

# **“Strategic White Tears Womanhood”: A Critical Examination of White Womanhood and Emotional Entitlement**

**Sandra Tausel**

**ABSTRACT:** Toni Morrison identifies the significance of race as well as “the presence of the racial other” (46) as the fundamental pillar of US-American identity construction, stating that Americanness is ubiquitously associated with whiteness and juxtaposed with Blackness. Robin Di Angelo further explains that “us” and “them” thinking continues to saturate the very fabric of American society, creating a feeling of internalized white superiority and resulting in a biased racial equilibrium perpetuated by institutional power. While US-American feminist scholarship and movements have continuously advocated for the equality between men and women, considerations of race and racism have historically received significantly less attention and alienated Black women from the cause. According to Morrison, US-American society considers “a black female as the furthest thing from human” (85), an observation which resonates in the discriminatory stereotypes, such as the biased trope of “the angry Black woman.” Feminist scholars, among them Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term “intersectionality,” have critiqued the virtual erasure of Black women’s experiences within US-American feminism and examine the intersecting forces of discrimination pertaining to race and gender. Relying on Nahum Welang’s concept of “triple consciousness,” based on W.E.B. Du Bois’s “double consciousness,” that affects the lives of Black US-American women, this paper will argue that (feminist) discussions about racism are frequently distorted by “white fragility” (Di Angelo) and its deflecting mechanisms, often involving “white tears,” which aim to preclude meaningful conversations and turn the tables forcefully eliciting Black emotional labor. The following will further examine the continuously pervasive juxtaposition of Black and white women in feminist contexts and explore how the claim of feminist universalism and cultural constructions of whiteness inform historic and contemporary perceptions of Black and white womanhood and femininity.

**KEYWORDS:** white and Black womanhood and femininity; emotional entitlement; white strategic tears

## Introduction

During a *Canada Reads* event (2018),<sup>1</sup> Jilly Black, a Black R&B singer-songwriter, and Jeanne Beker, a white TV personality, heatedly discussed *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) by the Métis Canadian writer Cherie Dimaline. In the Young Adult dystopian novel most of humanity has lost its ability to dream, resulting in severely detrimental mental health effects. The North American Indigenous population, still able to dream, are hunted and killed for their bone marrow needed to create a dream serum. After the event, Black, whose endorsement is based on the contention with colonial privilege, interprets Beker's negative evaluation of the novel as "too dark" as "the first hint of colonial privilege" and obliviousness to the history and lived experiences of many Indigenous peoples (Black). Meanwhile, a brief debate ensues on-air when Beker interrupts Black until the former feels affronted and accuses Black of personally attacking her. Refusing to engage in an emotion-based argument, Black explains that her argument about the novel did not intend to attack Beker nor elicit her personal feelings: "Let me tell you what you just said, 'I feel like.' So whatever you're feeling, take it to the altar, because I'm not the one that's responsible for your feelings" (Black).

The ninety-second clip, but especially Black's final comment, gained considerable attention online and (re)ignited heated debates over what it means to be a Black woman in North America. The dynamic between Black and Beker can be viewed as one example of the relationships between Black and white women,<sup>2</sup> entrenched in the history of colonialism, slavery, and anti-Black racism. Today racially discriminatory systems of privilege and oppression have transformed from real bondage to more subtle yet powerful structural systems of subjugation. According to Robin DiAngelo, whiteness is a powerful determinant "in the sense that societies and rights [...] goods [...] resources and privileges have been built on its foundation" (23). In the foreword to *White Fragility*, Michael Eric Dyson refers to

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<sup>1</sup> *Canada Reads* is a televised annual event on CBC. Characterized as a "literary Survivor" competition ("About Canada Reads"), publicly known figures each endorse a novel with the aim of it being chosen as Canada's must-read of the year.

<sup>2</sup> This article focuses on Black and white women in the context of historical and present-day displays of emotions; however, women and men of color as well as white men were and are also powerfully affected by and implicated in the Western history of colonialism, race, and racism, albeit through varied experiences and in different ways. Regarding terminology, "Black" (used for African-Americans or Black Americans) will be capitalized throughout to acknowledge the term's cultural and social significance. "White" and "whiteness" will not be capitalized due to the terms' capitalization among white supremacist groups, nevertheless this article wants to emphasize its understanding of "white" as a race and a racialized category.

Amiri Baraka's (formerly LeRoi Jones) meaningful phrase "the changing same" (Jones 180) and applies it to whiteness, which is "a highly adaptable and fluid force that stays on top no matter where it lands" (Dyson qtd. in DiAngelo 22). DiAngelo also explains that "whiteness [...] would rather hide in invisible visibility" (23) and retain its supremacy. Jeanne Beker's emotional response on *Canada Reads* illustrates how challenges to the existing racialized system of privilege trigger white anxiety and fragility involving emotions such as fear, anger, defensiveness, and an unwillingness to discuss race, racism, and white privilege afforded by an unequal system. The live debate illustrates that emotions can be employed to silence, derail difficult conversations, and ultimately reestablish white comfort (DiAngelo 38).

