

## De-Constructing White Fragility through Alternating Focalization in Kiley Reid's *Such a Fun Age*

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**ABSTRACT:** The opening pages of Kiley Reid's debut novel *Such a Fun Age* (2019) introduce the central conflict that shapes the narrative: Emira Tucker, a twenty-five-year-old, recent Temple University graduate, and babysitter on the hunt for her calling, is accused of kidnapping three-year-old Briar Chamberlain who she is sitting that night because of her skin color. The reader is introduced to issues of race, class, gender, white fragility, and the attempt of a cross-racial dialogue between the two protagonists, Emira Tucker and Alix Chamberlain, Emira's upper-class, white employer. Reid alternates between the two perspectives in the voice of third-person narration, utilizing alternating focalization to unveil both their stories and struggles shaped by racial inequality and white fragility (DiAngelo). In this article, I argue that Reid's alternating focalization creates heightened white fragility and perpetuates white supremacy as well as racial inequality. I look at how color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva) is established and claims that the idea of white ownership (Harris) contributes to Emira Tucker's inability to break free from her subject position of the Black babysitter and 'racial loser.'

**KEYWORDS:** critical race studies; white fragility; white supremacy; racism; color-blind racism; controlling images; interpellation; focalization

### Introduction

In the opening pages of Kiley Reid's *Such a Fun Age*, Emira Tucker, a twenty-five-year old Temple graduate and former English major who babysits for a wealthy white family and occupies the role of the Black female care worker, is stopped in an upscale Philadelphia grocery store and accused of kidnapping three-year-old Briar, who she is looking after that night. In that passage, Emira is surrounded by a privileged white woman, an overly aggressive security man, and a curious bystander, who happens to be videotaping the incident on his phone as the reader witnesses Emira's struggle to justify her professional reliability. The incident is heavily emotionally charged, as readers learn that to Emira "[a]ll at once, on top of the surreptitious accusations, this entire interaction seemed completely

humiliating, as if she'd been loudly told that her name was not on a guest list" (Reid 11). Only when the child's father arrives to rescue Emira, the situation is resolved and Emira is literally and figuratively set free by her boss Peter Chamberlain, who in this case occupies the role of the white savior. The opening pages set the tone of Reid's debut novel and introduce the interplay between race, gender, wealth, privilege, and white fragility, as the reader follows the unfolding of the narrative of Emira Tucker navigating the looming uncertainty, chaos, and financial instability that hovers over her existence in the part-time job she works for lifestyle guru Alix Chamberlain, whose supposedly pure intentions for Emira only contribute to the reproduction of ideological Black-white racial inequality.

Unable to understand and correctly read the set of privileges and benefits that accompany the status of being white, Alix's character functions as a means of positioning Emira into the role of the 'racial loser,' which is further emphasized once Emira starts dating Kelley Copeland, who coincidentally happens to be Alix's high school boyfriend from back in the day. As the novel progresses and the reader gains insight into Emira's struggle to find a voice, Emira is unable to break free from the role created for her by her white employers and remains stuck in professional environments lacking full benefits and perspective, vilifying her own vulnerability instead of ever questioning her standing imposed by the system that has been produced and established for her.

Emira is "objectified as the Other, and is viewed as an object to be manipulated and controlled" (Collins 70). Published in a time considered post-racist and post-sexist, Reid's novel satirizes white feminism and the white obsession with political correctness that gradually falls apart as the narrative develops and exposes the systemic objectification of the Black woman as the Other whose role within white ideologies maintains white supremacy, class oppression, racial oppression, and other forms of oppression combined with fetishization of the Black woman as an object. Having been heavily discussed as a text encouraging a rethinking of power and privilege in ongoing discussions of contemporary feminist literature, reviewers claim that the novel fails to empower Black womanhood and thinking but praised for offering a realistic image of the relationship between the white

subject and Black object in the various social and socioeconomic contexts that shape the text (Hayes.)

The aim of this article is to provide a critical reading of Reid's *Such a Fun Age*, showcasing that the alternating focalization in the narrative layers of the novel allows for the characters of Alix Chamberlain and Kelley Copeland to utilize Emira Tucker as a means of objectifying their own color blindness. By doing so, both maintain an obsession toward upholding a positive sense of self (Unzueta and Lowery, "Defining Racism"; DiAngelo) and heightened white fragility (DiAngelo). Their behavior, however, eventually results in a largely failed attempt to allow character development for Emira as the ending of the novel perpetuates white supremacy and racial inequality. This is done by Alix and Kelley appropriating their understandings of race by preserving their own white privilege and white innocence, which is emphasized by how Reid structures the narrative points of view and goes back and forth between focalizers.

