical or mainstream social theory. The theoretical contributions represented by the ‘white theory boy’ are not wholly demonised precisely because the ‘white theory boy’ exists as a vessel in which to hold those more unpalatable aspects.

The boundary drawing is important as well – the monster is the other, the non-human, the alien. As Barbara Creed notes, the abjection of the non-human is important to understanding monstrosity. Creed asserts that ‘[a]lthough the subject must exclude the abject, the abject must nevertheless be tolerated for that which threatens to destroy life also helps to define life’ (1993: 9). As De Benedictus identifies at the outset of this paper in her clear anger at the domination of an international feminist conference by white Anglophone men and her rejection – even scorn – of them as ‘boy theory and theorists’, the term carries with it the opportunity to express and share

this anger, through the targeting of a particular figure. It gives useful vocabulary to inequalities which are felt not only intellectually, but viscerally and affectively. The white theory boy is a figure against which we can kick when we are not-hegemonic, when we are not-dominant. Further to this he is a figure to be openly mocked. Dismissing something as 'boy theory' or 'dead white men' not only acknowledges problems of hegemony, it also in this context, mocks the classism, sexism, and racism identified in such theory. There is the implicit (and sometimes explicitly stated) inference that this apparently grand theorising is actually rather narrow, that those who make 'boy theory' miss a whole range of intersectional thought and scholarship, and that the privilege of being a 'white theory boy', or making 'boy theory' breeds intellectual myopia.

### **Performing the White Theory Boy Role: both always and never**

A chief problem with using the 'white theory boy' figure in feminist and critical race analyses of inequalities in knowledge production is that the construction of the figure implicitly understands whiteness and maleness as monolithic categories. In the same way that femaleness/womanliness and being a person of colour are not homogenous experiences, neither is whiteness nor maleness/masculinity. The above analysis of monstrosity and the 'white theory boy' initially points to the necessity of continuing to read the figure in the negative. However, I suggest that it is useful to extend some space of sympathy to the monstrous theory boy, and to consider the 'white theory boy' not as a stable figure, but as a role to be performed. The advantage of approaching the 'white theory boy' in this more intersectional manner is that it demonstrates the way in which hegemonic identities can be instances of performance, and in doing so, makes visible the different forms of capital at work at the core of dominant epistemology. Doing this also means considering the lived experience of those who potentially fit into this figure – white men who write social theory – and as such I spent some time discussing canons, selfhood, social identifications, teaching, power, and privilege with people who could be considered 'white theory boys'. Shining light on these machinations of power allows sociology to think in more concrete ways about what the discipline values when it comes to knowledge-making, and to tackle these inequalities in a more targeted fashion.

What is very clear is that being a white man in social theory/sociology (and academia more broadly) is a safe space. The social identifications of 'white' and 'man' import their own power, and allow the wearer of these identifications to wield this power, whether knowingly or unknowingly. People who can fit into these categories have the privilege of these identifications at their disposal. Though my suggestion is that the 'white theory boy' figure is one which is performed rather than rooted in genuine lived experience, it is important to note that it is a performance which is not open to all. There remains exclusivity in the role. Examining how one performs the role of 'white theory boy' is key in understanding the power the role carries. During my discussions with apparent 'white theory boys', what came through most strongly was the importance of cultural capital. Indeed when I asked one social theorist about the possible link between high cultural capital and academic success he replied,

You know the answer to the story – you ask the question but you know the answer, which is basically I know I've been reasonably lucky in life in comparison to most people, that I've been

reasonably privileged, there's no doubt about it. And...but I think that applies to most professional academics, I think.

Class, geographical location and capacity for cultural interactions play a large role in successfully inhabiting the role of the 'white theory boy'. These allowed the men in question to acquire the tropes of the successful 'white theory boy' character: dexterity with language – including speaking more than one European language; a wide range of academic networks amongst more senior scholars; education at elite institutions. These in turn can be mobilised into jobs (several of the academics I spoke with obtained a permanent lectureship before completion of their doctoral thesis), international speaking engagements, and published work – all of which are signs of status in academia.

One 'white theory boy' spoke of how his childhood and upbringing scored low on markers of cultural capital – paucity of museum visits or traditional arts engagement, lack of world travel, and absence of literary engagement – and began to draw links between this initial deficiency in cultural capital and his ability to have certain forms of work taken seriously by certain journals, calling attention to having an article rejected because references were to translated rather than original French works. Despite this initial disadvantage regarding cultural capital, he noted his clear privilege within social theoretic knowledge-making, drawing attention to the fact that he fits into the expected notion of the type of person who makes theoretical interventions, and that he is able to draw on typical objective understandings of whiteness and maleness in order to move with ease through the discipline.

