"Contingent Beings": On White Supremacy and An Islamic Framework

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Abstract

Though U.S. American academic discussions of White supremacy abound, they often consider White supremacy and its effects as phenomena that, while interesting and important subjects of study, represent some aberrant departure from Western rationality, or an offense minor enough to be corrected while generally keeping our current sociopolitical systems intact. Such perspectives reinscribe the very White supremacy they purport to challenge: when we discuss White supremacy as the ideological exception rather than rule, or as one building block of our society rather than its foundation, we prevent ourselves from considering the truth of White supremacy and what it may take to change it. In this article, I argue that those of us interested in a world beyond White supremacy can learn from Islamic frameworks, which are often ignored by the White, settler colonial context, but can offer ways of understanding our world. To that end, this article discusses the Islamic concepts of shirk and ummah to examine the effects of and resistance to White supremacy.

Keywords: Islam; White supremacy; Sylvia Wynter; Black-Indegenism; Sherman Jackson; contingence

Introduction

Though U.S. American academic discussions of White supremacy abound, many of us in education consider White supremacy and its effects as phenomena that represent some aberrant departure from Western rationality, or an offense minor enough to be corrected, while generally keeping our current sociopolitical systems intact. As an institution that supports and is supported by a White supremacist state, U.S. schooling perpetuates these patterns of discourse, both in K-12 schools and at the university level. These types of discussions reinscribe the very White supremacy they purport to challenge: when we discuss White supremacy as the ideological exception rather than rule, or as one building block of our society rather than its foundation, we prevent ourselves from considering the truth of White supremacy and what it may take to change it. Though not often seen as related, the truth about White supremacy and a key to changing it may be found in Islamic teachings.

Our challenge in discussing White supremacy makes sense. Most of us are products of Western elementary, secondary, and post-secondary schooling practices that divide select aspects of the human experience into "study-able" subjects, while ignoring or objectifying the less-observable or -explainable aspects human experience, including spirituality and religion. While narratives of Western academic practice either celebrate or lament the European academy's break

from Church control, I posit that such a break—even if only rhetorical,[1] and even as it coincided with European imperial, colonial, and enslavement enterprises around the world—paved the way for current understandings of White supremacy as a relatively recent, observable, and self-remedying phenomenon, rather than a practice long recognized and documented in religious and spiritual practice. Further, as White supremacy has allowed for the co-opting of a particular religious and spiritual practices in the name of domination (namely, Christianity), I further argue that attention to knowledges offered by other spiritual and religious practices can offer ways of considering and resisting White supremacy outside of a framework that simultaneously reinscribes it.

I acknowledge that, even as I discuss "religious and spiritual practice" as a discreet and separate category, I am bending to the aforementioned Western practice that separates our lives into categories of *observable/knowable* and *unknowable/non-existent/invalid*, particularly as many adherents' religious and spiritual knowledges structure their entire worldview—both what they see, and what they cannot. Because of this, I prefer to discuss such knowledges and attendant practices as *frameworks*, in that they often inform people's understanding of their universes. I also acknowledge that it is outside the scope of this article to offer specific instructions incorporating spiritual/religious framework knowledge into academic research practice and schooling curricula. However, this article invites those of us interested in education and schooling to spend less time considering how we "teach" spiritual/religious frameworks, and instead consider what these frameworks can teach *us*, particularly when it comes to long-standing social issues that we seldom connect to the areas of spirituality or religion, such as the existence and effects of White supremacy in society, and specifically in education.

Elsewhere, I discuss the Black-Indigenist paradigm, a paradigm which—in response to five centuries of White supremacist, settler-colonial dominance in the lands called North America— looks to Black and Indigenous responses to the settler colonial project as models of resistance.[2] Those models prioritize (1) the *Word* (language, storytelling, narrative construction); (2) kinship/community networks; and, (3) land/space connections as sites where Indigenous and Black peoples have historically confirmed and reaffirmed their humanity in a wider settler colonial context predicated upon their dehumanization and enslavement/elimination. While I have focused quite heavily on Sylvia Wynter's and others' conceptions of the *Word* as a vehicle for creating (or re-creating) a world beyond White supremacy and colonialism,[3] this article more closely focuses on the second site of Black-Indigenist resistance—kinship/community networks—and their connection to spiritual/religious frameworks. While this connection could work with a variety of spiritual/religious frameworks, a statement by Wynter encouraged the specific religious focus of this article.