My agenda to prove my point is threefold. First, I will suggest that the alternating focalization present in the narrative establishes the concept of color-blind racism by dissecting the story of Alix Chamberlain and her past persona, her teenage self who was called Alex Murphy. I claim that Alix's understanding of race and white ownership is created through the carefully placed flashbacks of her past as a newly rich and privileged high school student, unable to dissect and read racialized patterns at her school and being called out for her colorblindness by classmates and then boyfriend Kelley Copeland. Second, I will offer a reading of the character of Kelley Copeland, whose entanglement with Alex Murphy during their senior year of high school establishes the space in which the dialogue on white fragility develops and perpetuates the looming white innocence both he and Alix covertly express in the current day narrative layer that introduces the character of Emira Tucker. In commenting on the characters of Alix and Kelley, I will suggest how the "racial imagery of white people" (Dyer) manifests itself in Reid's text. And, finally, I will discuss Emira Tucker being interpellated into the subject position of the Black babysitter functioning as a critique of class welfare, and how the attempt of giving Emira the voice she lacks throughout the

narrative eventually fails and results in her inability to break free from her role as the 'racial loser' she is positioned into by both Alix and Kelley and their positions of power they are unable to consciously see and acknowledge.

### *Defining Key Terms*

This final section of the introduction states terms and ideas that have been identified as key concepts in my argumentation: "white fragility," "color-blind racism," and "color-celebrate claims." The definitions of those terms may be used differently in other contexts and are taken from a range of sources from the larger field of critical race theory. One of the most central terms used throughout this article is "white fragility," a concept coined by Robin DiAngelo. To fully understand what Robin DiAngelo means by white fragility, it is first necessary to look at sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's new racial ideology that he labels "color-blind racism," which he identifies as an aspect of white fragility. He explains color-blind racism as the result of nonracial dynamics and suggests that color-blind racism rationalizes "minorities' contemporary status as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and blacks' imputed cultural limitations" (Bonilla-Silva, "Racism" 92). Moreover, he considers the racial climate in America as one that leaves no room for "the open expression of racially based feelings, views, and positions," which results in discomfort within whites who, as a result, avoid talking about racism altogether (Bonilla-Silva qtd. in DiAngelo 110), stemming from a fear of "talking about race in a world that insists that race does not matter" (DiAngelo 110).

This discomfort then again perpetuates the reluctance to discuss one's racial perspectives and understanding of racism, resulting in what Robin DiAngelo has coined white fragility: "The continual retreat from the discomfort of authentic racial engagement in a culture in which racial disparity is infused limits white people's ability to form authentic connections across racial lines and perpetuates a cycle that keeps racism in place" (111). In this context it is necessary to differentiate between color-blind statements and what Robin DiAngelo discusses as "color-celebrate claims," claims that are intended to emphasize a person's awareness of racial difference and their attempt to embrace racial difference (DiAngelo 77).

The difference between color-blind statements and color-celebrate claims is that while color-blind statements disregard racism altogether, the latter set of claims are intended to “provide evidence of the speaker’s lack of racism” (DiAngelo 79). Color-blind claims include statements such as “I do not see color.” or “Everyone struggles, but if you work hard . . . ,” whereas color-celebrate claims include statements such as “I have people of color in my family/married a person of color/have children of color.” or “I used to live in New York.” or “I used to live among the [fill-in-the-blank] people, so I am actually a person of color” (DiAngelo 77–78; emphasis in original). Color-celebrate claims are intended to underline the speaker’s lack of racism and to exempt them from responsibility, believing that their color-celebrate claims will render racism a non-issue. Due to the large variety of widely used color-celebrate claims and the narratives underlying those claims I refer to Robin DiAngelo’s *White Fragility*, in which she dissects several said claims in chapter 5 titled “The Good/Bad Binary.”