This article will assess how race, gender, and emotions intersect in a restrictively racialized and gendered society constructed around white supremacist thinking and patriarchal structures to shape notions of womanhood, femininity, and feminist efforts in activist and scholarly spaces. In the following, the central argument is twofold. Firstly, I will argue that the historical makeup of North American, particularly US-American society, has contributed to implementing a system of white emotional supremacy, which powerfully affects inter- and intra-gender and race relations today. Given this white emotional entitlement and the power to stereotypically ascribe emotions onto what is deemed "the Other," a chief aim of this article is to contextualize the juxtaposing and contradictory constructions of Black and white womanhood in connection to the visibility and displays of emotion in contemporary private, professional, and feminist spaces. Secondly, I will demonstrate that white-centered womanhood and white feminism—or what Rachel Cargle terms "white supremacy in heels" ("When Feminism")—has found a specific iteration in the utilization of white women's (strategic) tears. White women, insulated by white privilege and yet driven by white fragility, may use such tears unconsciously or maliciously. I will call this phenomenon "Strategic White Tears Womanhood"<sup>3</sup> and illustrate how it functions throughout the *Canada Reads* debate and in examples beyond, where it has the destructive potential to endanger Black lives. Finally, I will show that white emotional entitlement—mainly white women's tears—is a form

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<sup>3</sup> The phenomenon that I call Strategic White Tears Womanhood is neither new nor has it gone uncommented or uncontested by the diligent work of feminists and scholars of color. Among recent works is Ruby Hamad's book titled *White Tears/Brown Scars: How Feminism Betrays Women of Color* (2020). In this article, I will use Hamad's term "Strategic White Womanhood" (105) as a base to specifically examine white women's tears and their functions.

of silencing and contributes to upholding an inequitable status quo among women, which invariably shakes the idea of (feminist) sisterhood to its core.

### **The Incongruity of Race, Womanhood, and Emotions**

Jeanne Beker derailed Jully Black's content-based statements by relocating the conversation to an emotional level, where Beker's white emotional entitlement allowed her to reframe Black as an attacker, who had implicated her in colonial privilege. Beker emphasized her emotional distress and simultaneously imposed the "angry Black woman" caricature on Black. The women's discussion of race, racism, and privilege connects to broader stereotypical and racialized constructions of Black and white womanhood also present within the United States.<sup>4</sup> From Rachel Cargle's assertion that "[r]acism is as American as pie" ("When Feminism"), it follows that North American, specifically US-American, history, society, and culture are fundamentally shaped by and dependent on the construction of race—specifically the superiority of whiteness—and, as Toni Morrison states, "the presence of the racial other" (46) for the countries' identity formation. Morrison further deems Americanness as ubiquitously associated with whiteness and juxtaposed with Blackness (46). Consequently, the idealization of innocent white womanhood in North America coincides with the harmful, racist, and misogynist construction of Black womanhood as illustrated by Beker's framing of Black.

Notably, multiple social identities contribute to a person's advantage or disadvantage in Western societies; however, white women were and are powerfully subjugated through their gender and perceived as inferior to white men. Patricia Hill Collins explains that "[a]ccording to the cult of true womanhood that accompanied the traditional family ideal, 'true' women possessed four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" (72). White women's prescribed role within a gender oppressive system coincides with the advantage afforded to them by their race. According to Lisa B. Spanierman et al., white women experience "the convergence of privileged and marginalized identities [...] especially as they

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<sup>4</sup> This article wishes to acknowledge that Canadian and US-American colonial history, their practices of slavery, and contention with gender, race, and racism took and take different forms. Therefore, the *Canada Reads* event serves as a starting point to discuss issues that also have bearing in US-American society and culture.

relate to power, privilege, and oppression" (174-75). They embody the oppressed in a white patriarchal society but also inhabit the role of the oppressors because their whiteness situates them as beneficiaries of a racially discriminatory system. In contrast, Black women forcefully experience(d) oppression based on their gender and race<sup>5</sup> as a patriarchal society positions them as inferior to Black and white men, and their race privileges their white counterparts. While white women aspired to the four virtues enumerated above, Hill Collins determines that "African-American women encountered a different set of controlling images" (72), some of which cast "a black female as the furthest thing from human" (Morrison 85) in US-American society. Therefore, US-American womanhood has been defined by a white supremacist patriarchal worldview, the resulting discriminatory, binary juxtaposition of white and Black women, and the near erasure of all other women of color.

This divide was already felt in the women's suffrage movement—also referred to as first-wave feminism in the United States—and is foundational to a detrimental legacy in feminism that, according to Kimberley Christensen, stems from a latent reluctance "on the part of white feminists [to recognize] that no one form of oppression is primary" (632). The suffrage movement was inept and often consciously unwilling to apply what would now be an intersectional approach<sup>6</sup> to their efforts, which negated the potential to unite white, Black, and all women of color in striving to become enfranchised. Race always played a separative role within the movement, and while Sojourner Truth had to ask "Ain't I A Woman?" in her speech at the Women's Rights Convention in 1851, white women, who established themselves as leaders for the cause, held openly racist ideas, ascribed to white supremacist beliefs, and prioritized considerations of gender over race. Enabled by whiteness, white women could afford, according to Hamad, "the privileging of those racial, cultural, and religious identities that most resembled the typical characteristics associated with fair-skinned (Western) Europeans" (*White Tears/Brown Scars*). Whiteness, therefore, is

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<sup>5</sup> While W.E.B. DuBois advanced the concept of "double consciousness"—"the two-ness" (17) of being US-American and Black—Nahum Welang proposes a "triple consciousness theory" (296) that considers Black women's identities and argues that the converging discriminations against Black US-American women have to be taken into account (296-99). Notably, other intersecting social identities, such as class, age, sexual orientation, able-bodiedness, nationality, religious denomination, and ethnicity, are also influential in positioning an individual in society.