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1. See Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument," *The New Centennial Review* 3 (2003).

2. Kelly Limes-Taylor Henderson, "'I had never been at home in the world': A Case for Black Indigenism," forthcoming; Kelly Limes-Taylor Henderson, "On Academic Repression, Blackness, and Storytelling as Resistance," *Fighting Academic Repression and Neoliberal Education: Resistance, Reclaiming, Organizing, and Black Lives Matter in Education*, ed. Anthony J. Nocella II and Erik Juergensmeyer (New York: Peter Lang, 2017); Kelly Limes-Taylor Henderson, "The Story of One Hundred and Sixteenth" (doctoral dissertation, Georgia State University, 2016).

3. Karen Gagne, "On the Obsolescence of the Disciplines: Frantz Fanon and Sylvia Wynter Propose a New Mode of Being Human," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 4 (2007); Joyce King and Sylvia Wynter, "Race and Our Biocentric Belief System: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter," *Black Education: A Transformative Research and Action Agenda for the New Century*, ed. Joyce King, (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005).

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In her piece with G. Thomas, Wynter mentions the Islamic concept of *ummah* when discussing the ways that de- and anti-colonial thinkers (including educators and researchers) can push ourselves beyond our current oppressive societies—notably, how we can understand ourselves beyond the Western construction of White, heterosexual, cisgendered normative construction of humanity, or Man.[4] Instead, this group can "recognize itself not just as physiologically a species but phenomenologically as a unit; as a 'we' or to borrow from Islam, as an 'umma[h],' but this time one of the human, after 'Man.'"[5] If we, as Wynter suggests, extend our definition of *ummah*, or community, from those with whom we share religious connection (in the typical Islamic sense) to all oppressed and marginalized under White supremacy, we can better recognize potential partners in our resistance. [6] In this article, then, I argue that those of us interested in understanding and extending these partnerships can learn from Islamic frameworks, which are often ignored as valid sources of knowledge in the larger White, Western context, though these frameworks offer ways to understand our world. To that end, this article discusses the Islamic concepts of *shirk* and *ummah* in order to examine the effects of and resistance to White supremacy.

This article is separated into four parts. The first section, called "White Supremacy" briefly addresses the history and effects of Whiteness in the United States. The next section, "Shirk," discusses the Islamic concept, as well as its connection to White supremacy in the United States. "The New Ummah" addresses the implications of spiritual and interpersonal connection as a site of resistance to White supremacy. Finally, "Education" attends to the ways that these concepts affect our schooling practices, and what we can do about it.

Before addressing these topics, however, it is important to note what I hope to accomplish through this article, and what I do not. First, while assertions in this article may apply to White supremacy outside of the United States, this article addresses issues of supremacy and religious frameworks within the U.S. American context. As a Black U.S. American, my priority is to address White supremacy in my own backyard; though I am interested in and hopeful for the eradication of White supremacy in other places, there are others much better qualified to discuss it than I. I will not impose upon their space/place.

Second, though I am a Muslim (and Black and queer) academic, I am not an Islamic scholar. In other words, the argument presented here is not based on theological background, but on one religious adherent's perspective on the sociocultural context in which she finds herself. References made to the Qur'anic text come from Abdel Haleem's and Yuksel's, al-Shaiban's and Schulte-Nafeh's English translations, which I have found helpful in my personal spiritual practice.[7] For easy reference, I include parenthetical citations of the Qur'an in the body of this article, while I include specific translations' publication information in the footnotes. I invite interested readers to consider my assertions using the Qur'anic text that is most helpful for them, and that those better-versed in the centuries-old history of Islamic scholarship extend upon the ideas presented here. It is important to note that Islamic scholars have addressed the topic of White supremacy and *shirk* in various forms, and some of them will be referenced here.

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4. Greg Thomas and Sylvia Wynter, "Fanon, 'the Man,' Humanism and 'Consciousness,'" *Proud Flesh: A New Afrikan Journal of Culture, Politics & Consciousness* 4 (2009).
    5. Ibid., 22.
    6. King and Wynter, "Race and Our Biocentric Belief System."
    7. *The Qur'an,* trans. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); *Quran: A Reformist Translation*, trans. Edip Yuksel, Layth Saleh al-Shaiban, and Martha Schulte-Nafeh (Brainbow Press, 2007).