Towards the end of this article, I work with Louis Althusser’s “interpellation” and “hailing” to shed light on whether Emira adheres to the categorical “controlling images” coined by Patricia Hill Collins. I argue that even though Emira occupies the role of the object throughout the narrative, she is turned into a subject, namely that of the Black woman, through the process of “interpellation.” Althusser asserts that by accepting others’ positioning of one’s own identity into a certain role, individuals become subjects and accept the traits and roles they are addressed through the active process of what he calls “hailing” (Althusser 174). He argues that hailing can, for example, take on the form of being called out by police in public. By turning around physically and thus accepting that one is being addressed directly, the individual is hailed and therefore interpellated into the role of the person being addressed by police, accepting the set of rules, thoughts, and beliefs associated with the process of being called out by police in public (Althusser 174). In *Such a Fun Age*, Emira is interpellated into the role of the Black sitter and objectified by both her employer as well as her love interest. Their ideologies force Emira into her role specifically created for her, which shapes her understanding of herself as a Black domestic worker and as a Black woman who is part of the subordinate group and subject to numerous binaries, such as the obvious

white/Black, but also others including male/female and subject/object (Collins 70). Clearly, Emira is objectified as the Black care worker by Alix and the Black woman by Kelley. "Objectification," Collins argues, "is central to this process of oppositional difference" that shapes Reid's narrative. "In binary thinking, one element is objectified as the Other, and is viewed as an object to be manipulated and controlled," she suggests (Collins 70).

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins convincingly introduces a set of what she calls "controlling images," a set of "several interrelated, socially constructed controlling images of Black womanhood, each reflecting the dominant group's interest in maintaining Black women's subordination" (72). A central controlling image applied to Black women is that of the mammy, "the faithful, obedient domestic servant" (Collins 72). Reid plays with this controlling image, I argue, as she introduces it through the character of Claudette Laurens, a domestic worker who used to work for Alix's family when she was a child and teenager. The mammy is the Black woman embodying loving, nurturing, and caring traits she is said to have in her work with white children as part of her job, symbolizing "the dominant group's perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite White male power" (Collins 72). Even though Emira does not fit the traditional mammy role at a first glance, which is potentially due to her age and modern persona engaging in a life outside of her job that the reader also learns about, she definitely *is* the nurturing, warm, and obedient servant to the Chamberlains and accepts her subordination (Collins 73). In this sense, she is a modern mammy concerned about Briar's emotional wellbeing and concerned for Briar not to be seen for she is a loud child that does not adhere to the doll-like role her mother Alix would ideally want her to embody.

"Employing Black women in mammified occupations supports the racial superiority of White employers, encouraging middle-class White women in particular to identify more closely with the racial and class privilege afforded their fathers, husbands, and sons," argues Collins (73). She refers to Patricia Williams when indicating that Black women accept instead of take (Williams qtd. in Collins 73). This thought rings especially true for the character development of Emira, which is massively hindered by this acceptance that is foreshadowed through the

entire novel and finds its climax in the fact that Emira never develops aspirations to outgrow the role so carefully constructed for her by the white ideologies surrounding her.

### **Alix Chamberlain**

The following sentence opens the novel and provides the reader with central pieces of information that introduce the character and establish the role of Alix Chamberlain or, as Emira calls her, Mrs. Chamberlain: "That night, when Mrs. Chamberlain called, Emira could only piece together the words ' . . . take Briar somewhere . . .' and ' . . . pay you double'" (Reid 3). Referring to her boss as "Mrs. Chamberlain" points at the distant relationship between Emira and Alix. The first sentence of the novel indicates the authority that structures the narrative by suggesting the relationship of employer and employee as well as the indication that Mrs. Chamberlain is aware of Emira being financially dependent on her and her family's wealth; hence, she considers it necessary to point out that Emira will be paid double on what is her night off. This first sentence thus opens a space of co-dependency between Emira and Alix.

According to Bonilla-Silva, "[i]deologies are about 'meaning in the service of power'" (*Racism* 39). He moreover suggests the following: "Whereas rulers receive solace by believing they are not involved in the terrible ordeal of creating and maintaining inequality, the ruled are charmed by the almost magic qualities of a hegemonic ideology" (Bonilla-Silva, *Racism* 39). This set of beliefs is entrenched within Alix Chamberlain's thinking, whose narrative is shaped by an excessive amount of what Robin DiAngelo terms "color-celebrate claims" (77), including a set of statements made by people who insist that race has no meaning to them because they presumably see and embrace racial difference. Even though those claims are used with the intention to highlight diversity, DiAngelo states that "they all exempt the person from any responsibility for or participation in the problem" (78). Early in the novel, the reader witnesses the gradual development of Alix's crush-like obsession with Emira's persona and what Alix thinks this obsession entails: making peace with her past of being accused a racist. Whenever threatened in her perceived status as someone very conscious of her white privilege, Alix's present-day narrative is interspersed with flashbacks that construct

her past as Alex Murphy, a newly rich teenager who is cared for by a Black housekeeper. When Alex starts dating Kelley Copeland, she is forced to engage with the counternarratives established by the good/bad binary she suddenly is accused of being blind to. Kelley is the one who makes Alix aware of her colorblindness.