<sup>6</sup> Originally the term intersectionality was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) as a legal framework that addressed the simultaneous discrimination of women on the basis of "race and sex" (139). The concept has now been expanded to include multiple axes at the intersection of which discrimination may occur.

an ideology that is deeply enmeshed in Western societies, their public and private institutions, legal and political systems, cultural practices, (religious) belief systems and values, codes of conduct, appearance-related norms, and social activist movements.

Accordingly, Carrie Chapman Catt, a leading figure in the National American Women Suffrage Association (NAWSA), declared that “[w]hite supremacy will be strengthened, not weakened, if you give us the right to vote” (qtd. in Cargle “Coming to Terms”). The effort for women’s suffrage was consequently divided along racial lines. The reverberations are still felt today as Black feminists and scholars are actively critiquing white feminism. Then Black feminists, for example, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, a Black journalist and anti-lynching organizer, contested Susan B. Anthony’s proposed concept of expediency when it came to marginalizing Black women within the women’s suffragist movement (Giddings). However, when the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified in 1920, asserting that the right to vote “shall not be denied or abridged [...] on account of sex” (“Amendments”), Black women remained disenfranchised, and Robin DiAngelo points out that it was “[n]ot until the 1960s, through the Voting Rights Act [that] all women—regardless of race—[were] granted full access to suffrage” (30). The issue of suffrage tellingly illustrates how the conflation of oppressed identities—women, as *all* women—can be construed as proactive and problematic at the same time. Wells’s gendered analysis of racism tellingly asserts that “the battle for womanhood is the battle for race” (Bay 127, Davis 17).<sup>7</sup>

Consequently, Jeanne Beker’s invocation of Jully Black as an attacker corresponds to the reductive and racist stereotypes historically ascribed to Black US-American women and feminists. Among them is the so-called Sapphire<sup>8</sup> or “angry Black woman” stereotype. Black’s anger at the persistence of colonial privilege is evident, and as Audre Lorde asserts, “[a]nger is an appropriate reaction to racist attitudes, as is fury when the actions arising from those

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<sup>7</sup> This battle was palpable before the 1913 NAWSA women’s march in Washington D.C., where a segregation order prescribed that Black women march separately. Ida B. Wells (Alpha Suffrage Club) was joined by a majority of Black women in resisting the order (Giddings). Meanwhile, racial tensions and articulated sentiments typically associated with white feminism, such as “we should all be women first” (Bates), during the sister marches following the 2017 March on Washington attest to the continuing divide in feminist activist spaces today.

<sup>8</sup> Bettina Judd explains that the TV show *Amos ‘n’ Andy* popularized the Sapphire trope as it depicted the Black woman character as “[q]uick tongued and mean” (180) as well as an “emasculating type” (180).

attitudes do not change" (129). Such anger<sup>9</sup> can also be traced to the forms of sexism and racism unique to Black women's experiences in white society at large but also in (white) feminist contexts and activist spaces. Moya Bailey has coined the term "misogynoir"<sup>10</sup> (26) to address these specific misogynist and anti-Black attitudes. This targeted discrimination and the "angry Black woman" stereotype seems to arise from the dominant white society's assumption that, as Bettina Judd puts it, assumes "there must be something about the inner lives of women who are Black that is dangerous" (179). According to Patricia Hill Collins, such "controlling images" (5) are frequently utilized by "elite groups in [...] power [to] manipulate ideas about Black womanhood" (69) and evade the perceived danger emanating from Black women. In the aftermath of 2018's *Canada Reads* on-air dispute, Jully Black also referred to such controlling images and language imposed on Black persons in a statement on her website:

Throughout my career, I've become accustomed to being the only Black person [in] the room [...]. But the reality is, I am still a Black woman. The same demeanor that earns my white peers superlatives like "confident," and "assertive" has earned me labels like "loud," "angry," "aggressive," and "obnoxious." (Black)

The singer's statement recognizes a discriminatory intra-gender dimension to the perception of Black women in a system that privileges whiteness. Such labeling stereotypes are the racist legacies of the specific history of enslavement, discrimination against, and pejorative evaluation of Black women in the United States. The historical juxtaposition of white women, supposedly embodying the ideals of womanhood, and Black women, facing the ascription of reductive tropes, shows how Black and white women were subjugated and adversely positioned in the US-American patriarchal system. Furthermore, white women were often reduced to merely emotional, entirely non-rational beings, while Black women were tendentially perceived as devoid of most emotion. Therefore, whiteness and Blackness had

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<sup>9</sup> It is vital to point out that Lorde also suggests that anger can be a constructive tool implemented to contest racial discrimination and work to affect social change, which is evidenced in Black and Women of Color activism (e.g., the Black Lives Matter movement) and scholarship.

<sup>10</sup> In her dissertation (2013), Bailey specifies that her coinage "misogynoir" (26) is a portmanteau of misogyny and noir. The term carries "film and media connotations" (26) and is particularly relevant for media and popular culture.

all-encompassing effects on women's lives that coincided with their gender-specific suppression.

This effect is particularly disconcerting as whiteness and Blackness are known constructs created when race was invented at the onset of European colonialism. According to Ibram X. Kendi on *Scene on Radio*<sup>11</sup> and in his work *Stamped from the Beginning*, race, albeit without any scientific or biological merit, racism, unequal race relations that elevate whiteness, and racialized affective ascriptions have retained significant political, social, and cultural power from the colonial period to contemporary times (Biewen and Kumanyika). Nikole Hannah-Jones, the creator of *The 1619 Project*,<sup>12</sup> amends that the institution of race-based slavery constitutes the principle “founding paradox” of the United States’ democracy (Hannah-Jones). However, slavery—according to Hannah-Jones, “the first global enterprise” and “driver of early capitalism”—not only structurally buttressed white supremacy but also emphasized the view of Black persons not as fellow human beings but instead as chattel and commodities devoid of affective capacities. This utter negation of sentience and emotions is grounded in powerful Othering mechanisms supposedly legitimized by white supremacist beliefs.