Third, following the leads of Hasan and Stonebanks, I encourage interested adherents to say the requisite blessing after reading any direct reference to God or Prophet Muhammad.[8] I use various names to signify God, including The Creator and The Divine. Those Names will be represented by the capitalization of both the name and its accompanying article (e.g., The Divine). I try to avoid gendering God, as The Creator of the universe defies our limited confines of sex and gender. Where gendering seems unavoidable, I use *he/she/they* as a way to both trouble and broaden our assumptions about gender and God. I also note that, as a convert, I was neither raised within or ascribe to a particular Muslim order; rather, I work to align my religious practice most closely with my personal readings of the Qur'an, various teachings on the Qur'anic text, and inspirations that emerge from prayer and meditation practice. Because of this, my approach to the Qur'an, as well as the exclusion of other important aspects of the mainstream Islamic knowledge base (such as discussions of the Sunnah and quotations of well-known hadith), may differ from the approach of my brothers and sisters in the faith. Rather than excuse these differences, I hope that they remind us of the depth and breadth of Islamic thought and practices. We are in the same *ummah*, but we understand and approach aspects of our religion in different ways. That is okay.

Finally, I hope that this article offers one of many ways to consider, understand, and resist White supremacy; I neither posit nor imply that it is the only way. In the spirit of Islamic traditions that honor the variety of paths humanity takes to get to Truth, may this article serve as one helpful step along a world full of paths.

White Supremacy

Within the past five hundred years, *Black* has come to define those in the global socio-economic hierarchy whose bodies and resources are permanently and perpetually at the disposal of Whites (whose bodies and resources are, paradoxically, at no one's disposal but their own). While Blackness as the antithesis of the norm makes it what Wynter calls a "liminal category," and while it is often included in discussions of Whiteness as the opposing identity (as will be done here, intermittently), the concept of Whiteness itself is the primary focus here.[9]

In the current imperialist/colonial era, Whites' representing their experiences as "normal" is not only the foundation for White supremacy, but makes all non-Whites the perpetual "other." This delineation between White and non-White has not always existed, however, and has been a developing concept throughout the Western colonial era. In the case of the area that came to be called the United States, Africans and people of African descent did not initially represent only an enslaved and enslaveable caste. While 100 enslaved people from Africa were brought by Spanish colonials to present-day Virginia in 1526, Africans and African-descended people were also a substantial portion of the then-British colony's indentured servant population in the region in the early seventeenth century—a time when, as Steven Martinot contends, the English had not "racialized the Africans, as evidenced by the fact that they had not racialized themselves."[10] As late as 1651, these Africans shared social standing with British indentured servants and laborers, and were awarded stolen Indigenous land and freedom from indenture after a specific term of

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8. Christopher Darius Stonebanks, "An Islamic Perspective on Knowledge, Knowing, and Methodolgy," *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*, ed. Norman K. Denzin, Yvonna S. Lincoln, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Los Angeles: Sage, 2005), 294. Here, Stonebanks quotes Hasan (2005).

9. King and Wynter, "Race and Our Biocentric Belief System," 363.

10. John Rickford and Russell Rickford, *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2000), 130-131; Steve Martinot, *The Machinery of Whiteness: Studies in the Structure of Racialization* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 45.

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service.[11] As the growth of labor-intensive cash crops such as rice, cotton, and tobacco began to increase, so did the growth of the enslavement industry, especially in the southern British colonies, where small African and African-descended populations doubled and continued to grow. By 1750, African-descended people made up 27%, 31%, and 44% of the populations of North Carolina, Maryland, and Virginia, respectively; by the late eighteenth century, African-descended peoples outnumbered British-descended in South Carolina and Georgia.[12] While European indentured servants were still present, the influx of African-descended enslaved people shifted the legal and social practices in the colonies, where older laws regulating the enslaved were more regularly enforced. Thus, while there were laws distinguishing the rights of the African-descended Blacks and British-descended Whites as early as 1639 (including the law of "lifetime service" in Virginia), the letter and adherence to these laws hit a violent uptick in the early 1700s.[13]