The chapters containing flashbacks to Alix's past explain present-day Alix's attempt to maintain her positive sense of self and at the same time serve as a means of building the narrative around her constant need to express her ability to both recognize and celebrate racial difference (DiAngelo 77). After Alex Murphy's home is raided by a group of her high-school classmates and a Black student athlete, Robbie Cormier, is arrested, Alex's obsession with overcoming the racial prejudice she claims to have been positioned into begins. A character in the novel, Mrs. Claudette Laurens, is introduced as "a light-skinned black woman with curly gray hair" (Reid 101). Alix's parents "purchased" her "services" (Reid 101). Reid's specific use of racially charged language therefore hints at Alix's understanding of ownership over her family's employees, which is situated in her family's history and has had an impact on her understanding of race as she expresses it as Alix Chamberlain in the present-day narrative layer of the novel. With the idea of buying Mrs. Claudette Laurens' services comes the entrenched premise that explains Alix's white identity and the idea that her whiteness grants her a right to consider the Black employees her family employs as white property (Harris 1714). This is emphasized in the way Alix and her family consider Black houseworkers including Claudette as mere employees. The reader learns about Alix's inability to understand her own contributions to upholding the system of white ownership and Black labor also later: "The combination of a popular black student athlete arrested on property that had plantation columns standing out front did not pan out well for Alex Murphy" (Reid 108). Thus, the classification system that allowed the entrenchment of plantation slavery (Harris 1717) is a trope that is hinted at when trying to dissect and read the character of present-day Alix Chamberlain and piecing together her obsession with trying to make things right by employing Emira.



Even though Alix's color-celebrate claims seem to indicate her willingness to restructure her racial bias, they present a paradox. While on the one hand Alix claims to have a nuanced understanding of Black culture due to the mere reason that she was brought up by a Black woman her family employed as a housekeeper, she at the same time also employs a Black woman to take care of her daughters and, thus, ensures that the Black/white divide she experienced as a teenager is maintained. This way, while assuming that employing Emira is evidence for Alix's lack of racism, Alix in fact contributes to the continuation of what DiAngelo calls the "racial status quo" and the upholding of segregation and racial inequity (78).

This idea of ownership is first introduced when Alix asks Emira to wear a polo shirt while babysitting Briar. What originally is a coincidence because Emira's own clothing gets dirty, however, becomes a practice, and Emira starts wearing a polo shirt that has the name of Alix's business embroidered, ironically announcing to "LetHerSpeak." The slogan intended to empower women results in silencing Emira instead of letting her speak. This highly problematic example of white ownership deeply entrenched within Black domestic work is discussed and resolved much later in the narrative through the perspective of Emira, who learns from Kelley that this behavior was part of Alex Murphy's past as Claudette Laurens, too, was required to wear a uniform. The exploitation of Black labor contributes to what Harris terms as "whiteness as property," suggesting that the "hyper-exploitation of Black labor" positions Blacks to the role of "objects of property" (1716). This idea is moreover supported by Collins, who suggests that employers use "a variety of means to structure domestic work's power relationships and solicit the deference" desired and wanted, thereby consciously establishing distance between employer and employee (56). Through the alternating focalization introducing Alix's past and highlighting Emira's realization of how she is being treated, the narrative constructs the character of Alix as one that legitimizes expectations of power and control as deeply entrenched in her thinking, which she is, however, unable to let go. Instead, she demands the physical marker of the uniform, which in

the context of Black labor and Black domestic work indicates in whose property a Black worker belongs (Collins 57).

While upholding the power relationship over Emira as her employer, Alix feels the urge to make things right and distract from the racial statement made by her husband Peter Chamberlain, a renowned news anchor, on live news. In a segment on the news showing a Black student asking a white girl out to prom, Peter makes a racist remark, "Let's hope that last one asked her father first" (Reid 34), showcasing his own bias and referring to a Black student needing to ask the girl's father for his blessing before taking her to prom. While Alix calms Peter down and does not expect people to give any further thought to Peter's comment, the remark causes immense backlash on social media and eventually also prompts strangers to throw eggs at the Chamberlains' home. This incident initiates concern within Alix, trying to imagine what Emira must think about Peter and herself: "*Oh God . . . does she know what Peter said?*" (Reid 35; emphasis in original).