Paul Kivel states that “[w]hiteness is a constantly shifting boundary separating those who are entitled to certain benefits from those whose exploitation and vulnerability to violence is justified by their not being white” (17). Scholars, such as Richard Dyer, therefore, advocate for the reconceptualization of whiteness from *the* “human condition” (Dyer 10-12) to being seen, as Peggy McIntosh states, as a distinct “racial identity” (12) that affords societal benefits. Beverly Daniel Tatum identifies whiteness as “a system of advantage” (“Why Are All”), and McIntosh further explains that the dominant white society wants to retain these

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<sup>11</sup> As a guest on John Biewen and Chenjerai Kumanyika's podcast episode “How Race Was Made” (*Scene on Radio*), Dr. Ibram X. Kendi states that “race(s)” were invented. Kendi connects its invention to the emergence of the African slave trade and the Portuguese chronicler Gomes Eanes de Zurara, the first articulator of racist ideas in the 1450s. Zurara viewed different African ethnic groups as one inferior, beastly group and suggested that slavery would be an improvement, while such claims of inferiority also came to justify slave trade endeavors. This historical account shows that ignorance did not cause exploitation, but that exploitation necessitated willful ignorance on the part of slave traders and the trade's white profiteers. For further reference see Kendi's work *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*.

<sup>12</sup> Nikole Hannah-Jones initiated *The 1619 Project* for *The New York Times Magazine* in 2019. The year marked the 200th anniversary of the beginning of slavery in the United States and the project takes a critical look at how history is taught and the continued ramifications of slavery's legacy in contemporary US-American society. For further reference see Hannah-Jones's collaborative work *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*.



advantages by making powerful aspects of whiteness function in invisibility. Thereby, white privilege is designed to be “an elusive and fugitive subject.” McIntosh also notes that “obliviousness about white advantage, [and] about male advantage, is kept strongly inculturated in the United States so as to maintain the myth of meritocracy, the myth that all democratic choice is equally available to all.”<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, defining whiteness as a *constructed* racial identity that affords *real* societal, cultural, and economical advantages helps explain how it continues to be instrumentalized and weaponized against people of color.<sup>14</sup> This results in interracial and intraracial discrimination, exclusionary colorism, anti-Black racism as well as violence, and a harmful white worldview built on fabricated assumptions of supremacy and “unearned entitlement” (McIntosh 12). Returning to July Black and Jeanne Beker, it can be said that Beker’s whiteness and womanhood function to inoculate her from racial stress, while her status as a white woman may invoke the “True Womanhood” rhetoric, exempting her under assumed “inherent goodness.”

Similarly, Black and white women’s juxtaposition within the gendered and racialized societal hierarchy also extends to their unequal treatment in the realm of emotions. Dominant white society determines the allocation and accessibility to emotions for specific people, contingent on their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, age, religious denomination, and other identity-forming categories. The entitlement to feel, exhibit, and have emotions seen is not only historically connected to white women but remains restricted along gendered and racial lines today. White women’s historical, emotional entitlement has direct detrimental effects on Black women, who are tasked with contesting the disruptive white essentialization of emotion in everyday, professional, and feminist spaces. Since the era of Enlightenment, emotions have been allocated to the so-called private/domestic sphere and were therefore connected to bourgeois white women. Notably, according to Vicky L. Ruíz and Ellen Carol DuBois, the private sphere (initially) excluded lower-class white

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<sup>13</sup> This myth of meritocracy is directly connected to the narrative of the American dream—defined by Armstrong et al. as “an ideological symbol of achievement and success in American culture” (227)—though its relative attainment for Black Americans is precluded by racial discrimination as a “structural tool” in all sectors of life (finance, health care, professional advancement) (228-229).

<sup>14</sup> This article acknowledges that the term “people of color” can be problematically generalizing and exclusionary at the same time. It will, therefore, only be used as an umbrella term where absolutely necessary.

women and women of color (xi), whereas the public realm was the sphere of reason represented by white men. Emotions, along with white women's assumed disposition, were devalued in favor of rationality and excluded from the sphere of white men.

Meanwhile, Black women and men's capacity to feel was questioned and dominant white society largely denied their emotional lives and expressions. According to Alison Phipps, "the performance of bourgeois white emotion accomplishe[d] the dehumanisation of people of color" (87). Emotions have since been ascribed to white women, and Ruby Hamad argues that while contemporary "[m]iddle class white women are allowed emotions and inner worlds [...] women of colour are not" (*White Tears/Brown Scars*). The (in)visibility and the discrepancy of entitlement to emotions are racialized and gendered, and its effects can be observed in interracial interactions, such as the one between Jully Black and Jeanne Beker. While the latter is free to express her hurt feelings about what she perceived as a personal accusation, Black, by contrast, cannot voice her anger without being labeled: "In my exchange with Jeanne Beker, I earned another label for stating a factual point: attacker [...]. Given our purpose for being on the show [...] it was completely inappropriate" (Black).