As they were legally and socially establishing who Blacks could and could not be, the British-descended colonists were also developing what Whiteness was and was not. While Martinot notes that the 1662 act "Negro Women's Children to Serve According to the Condition of the Mother" was what "marked the beginning of a process of social differentiation between the English and the Africans," he also notes that this act did not make an immediate difference in the lives of the European and African indentured servants, who together worked under and resisted the oppressions of their masters.[14] Martinot echoes others that marked Bacon's Rebellion in 1676 as the beginning of a more widely economically- and socially-influencing racialization within the colonies. It was then that narratives describing African-descended peoples as dangerous, rebellious, and in need of White control encouraged impoverished, European-descended people to join the richer colonists in their domination over the Black population for financial gain.[15] Martinot notes that this "emergence of whiteness" created a new identity and consciousness for the colonials: "[w]ith the birth of slavery, the English felt secure; with the birth of racialization, they could feel 'civilized' and genteel even about having barbarically imposed themselves on the Africans."[16] In the centuries that followed and with the creation of the United States, immigrants from various European nations, not initially understood as White, were able to gain "U.S. cultural membership (as white)" as they performed "acts of 'nativism,'" and abandoned "the ethnic cohesion that attended their 'alienation.'"[17] Martinot notes that this performance often meant at least a "distancing" of the self from Black people, if not more overt expressions of anti-Black racism.[18] In this way, White supremacy was established and perpetuated through the United States' colonial beginnings and its history as a nation.

While understanding Africans as barely human was a vital concept in the perpetuation of African enslavement in the United States (an institution that Clyde Woods characterized as the

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11. Rickford and Rickford, *Spoken Soul*. 131. Steve Martinot presents an interesting discussion about the beginnings of the shift of the English indentured servant away from the caste of servitude and the African into perpetual servitude with the 1662 act "Negro Women's Children to Serve According to the Condition of the Mother," which negated the English tradition of a child's social status being based on his/her father and set the stage for the future of "slave breeding." See Martinot, *The Machinery of Whiteness*, 40.

12. Rickford and Rickford*, Spoken Soul*, 134.

13. Ibid.,135.

14. Martinot, *The Machinery of Whiteness*, 41.

15. Ibid., 50.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., 136.

18. Ibid.

ultimate expression of capitalism[19]), White supremacy has shifted in recent years: in this post-Civil Rights era, where public and explicit racist dialogue tends to be (though is not always) silenced, Whites are able to take full advantage of the racial hierarchy without acknowledging it. Such distancing and taking advantage applies to academic situations, as well, as they incorporate the normalcy of Whiteness into knowledge-dissemination institutions.

David Newman discusses how White supremacy and the normalcy that undergirds it seem to take on humble, self-deprecating tones within the academic environment, particularly as they apply to the White gaze. Each year, Newman asks his group of mostly White, mostly wealthy students to describe the "typical" Latino, Black, and Asian family, and the group easily complies. When he asks them to describe a typical White family, however, the discussion invariably "grinds to a screeching halt." Once students eventually assert that White families are "all different" and that "[t]here's no way you can come up with common traits" for them, Newman notes that his point has been made. Newman acknowledges that, "when we think of our own group…we're more inclined to highlight or at least pay heed to the diversity of individuals." Whiteness, however, is in the peculiar position of dominance in our society. Because of this,

> White families are simply "families." In the absence of a modifying racial or ethnic adjective, they're the default option. White families are assumed to be ordinary and regular. Consequently, they need no explaining, no special chapter devoted to their striking differences…In a racially imbalanced society like ours, whiteness, in general, is the yardstick against which "non-white" racial groups are evaluated. [20]

As Newman points out, despite a seemingly reverent, even celebratory discussion of how interesting, moving, or (dare I say it?) exotic some non-White groups/people may be, the problem still remains: this reverence, this celebration turns certain humans into objects of observation, full of problems to be explained by the observers, full of solutions to be expropriated by them. These objects do not have a frame of reference, a perspective, or a way of knowing that is their own. Indeed, they exist for the sake of the Whites, and what's an object of observation worth without the observer? While Newman's example seems relatively innocuous, this objectification has had devastating consequences throughout the history of Western modern education. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, for example, discusses the ways that this objectification has been instrumental in the area of Western academic research, which, from its start, has subjected marginalized people around the world to various levels of outrageous intrusions—from physically devastating medical experimentation to outright theft of homes, objects, and bodies.[21] These instances of torture and theft, however, were instead called "research," with the researchers taking the role of innocent, objective observer.