Alix's guilt causes the emergence of what Robin DiAngelo calls "racial stress," an emotional process experienced by white people in North America who feel threatened in their superiority (1). "The smallest amount of racial stress is intolerable—the mere suggestion that being white has meaning often triggers a range of defensive responses. These include emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and withdrawal from the stress-inducing situation," suggests DiAngelo (2). The racial stress Alix experiences predominantly in the form of guilt and argumentation runs like a common thread through the narrative: "Whenever Alix was afraid that Emira was mad at her, she came back to the same line of thought: *Oh God, did she finally see what Peter said on the news? No, she couldn't have. She's always like this, right?*" (Reid 117; emphasis in original). Alix's guilt gradually turns into an obsession with the persona of Emira. "[T]he lockscreen of Emira's phone was always filled with information that was youthful, revealing, and completely addicting," says Alix as she develops neurosis-like emotions that leave her in a thrall that resembles the emotional state when having a crush on someone (Reid 75). Later, the narrator points out: "The realization that Emira could have a seat at their Thanksgiving

table made Alix practically high" (Reid 141). This development of neurosis-like obsession and Alix's fantasizing about being friends with Emira also exposes the idea that domestic work can be exploitive in the sense that it allows a personal relationship between employer and employee that can be unusually close, which is not necessarily the case in corporate settings.

In addition to the relationship of co-dependency between Alix and Emira and Alix's budding obsession with Emira, the alternating focalization present within the narrative sheds light on Alix's quest to prove her non-racism while she indulges in her fascination with Emira's youthful wokeness and foreign habitus and practices. Stressing the heightened white fragility of the character of Alix Chamberlain, several quotes characterize the narrative, constructing the story that showcases examples of racism that matches the parameters of Bonilla-Silva's frame of cultural racism as well as that of abstract liberalism in the context of color-blind ideology.

The close readings of the following three passages shed light on the crush-like emotional upheavals Alix experiences when engaging or wishing to engage with Emira. The first passage refers to Alix's guilt she instantly forces herself to experience when thinking not highly of Emira and her standing despite knowing that she holds a college degree from Temple: "[Alix] knew Emira had majored in English. But sometimes, after seeing her paused songs with titles like 'Dope Bitch' and 'Y'all Already Know,' and then hearing her use words like *connoisseur*, Alix was filled with feelings that went from confused and highly impressed to low and guilty in response to the first reaction" (Reid 79). The wording of the second part of this passage suggests Reid's conscious positioning of Alix in the role of the white person confused about Emira not meeting the expectation Alix wants a Black woman of Emira's standing to fulfil, causing for guilt to arise within Alix for having such thoughts in the first place. The problem in this passage is that Alix does not feel guilty for thinking not highly enough of Emira but for knowing she is supposed to think differently of Emira.

The second and third passages pick up a similar set of issues entrenched within Alix's thinking and cultural racism:

If Alix went shopping, she took the tags off clothes and other items immediately so Emira couldn't see how much she'd spent, even though Emira wasn't the type to show interest or ask. Alix no longer felt comfortable leaving out certain books or magazines, because she feared Emira eyeing her Marie Kondo book and subsequently thinking, *Wow, how privileged are you that you need to buy a hardcover book that tells you how to get rid of all your other expensive shit.* (Reid 138; emphasis in original)