Such affective stereotypes, among them the "angry Black woman" or, as Beker phrased it, "the attacker," flatten Black women's emotional inner lives and harmfully preclude Black women from showing and expressing emotions, specifically their anger, even though scholars, such as Lorde and Judd, advocate for the transformative potential of Black women's anger. In a paradoxical development, Jully Black's display of anger ultimately enables Jeanne Beker's white emotional entitlement and the corresponding accusation of being attacked, which invokes and perpetuates the "angry Black woman" stereotype. However, Black's response signals her resistance against the reductive trope and the decentering of the conversation in favor of Beker's feelings. Whether Beker consciously or unconsciously instrumentalizes her feelings in the brief but heated discussion cannot be conclusively determined; however, she nevertheless practices emotional centering. Beker's discomfort with the conversation about race and privilege causes the subsequent emphasis on her feelings, which ultimately derails the content-based conversation with Black. Rachel Cargle

explains that white women<sup>15</sup> ubiquitously and strategically use centering to regain control and comfort because they “get so caught up in how they *feel* in a moment of black women expressing themselves that they completely vacuum the energy, direction, and point of the conversation to *themselves and their feelings*” (Cargle, “When Feminism,” emphasis added). Beker’s *Canada Reads* example shows that white women (can) wield emotions as a deflationary tactic in private, professional, and feminist activist settings to tailor conversations to their comfort. If all else fails, tears are spilled to invoke white privilege, which potentially elicits helping behavior, sympathetic and empathetic attention, and under specific circumstances, protection and white (institutionalized) rage.

### White Women’s Strategic Tears

According to Nabina Liebow and Trip Glazer, white privilege triggers “emotional white fragility” (3), which they define as “[t]he experience and/or expression of emotion that results from white fragility and that makes it more difficult for one to have constructive, meaningful thoughts and conversations about race” (3). Robin DiAngelo further explains that white fragility—triggered by even slight challenges to a white racial worldview—manifests itself in a range of emotional reactions, among others “anger, fear, and guilt” (38) and thereby becomes “a powerful means of white racial control and protection of white advantage” (38). Thus, in situations pertaining to race and racism, white (women’s) tears can not only be interpreted as a form of racial anxiety but, more importantly, as Diane Negra and Julia Leyda note, as “an affective symptom of white privilege” (351). For Ruby Hamad, such use of white women’s tears exceeds the mere expression of emotion in the form of tears but is a facet of what she terms “Strategic White Womanhood” (*White Tears/Brown Scars*).

The following analysis of select examples will show how white women’s fragility in conversations about race and racism, but also in situations where they perceive a threat to their racial comfort, triggers the embodiment of what I will call “Strategic White Tears Womanhood.” Based on Hamad’s term and her analysis of strategic tears (“How White

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<sup>15</sup> In her article “When Feminism Is White Supremacy in Heels,” Rachel Cargle specifically addresses white women’s displays of emotions and behavior in conversations about race; however, centering, as a strategy, is not exclusive to white women.

Women”), the following will engage specifically with the strategic shedding of white women’s tears and show how they have affected historical as well as contemporary events in US-American society and culture. In these examples, Strategic White Tears Womanhood is instrumentalized for multiple purposes, firstly, to evade critical conversations about racial privilege, racism, and whiteness by centering personal feelings. Secondly, it invokes historic idealizations of white “True Womanhood” (Barnard 2) and thereby elicits protection, often, by white men against Black men, thus triggering and legitimizing “white rage” (Phipps 86). Finally, these tears may be used to exempt white women and white feminists from participating in an intersectional form of feminist activism that aspires to represent *all* members. The *Canada Reads* debate between July Black and Jeanne Beker is an example of white emotional centering as the latter did not cry but still affirmed that she was in emotional distress. However, as a potential extension of centering such emotional distress, white women’s crying constitutes a visible display of (strategic) emotions that shape, further complicate, and possibly control and manipulate interracial interactions.

Scholars have long been interested in crying and the shedding of tears regarding their purposes, physiological and psychological functions, and their effect on the self and others. Vingerhoets et al. define crying as “a complex secretomotor response that has as its most important characteristics the shedding of tears [...] often accompanied by alteration in [...] facial expression, vocalizations, and in some cases sobbing” (“Adult Crying” 355). They also assert that crying can be understood as “fulfilling different coping functions that are not mutually exclusive” (“Adult Crying” 357). For Nico H. Frijda, crying signals an inability to cope with a given situation and suggests the crying individual's helplessness (53). Frijda further explains that the act of shedding emotional tears has interpersonal social functions, such as creating a sympathetic or empathetic connection between people (54). However, Vingerhoets et al. suggest that crying can function manipulatively and that it “may be considered helpful in turning seemingly uncontrollable situations into controllable ones” (“Adult Crying” 357), which also speaks to the effect crying and tears have on onlookers. This article will follow scholars who regard crying as a function that extends beyond physiology and consider the shedding of tears as an “interaction with the environment, with an

emphasis on its communicational aspects" (Vingerhoets et al., "Adult Crying" 356). As such, crying and, specifically, the communicative role of white women's tears concerning race, gender, and feminism is indicative of some of the ongoing tensions in personal, professional, activist interracial relationships and feminist spaces.