What is happening here, I think, is a form of 'passing'. Vikki Bell notes how Sara Ahmed argues 'that passing is a mobile encounter that is not to be collapsed into becoming, since as the one does not become the other' (Bell 1999: 5). This lack of collapse into becoming is apparent in my encounters with 'white theory boys', who all recognised their social privileges, but did not feel them as comfortable, stable identities. All spoke to me of the hidden disadvantages of their ostensible privilege: of the advantage of native French or German, but the exhaustion of learning and speaking English in academic spaces; of the emotional labour of writing and the 'imposter syndrome' feelings of performing the role of theorist; of never being quite sure if your accent is acceptable in the space you've entered. There was, in these conversations, a clear recognition of fitting into privileged categories, but strong contestation of these representing the individual. The 'white theory boys' I spoke with felt no allegiance to the figure, and indeed expressed frustration and discontent with the dominant modes of canon-building and knowledge-making in social theory.

It is crucial not to homogenise whiteness, but to understand it as intersecting strongly with notions of class, especially working-class identities (McKenzie 2015; Lawler 2012). Moreover, we also need to mark the way in which whiteness can be a form of passing, not only in terms of class where this can be seen in canonical scholars such as Bourdieu (Grenfell 2004), but also in terms of the multiplicity of white ethnicities. Historically speaking, typical 'dead white men' such as Marx and Durkheim fit uncomfortably into a stable and monolithic category of 'white' owing to their Jewish ancestry. Further to this, it is possible to unpick apparently stable privilege on grounds of physical or mental disability and its detrimental effect not only on an individual's work, but on the perception of them in public (see, for instance, the mental breakdowns of Weber or Althusser). A historical perspective helps here, making it possible to distinguish between how we currently

imagine these men, and their own notions of selfhood and contemporaneous reception. The texture added to the monstrous figure of the ‘white theory boy’ which comes through unpicking these categories and tropes of the role indicate that there may exist common or shared grounds between the hegemonic and the dominated. This is potentially extremely fruitful, not only in terms of the space to foreground obscured epistemologies, but also in changing the structural inequalities of contemporary academia.

## Conclusion

There is a problem with the formation of the social theory canon and the pedagogical strategies of the discipline: it ingrains institutional and epistemological racism and sexism through selectively showing a very particular version of knowledge and deeming that version as truthful. Naming this problem is vital to tackling it. In this naming, though, it is necessary to be especially careful and particular about what – and who – is at the source of the trouble. By conceptualising this problem through simple and stable categories of whiteness and maleness we risk not paying attention to the small but vital operations of hegemonic power. Mobilising a more intersectional analysis can enable us to make visible the inequalities of gender, class, (dis)ability, linguistic, emotion, location, history, and religion which are at the core of social identities and domination. It cannot be denied that being white and male is advantageous, and it can be used – either obliquely or openly – to perform power, and to be taken *as* powerful. What is important is to be vigilant of assuming unfettered and easy access to the dominant symbolic based on apparent whiteness. The ‘white theory boy’ and the ‘dead white man’ has arguably become a sort of bogeyman - a horrific and horrifying figure who embodies the social inequalities perpetuated in academia and sociological knowledge production. Whilst the use of the ‘white theory boy’ as a monstrous figure of hegemonic dominance may be tempting to those of us who are non-hegemonic scholars the homogenising characterisation of the figure obscures and effectively silences the problem through its monolithic identity constructions; by employing the term and setting loose the figure with such regularity and alacrity we risk not delving deeper into the issues at hand.

Few ‘white theory boys’ feel an easy privilege: they recognise their advantage – they speak of trying to account for that advantage and they speak of failing at it. These reflexive attempts and failures open space for discussion and progression rather than opposition, where we can think more critically about hegemony and show hegemonic identities as lived, lively, mutable and ambiguous. This practice appears to be a key starting point for challenging historical interpretations of knowledge and changing current practices of knowledge-making and pedagogy. Understanding the ‘white theory boy’ as a performance or masquerade enables critique of the constructs of hegemony. Performing this role allows individuals to navigate difficult situations by showing external allegiance to dominant notions or identifications.

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