Through the passage above, the reader learns about Alix's obsession with trying to hide her privilege from Emira while at the same time wishing and wanting to be more like her. The notion of Alix trying to become more and more like her sitter, which she imagines would spark interest within Emira to be friends with her and functions as a way to deal with her guilt, is also seen in the following excerpt from the narrative: "Alix fantasized about Emira discovering things about her that shaped what Alix saw as the truest version of herself. Like the fact that one of Alix's closest friends was also black. That Alix's new and favorite shoes were from Payless, and only cost eighteen dollars, and that Alix had read everything that Toni Morrison had ever written" (Reid 139). This passage indicates that Alix thinks of owning cheap shoes as a cultural practice she reads as commonly Black, understanding and even labelling poverty or financial instability as a fixed feature of Black culture. Being a privileged, rich white person herself, Alix articulates her culture of poverty views about Emira while instantly wanting to put herself on the same level. This behavior is, however, translated as highly cynical to the observant reader aware of Alix's hypocrisy and the paradox of Emira being likely unable to afford more expensive shoes due to her low salary—a discussion that is picked up later in the novel and also in this article, commenting on how Emira is not granted benefits at her job in the Chamberlain household. Moreover, the quotation alludes to the thought that Alix could be aware of Morrison's contribution to critical Black feminist thought. This is, however, not elaborated on any further in the novel, and the reader cannot know whether Alix refers to Morrison's fictional oeuvre only or if she has also read her texts such as her seminal work *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* from 1992 or her other contributions to literary criticism. Alix's Morrison reference does, however, function as a means of justifying what she considers her apparent involvement with Black

literature, consciously using that reference as an indicator for how well-informed she is about race matters.

The aforementioned quotations are three of the novel's most telling passages that offer a reading of Alix's racism as one that is shaped by what Bonilla-Silva calls the frame of cultural racism (*Racism* 46), which Alix finds herself trapped in but also repeatedly uses to justify the differences between Emira and herself. Despite knowing that Emira is educated, she questions her consumption of music and immediately feels guilty for assuming that Emira does not know proper English. At the same time, Alix engages in thinking patterns that perpetuate the underlying beliefs that Emira's race equals her low financial standing, which leads Alix to presume that by buying shoes from Payless, she herself is more like Emira and in her own opinion does not contribute to the standing of the frame of cultural racism, which is mirrored in several passages formatted in italics to mimic Alix's thinking made available only to the reader of the narrative. This, too, can be classified as a 'controlling image' Alix has established and believes to be true. Alix's gentler and presumably more compassionate way of expressing her "culture of poverty views" (Bonilla-Silva, *Racism* 46) therefore reproduces the racial ideology and attitudes inherent to the text and mirrors the overt fetishization of Black culture, which is further emphasized through the introduction of the character of Kelley Copeland.

### **Kelley Copeland**

In comparison to the racial divide that threatens to undo the relationship between Alix and Emira, it is Kelley Copeland's racial tourism and his history of surrounding himself with Black friends as well as only dating Black women that shapes Reid's narrative and strengthens the numerous notions of white fragility as well as color-blind racism present in the text. Kelley makes his first appearance in the opening pages of the novel, taking on the role of the white savior who records the incident of Emira being accused of kidnapping Briar Chamberlain and then encourages her to send the video footage to news stations to make people aware of the racism expressed by the grocery store—a suggestion Emira does not follow up on. Introduced through both Alix and Emira as focalizers throughout the novel, it becomes

obvious that his character functions as a mirror for Alix, which she, however, fails to grasp. Moreover, his character serves as an ironic reminder encouraging Emira to rethink her own standing and understanding of her Black identity. This is seen in several passages in the text, suggesting that Kelley cares more about race than she does herself. Having dated Alix—then Alex Murphy—for four months during their senior year at high school, he starts dating Emira without knowing that Emira works for Alix. Alix has never overcome the breakup, which is mirrored in how she tells the story of how he broke up with her via text to all her adult girlfriends in the present-day narrative layer. When Emira is invited to the Chamberlains' Thanksgiving dinner and brings Kelley as her date, an unfortunate reunion between Alix and Kelley takes place and triggers the oppressed feelings within Alix who still has not come to terms with being accused of being racist by Kelley and their high school friends.

Kelley Copeland is, as suggested, introduced as Emira's white savior who reminds her of her worth and having been mistreated at Market Depot, the "rich people grocery store" (Reid 6), where Emira is accused of kidnapping Briar because of her race. Throughout the narrative, Kelley has been occupying this role ever since he was a high school student. After Robbie Cormier is arrested on the Murphy property, property that once housed a plantation, and Alix is called "Massa Murphy" (Reid 108) by Robbie, Kelley slowly starts to distance himself from Alix and her family. The narrative focus realized in the chapters on Alix's past suggests that Kelley chose Robbie over Alex, which is something present-day Alix still has not come to terms with. She frequently muses over the way he broke up with her. The focalization stresses the foreshadowing of Kelley wanting to become involved in the Black community. His aim in doing so is, however, to relieve himself of societal racial wrongdoings. He starts this process as he begins to date "a light-skinned black girl with braids," which the narrator points out and at the same time refers to Alix's awareness of Kelley's budding obsession with Black women (Reid 111).