Tears can also express various emotions, including sadness and anger, and Jack Katz evaluates crying as a "richly varied expressive behavior" (2). Meanwhile, scholars such as Randolph R. Cornelius and Susan M. Labott argue that adult crying is expressive of how individuals "perceive themselves, the situation in which they find themselves, and the relationships they share with others in the situation" (160). Katz further states that "[o]ne cries on the understanding that *the situation requires a personally embodied form of expression that transcends what speech can do*" (197, original emphasis). Tears also have various uses as a specific form of communication, displayed only by humans. Jerome Neu specifies that "tears can be used defensively, whether to gain time and control or to dissipate aggression. And they can also be used manipulatively" (33). Likewise, Jefferey A. Kottler and Marilyn J. Montgomery assert that "crying is a coping of last resort: when words fail, the crying begins" (12). It follows that the act of crying is situational, depends on an individual's perception of themselves, others, and their environment, but also serves specific social functions that may (re)direct interpersonal interactions. Crying may also be viewed as the result of a linguistic or vocal impasse—an observation that becomes important when considering the function of white women's tears. Vingerhoets et al. discuss the "social impact of emotional tears" ("The Social Impact" 455) and assert that current research has merited two dominant functions of adult crying: "(1) Catharsis and emotional recovery (an 'intra-individual' function) and (2) signaling to others one's need for support and succor, which results in a change in their ongoing behavior and the directing of their attention to the crier (the 'inter-individual' function)" ("The Social Impact" 454).

The latter inter-individual effects of the shedding of tears on the individuals present carry social significance. Vingerhoets et al. find that "tears [...] also change behavioral intentions of observers" and that "the mere presence of visible tears facilitates prosocial behavioral

intentions" ("The Social Impact" 460-61). The study also suggests that onlookers are likely to perceive crying individuals as "more helpless and in need of support" (462), which may create a deeper connection between the observer and the observed, potentially leading to a more sympathetic evaluation of the crying individual, and finally "elicits helping behavior" ("The Social Impact" 462). These functions of crying can alter the course of charged social interactions and are particularly interesting in the context of women's interracial relationships and efforts in feminist activism.

The distribution of racialized emotional privilege is organized hierarchically, and gender is also a significant factor in allocating privilege and power. To this effect, Aída Hurtado writes that "each oppressed group in the United States is positioned in a particular and distinct relationship to white men, and each form of subordination is shaped by this relational position" (833). Leah R. Warner and Stephanie A. Shields argue that "the manly emotion standard is not simply based on masculinity; rather it is based on *White* (i.e., White European American) masculinity." White women as well as women and men of color deviate from this standard, albeit in significantly distinct ways. Gender and race are, therefore, among the determining social identities that allow or preclude the visibility and acceptability of emotions. Based on Hope Landrine's 1985 study on stereotypes of women, Warner and Shields further argue that there are "differences in emotion stereotypes [between] Black women and White women." Their study suggests that while anger is stereotypically associated with Black women, most emotions are predominantly ascribed to white women.

These observations relate to what I would term the supremacy of white emotion—a product of white supremacist ideology that has gained a persistent foothold in the United States and other Western societies. Thus, white women's ascribed embodiment of ideal femininity and innocence, as well as their status as simultaneously oppressive and oppressed, have historically served a dual purpose. Firstly, there are cases in which white women have consciously used their race privilege to wield power over Black men and women, and secondly, white women's perceived vulnerable status has coercively been instrumentalized by white men to uphold the existing racial hierarchy and to legitimize perpetrated racialized

violence against Black individuals, particularly Black men, in the United States for centuries. Indeed, Luvvie Ajayi's claim that emotions—especially white women's tears—can be weaponized and often result in anti-Black violence is historically exemplified by innumerable lynchings accompanied by the harm inflicted on Black persons and their property.<sup>16</sup>

The Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921 stands out as one infamous example of the consequences of an interaction between a Black man and a white woman. While the circumstances of the encounter between Dick Rowland and Sarah Page in an elevator in downtown Tulsa remain unclear, what followed were accusations of Rowland's sexual assault of Page, which incited the gathering of a white lynch mob that killed Black residents of the prosperous Greenwood District and burned what was then known as Black Wall Street to the ground (Parshina-Kottas et al.). Similarly, the public lynchings of Claude Neal (Florida, 1934) and Emmett Till (Mississippi, 1955) resulted from unconfirmed accusations of murder and inappropriate conduct against white women, respectively. Neal was accused of murdering Lola Cannady and was publicly lynched by a white mob despite a lack of concrete evidence. The lynching was followed by the Marianna Riots, during which a white mob looted and burned Black-owned properties. 14-year-old Emmett Till, accused of whistling at Carolyn Bryant, was violently murdered by Roy Bryant and JW Milam. The two white men were later acquitted of the murder, while (now) Carolyn Bryant Donham recently admitted to falsely testifying in Till's murder case (Judson 115; Tyson 6). These historical cases of violence against (young) Black men illustrate white women's controversial position in the hierarchy of racialized power and how their "fragility" and emotions were consciously used or inadvertently appropriated by themselves and white men to inflict racialized violence and endanger the lives of Black persons.

Angela Onwuachi-Willig importantly points out that lynchings of Black men were most often carried out under the pretext of protecting "True White Womanhood." According to Amii Larkin Barnard, the highly productive myth awarded white women for their "purity, piety and

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<sup>16</sup> This article draws on a limited number of historical examples; however, it is crucial to acknowledge that lynchings were a common form of brutally murdering, most often, Black people in the United States. The NAACP recorded 4,743 lynchings between 1882 and 1968, however, because of the lack of formal tracking the actual number remains unclear ("History of Lynching").

deference to men" (2) and for behaving "like a lady" (2). Finally, "True Womanhood commanded the protection of white ladies by white gentlemen" (Barnard 2) and categorically excluded Black women and initially only deemed white women of the upper classes eligible for such protection. Under the veil of protection, white women found themselves subjugated by white men, nevertheless wielding some power due to their whiteness and status symbol of womanhood and femininity (Onwuachi-Willig 264). Onwuachi-Willig also crucially appends white women's participation in lynchings, which "directly challenged the notion of the fragile, delicate creatures that the idea of True Womanhood was designed to protect" (266). Anti-lynching activists, among them Ida B. Wells, tried to expose lynching as racist anti-Black violence and worked to discredit the fabricated notion that lynchings served white women's protection (Onwuachi-Willig 265-66).