The character of Kelley Copeland actively and at times over-consciously performs the role of the white male who identifies and points at Alix's racism, but rejects any real actions, behaviors, or understandings that are necessary to work toward dismantling the systemic

racial inequality Emira faces first of all in the grocery store where they meet and then also in her wish to attain a job that will also grant her better conditions than her job in the Chamberlain household, namely benefits and paid leave. Gradually, however, Emira notices that Kelley is unafraid to use direct racial language. This is, for example, seen when Kelley uses the N-word in a conversation with Emira. Emira questions his right to use the term when she shares the following thought: "But Kelley seemed different. [...] but still . . . shouldn't he have said 'the N-word' instead? Maybe save the whole thing for the seventh or eighth date? Emira couldn't tell" (Reid 93). Instead of using "semantic moves" to avoid "dangerous discussions to save face" (Bonilla-Silva, *Racism* 51), Kelley does the opposite, which translates his over-confidence with surrounding himself with Black culture to the reader.

This over-confidence and extreme identification with Black culture as well as his obsession with Emira's race becomes a looming issue when Kelley states the following after realizing that he and Alix have a shared past that is shaped by Alix's wrongdoings in how she dealt with Robbie coming to her home uninvitedly: "Alex completely gets off on either having black people working for her or calling the cops on them. I can't . . . Emira, you can't be one of her people" (Reid 188). Emira, on the other hand, does not see a way out of being positioned into the racialized sitter who is not granted benefits and paid leave: "It wasn't that Emira didn't understand the racially charged history that Kelley was alluding to, but she couldn't help but think that if she weren't working for *this* Mrs. Chamberlain, she'd probably working for another one" (Reid 187; emphasis in original).

Considering Bonilla-Silva's frames of color-blind racism, Kelley operates from what Bonilla-Silva has termed the abstract liberalism frame. People operating from that frame are aware of racial inequalities but think that expressing one's passion for racial equality is enough (Bonilla-Silva, *Racism* 29). In Reid's narrative, it is obvious that Kelley operates from this frame because of how he actively reminds Emira of Alix's racism and repeatedly pushes her to go public with the video he took of her the night they met at the supermarket. At the same time, however, Kelley fails to consider the consequences going public with the video

footage—of being accused of a crime she did not commit—might entail for Emira and her professional future. Through this frame, Kelley acknowledges that discrimination exists while not actively dismissing policies and practices intended to combat racism as suggested by Bonilla-Silva, but by invoking the language of equality and liberal values and building a framework for how he appears to the outside world as someone making an active effort to shower himself in color-celebrate claims and to surround himself with Black people.

This interplay between Alix's almost child-like curiosity to learn about the music Emira consumes and her obsession to become friends with her while being aware of her privilege yet unable to let go of the white fragility hovering over the chapters told through the focalization of her character and Kelley's fetishization, tokenism, and over-consumption of Black culture allow for Emira to gain agency to a certain degree as she eventually quits her job as a sitter for the Chamberlains. That agency she gains, however, remains limited as suggested by the outlook Reid gives for the upcoming years of Emira's life. Only after four years in that new job, Emira is able to match her salary with the entry salary of one of her girlfriends they celebrate towards the end of the novel.

### **Interpellation, Controlling Images, and the Role of the Black Sitter**

What both the relationships between Emira and Alix and between Emira and Kelley do is impose the category of Blackness onto Emira, transforming her into the subject of the Black care worker who is unable to break free from this specific role she is given by the hegemonic ideologies established by Alix and Kelley (Althusser 174; Bonilla-Silva, *Racism* 39). The idea that Emira's character is intended to be read as what Althusser calls the "always-already" (Althusser 118) subject is emphasized by how Alix is constantly aware of Emira's race and her Otherness. This is done predominantly through Alix and her overwhelming and omnipresent obsession with Emira and Black culture in general as well as her urge to act according to what is expected of her as a white woman conscious of racial inequalities. In addition, this hailing of Emira into the role of the Black sitter is accentuated through the character of Tamra, Alix's Black friend, who in the narrative occupies the role of the Black voice of reason trying to push Emira into the role of the ambitious Black woman who is supposed to go to grad school