Meanwhile, white men, who actively advanced the "myth of the Black rapist"<sup>17</sup> (Onwuachi-Willig 264), used Black women's exclusion from the cult of "True Womanhood" as an excuse for sexual assault. The practice of lynchings is indicative of the history and legacy of pervasive racism in the United States, but it also exposes the arbitrary interplay of gender and race in the white supremacist hierarchy among white men, white women, Black men, and Black women. However, Spanierman et al. argue that "[w]hiteness is constructed differently for White men and White women, though race is the marking mechanism through which the privilege of each is maintained" (174, original emphasis). They further argue that "White men benefit from both male privilege and White privilege" (175) and are, therefore, afraid of losing these privileges. Consequently, white women's fragility and tears were then used to legitimize the expression of white men's fears in the form of anger against people of color (Spanierman et al. 175). Spanierman et al. then importantly conclude that "racial affect patterns" (175) are gendered; however, they also show that emotions are highly influential in conversations and lived experiences where gender and race intersect.

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<sup>17</sup> The persistent criminalization of Black persons and particularly the portrayal of Black men as rapists can be traced from the end of the Civil War into the twenty-first century. From racist media portrayals, such as D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, to the development of a racialized and discriminatory legal and penal system, scholars as well as Ava DuVernay's 2016 documentary *13th* have shown that Black Americans have been and are stereotypically associated with criminality and are consequently subject to disproportionate incarceration rates in the United States. For further reference see Ava DuVernay's *13th: From Slave to Criminal with One Amendment*.



The Tulsa Race Massacre and the murders of Till and Neal show that Black men were and are cast as a threat and therefore continue to be hypervisible and subject to surveillance within a predominantly white United States society. However, the enhanced monitoring of Black people has, to a great extent, been institutionalized in the twenty-first century and transferred to law enforcement in the form of racial profiling. Nevertheless, incidents of white people's vigilante policing of Black people's lives and activities have not ceased to exist. On the contrary, more recent viral examples of white (tearful) women calling the police on Black individuals for nonexistent offenses have resulted in vehement online criticism. The traction these videos gained online also signals that resistance against white people's racial biases, racist behavior, and white privilege has to a certain extent been relocated into the realm of popular culture and onto social media platforms.<sup>18</sup> This shift could be seen as a reaction to white feminism's slowness in responding to white women's "tendency to be lachrymose, which is often an attempt to avoid accountability in response to criticism by women of color" (Phipps 84). Thus, the availability of technology simultaneously constitutes an advantage and a disadvantage. As a specific form of depersonalized looking, CCTV cameras and cell phones can be a form of constant surveillance; however, such video recordings can also function as a witness and accountability device.

Since the summer of 2018, videos of white women placing 911-calls to report Black persons for seemingly trivial actions—existing/living while Black—have continuously appeared on social media channels, showing the racially motivated nature of such illegitimate calls. Chan Tov McNamara terms this behavior "racialized police communication" (335) and explains that it "may involve calls, complaints, or reports to law enforcement against Blacks, made out of implicit or unconscious bias, or reports made out of the specific desire to leverage law enforcement mistreatment of Blacks in an effort to harm the victim" (342). Exemplary are the cases of Jennifer Schulte (2018), dubbed BBQ Becky, and of Amy Cooper (2020),

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<sup>18</sup> Social media platforms are arbitrary spaces that may advance productive conversations about critical cultural, societal, and structural issues in relation to race; however, they can also have detrimental effects and perpetuate or even popularize problematic iterations of Strategic White Tears Womanhood. For example, a recent TikTok challenge tasks users—mostly white women—to tearfully cry until a voice-over command tells them to "turn it off" (#Turnitoff), at which point the person will instantly stop crying and smirk into the camera. The trend can be interpreted as symptomatic of the potentially manipulative and harmful nature of white (women's) tears and attests to the continued power white displays of emotions (may) wield in Western societies.

nicknamed Central Park Karen, which involve these white women tearfully calling the police to report Black persons without cause. These cases with memorable hashtags are reminiscent of the historical cases presented above; however, they are also symptomatic of the persistence of anti-Black racism and racial biases in the United States and demonstrate how white women instrumentalize their white emotional entitlement to elicit helping behavior from authorities (i.e., the police) and utilize crying, as Vingerhoets et al. suggest, “to [not only] communicate their needs and desires [but to also] alter situations to their liking” (“Adult Crying” 369).

The viral video of Jennifer Schulte—BBQ Becky—depicts the white woman confronting Kenzie Smith and his friends while barbecuing at Lake Merritt in Oakland in what Schulte believed was a non-designated area for a charcoal grill. Michelle Dione Snider, Smith’s wife, recorded the incident, as the group around Smith contradicted Schulte’s claim, showing her a park layout on their phones. Nevertheless, Schulte proceeded to call the police, expressing the desire to have the group removed from the area. After two hours, Schulte placed a second tearful call to the police telling the officer the group was threatening her. Schulte then went to meet a dispatched officer at a nearby Quik Stop while Snider, still filming, followed. When the police officer arrived, Schulte cried before answering the officer’s questions. Similarly, in July 2020, Amy Cooper called the police on Christian Cooper (no relation) in Central Park, who had asked the white woman to put her dog on a leash. Christian Cooper recorded Amy Cooper advancing on him and threatening to tell the police that an African American man was threatening her life. She then called 911 and explained that she was being recorded by an African American man threatening herself and her dog. Purposefully making the incident appear as a possible assault, Amy Cooper did not appear to answer the operator’s questions but screamed into the phone in a distressed, tearful voice demanding the dispatch of the police to the park.