and become successful. At the Chamberlains' Thanksgiving dinner table, Tamra starts questioning Emira about her plans for her future and suggests that Alix and Peter could help her get into a grad school. She also inquires about Emira's bigger plan for her life, to which Emira's thoughts reveal that "*If I had a 'big goal,' do you really think I'd be sitting at this fucking table right now?*" (Reid 178; emphasis in original). This passage appoints Emira as a subject in the context of class and profession as well as class welfare by another Black woman—Tamra—who, however, happens to be more successful than Emira and has little understanding for Emira's situation and struggle to even imagine opportunities that would allow her to climb the social ladder. The character of Tamra helps address the fact that Emira is the subject already in advance, meaning that in the novel she is turned into the 'racial loser' hindered by "ideological constraint and pre-appointment" (Althusser 119), which leaves no room for her to consider her actual standing and the options she might have to break free from part-time babysitting jobs that do not grant her the benefits she wishes she had. At the same time, Tamra fails to see the difference between Emira and herself, when she blames Kelley for dating Black women:

"Alix is saying"—Tamra stepped in—"that Kelley is one of those white guys who not only goes out of his way to date black women but *only* wants to date black women." [...] "It completely fetishizes black people in a terrible way," Tamra went on. "It makes it seem like we're all the same, as if we can't contain multitudes of personalities and traits and differences. And people like that think that it says something good about them, that they're so brave and unique that they would even dare to date black women. Like they're some kind of martyr." (Reid 199–200; emphasis in original)

Without realizing it, Tamra picks up the image of the white savior again when suggesting that the Chamberlains should help Emira get into grad school. In addition, she accuses Kelley of only seeing Emira's race.

Hailed into the categorical, pre-existing identity (Althusser 118) of the Black domestic worker, the Chamberlains, Tamra, and Kelley establish Emira's identity *for* her. This is achieved through the chapters that focalize on the character of Emira, allowing insights into her ever-looming anxiety to find an occupation that is better than her domestic job while constantly having to explain herself in front of everyone but in the safe space occupied by

her understanding girlfriends. Especially the passages that show Emira engaging with Kelley, however, cater to and nurture white fragility by prioritizing Kelley's comfort he experiences because he dates a Black woman and thus claims to naturally understand her struggles (Leonardo and Porter). Kelley's white innocence is mirrored in the absence of him taking responsibility or even more being aware of the necessity of taking responsibility as a white person.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Emira's narrative is shaped and enabled by the narratives of Alix Chamberlain and Kelley Copeland, whose stories are interwoven and share both the characters' failure to look past their white innocence, missing to take responsibility in the numerous occasions they are given. This inability to become aware of their color-blind racism, which contributes to the perpetuating white fragility that weaves through the narrative, also eventually negates the dooming character development of Emira. While Emira does succeed to gain agency as she manages to find a new job, the reader never witnesses her considering a position that is much better than her babysitting job at the Chamberlain household and the administrative job for the Green Party she works after her sitting job. This is seen when confronted by her boss who enquires why she stays in an administrative entry job for more than two years and Emira tells her that she has no plan to leave, stating: "I can't believe I'm saying this . . . but I actually think I'm okay" (Reid 301).

In addition, color-blind ideology is preserved and the bitter aftertaste of knowing that neither Alix nor Kelley consciously decides to address and overcome their white fragility remains present within the reader. This nurturing of white fragility heightened by how the novel ends supports a lack of empathy and the two white protagonists fail to see their moral obligation to challenge the underlying logic that fuels racism and in consequence white fragility. It can therefore be asserted that even though the narrative is partly focalized through the perspective of Emira Tucker, Emira's story is still told from the white perspective, reinforcing the dominant ideologies that Black people are saved by white people and that

"[w]hites who are willing to save or otherwise help black people, at seemingly great personal cost, are noble, courageous, and morally superior to other whites" (DiAngelo 98).

Thus, Emira fails to break free from the ideological state created by her mammified occupation as the Black female care worker for a white family. Having been exposed to being "chronically undercompensated" (Collins 74), Emira's aim is to economically survive as she embodies the Black woman who is denied recognition and decent pay for the predominantly emotional labor she gives to Briar Chamberlain, who is deficient of a nurturing and close relationship with her parents. To conclude, Reid's novel serves as an imperative text that offers a modern-day reading of the Black mammy figure who ultimately fails to break free from the interpellated roles she is positioned into by the white power dynamics she has been taught to believe and adhere to, thereby upholding the controlling images created for the Black woman by the dominant group unwilling to dissect their numerous and overpowering layers of white fragility and white saviorism.

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