Schulte’s and A. Cooper’s 911-calls are only two examples of many video recordings of white women calling the police on Black persons. Amy Cooper’s illegitimate 911 call came on the same day that George Floyd was murdered by law enforcement in Minneapolis and thereby

received considerable attention. Another case in 2018 involving Teresa Klein, a white woman dubbed Cornerstone Caroline, who accused a 9-year-old Black boy, Jeremiah Harvey, of groping her in an NYC deli is particularly reminiscent of Emmett Till, although the incident did not end violently. All these incidents can be categorized as racialized police communication and show how white women's tears lead to police involvement and the endangerment of Black lives. Casting themselves as damsels in distress, Schulte and Cooper shed tears, which have the potential of manipulating a situation in their favor. Both white women told the 911-dispatch that Black persons were threatening them, thereby invoking narratives of white women's victimhood that have repeatedly triggered the protection scheme historically connected to white womanhood.

Schulte and A. Cooper perceived Smith, his wife, and friends as well as C. Cooper as what Nirmal Puwar terms "space invader[s]" (7), i.e., space historically not reserved for Black people. It may be argued that Schulte's and A. Cooper's initial behavior toward the Black individual might have been guided by unconscious racial biases and their perception of them as space invaders. However, the video recordings clearly illustrate the moments when both white women consciously and maliciously instrumentalize their white womanhood, emotions, and linguistic register to enlist law enforcement to wield institutional power over the Black men in question. Both women report that Black men are threatening them at certain points in the recordings. The historical significance of such racist claims, as well as the short "circuit between white tears and white rage" (Phipps 86), implicates Schulte's and A. Cooper's examples of illegitimate racialized police communication in a tearful and willful attempt to endanger Black lives. The actual *threat* in these specific cases emanates from Schulte and A. Cooper, who, by instrumentalizing their Strategic White Tears Womanhood, embody the role of the actual attacker. The video recordings made by Snider and C. Cooper are thereby not only evidence inoculating the Black individuals from being accused of any wrongdoing, but they also attest to white women's (arguably) deliberate and strategic tearfulness.

Writer David Dennis, Jr. perceives these videos as a means to acknowledge that “America has functioned under the premise that white women are innately innocent and harmless in the history of anti-Black violence despite overwhelming historical and present-day evidence to the contrary.” Dennis’s assertion of white women’s ability to exert their power through displays of emotions, particularly tears, indicates how Strategic White Tears Womanhood operates in contemporary US-American society. It is also notable that Schulte and A. Cooper’s tears may have an enhancing effect. Katz asserts that “whether or not anyone else will observe the person crying” (197) plays a significant role. Notably, Schulte only starts to cry once she meets the white police officer called to the scene. Amy Cooper also seems assertive and devoid of tears until she is on the phone with the 911-operator, when her voice changes and her expression turns tearful. Corresponding with Katz’s observation that “[f]or people who can use language, part of the phenomenon of crying is artful and empathic not-speaking” (197), it follows that tears can be more expressive than speech. This becomes pertinent when white fragility manifests itself in the form of white tears with the potential to skew everyday encounters and interracial interactions about race, racism, and white privilege. The potential instrumentalization of Strategic White Tears Womanhood further complicates such interactions, centers white women such as Jeanne Beker, Jennifer Schulte, and Amy Cooper, and potentially not only derails content-based conversations but endangers Black lives.

## **Conclusion**

Research has found multiple functions of crying and the shedding of tears. While tears may simply express emotions, such as sadness or anger, historical and current examples have shown that white women’s tears can be used in conscious and malicious ways. The arbitrary construction of Black and white womanhood has contributed to the preclusion and reductive ascription of emotionality in a patriarchal system shaped by white supremacist thinking. In short, the interplay of racialized, gendered, and affective (historic) stereotypes upholds racist and reductive dynamics inherent in viral incidents of racialized police communication today. Furthermore, white privilege and white fragility caused by a white supremacist history and

present are accompanied by persistent white emotional entitlement that determines who gets to display emotions, which emotions are appropriate for whom, and how these displays are received and perceived. This entitlement ultimately also enables Strategic White Tears Womanhood.

White women's tears and their potentially harmful effects, among them emotional centering, evading difficult conversations, and willfully exerting power bestowed by white womanhood, are acknowledged phenomena frequently discussed on social media platforms, especially Black Twitter, where #WhiteTears generates a myriad of posts that comment on the tearful behavior of white women. White women's invocation of the damsel in distress trope, as in the case of Jeanne Beker, Jennifer Schulte, and Amy Cooper, is problematic in private, professional, and activist interaction and can be interpreted as an attempt to capitalize on the "cultural power of white tears" (Phipps 90). Ultimately, like Jeanne Beker on *Canada Reads*, white women may employ Strategic White Tears Womanhood to evade discussions about colonial history and white privilege, regain racial comfort, and exert control bestowed on them by the elusive construction of whiteness and the power of their tears.

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