This ability to take advantage while remaining ignorant of that advantage is one of the hallmarks of White supremacy. Robert Jensen defines the near-invisibility of Whiteness to Whites themselves as part of White privilege—the privilege to ignore the reality of a White-supremacist society when it makes Whites uncomfortable, to rationalize why this supremacy is not really so

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19. See Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (London: Verso, 1998).

20. David Newman, *Identities and Inequalities: Exploring the Intersections of Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality* (Boston: McGraw Hill: 2007), 14, 15, 16.

21. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999).

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bad, to deny one's own role in it. It is the privilege of remaining ignorant because that ignorance is protected.[22] Both the privilege and normalcy accorded to Whiteness are indicators that this era of imperialism/colonialism has also been one of White supremacy.

Jensen defines a White supremacist society as one "whose founding is based in an ideology of the inherent superiority of white Europeans over non-whites, an ideology that was used to justify the crimes against indigenous people and Africans that created the [United States]."[23] Like Wynter, Charles Mills notes that such superiority ideologies are not necessarily abnormal; indeed, societies "structured by relations of domination and subordination" will feature "conceptual apparatus…shaped and inflected in various ways by the biases of the ruling group(s)."[24] This ideology, however, often leads to the ruling group's tendency to "find the confirmation" for their supremacy "whether it is there or not."[25] This ability to find confirmation of supremacy where there is none has important implications for the Western schooling systems, including K-12 schools and the academy, from what courses are offered in classrooms to how non-White students are perceived and treated.

H. Alexander Welcome notes that White ontology establishes what is and is not an acceptable mode of being, and that Blackness is understood as inherently abnormal in the ways it deviates from Whiteness.[26] In addition to Welcome's analysis, Owen Dwyer and John Paul Jones assert that White worldview assumes a separation between Whites and non-Whites (and, more specifically, between Whites and Blacks people) in terms of physical space, as well as social identity and position. Both types of "distance" allow Whites to "refus[e] the trace" that will implicate the historical and current injustices that are required in order for Whiteness to exist.[27] This distance encourages what Mills calls the "management of memory," which allows Whites simply not to know or acknowledge (through what Mills has called "White ignorance") the "crucial facts" that would trouble the concept of White supremacy.[28] Such ignorance becomes part of the "social memory," which is "then inscribed in textbooks, generated and regenerated in ceremonies and official holidays, concretized in statues, parks, and monuments."[29] Meanwhile, the relegation of non-Whites by Whites to areas *away* from Whites—physically and psychologically— encourages White gaze and judgment[30]:

> [W]hiteness as an opaque façade that is at once apparent but whose depth is inscrutable— lest its true guilt be revealed. Likewise, whiteness does not represent its racialized Other as invisible but rather holds it in a state of transparent obviousness…These rationales for

22. Robert Jensen, *The Heart of Whiteness: Confronting Race, Racism, and White Privilege* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2005), 2.

23. Ibid., 3-4.

24. Charles W. Mills, "White Ignorance," *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 25.

25. Ibid.

26. For more discussion on blackness as abnormality, see Gagne, "On the Obsolescence of the Disciplines"; King and Wynter, "Race and Our Biocentric Belief System"; and Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom."

27. Owen J. Dwyer and John Paul Jones III, "White Socio-Spatial Epistemology," *Social & Cultural Geography* 1, 2000: 213.

28. Mills, "White Ignorance," 28.

29. Ibid., 29.

30. Here, White gaze is the use of White ontological and epistemological understandings to see, understand, and respond to the world, while not acknowledging that these standpoints are in use. See Dwyer and Jones, "White Socio-Spatial Epistemology" for an extended discussion of examples of the White gaze.

white privilege culminate in the representation of the white center as opaque and unknowable and, ultimately, non-existent, while the racialized margins are presented as transparently obvious and "debased"—and thus wholly responsible for their conditions. [31]

This discussion of White normalcy and the White gaze also applies to the academy. Such a gaze allows, for example, researching the practices of another group, making its members visible while maintaining one's own invisibility, all under the guise of objectivity. This objectivity (read: White distance) in academia—what Welcome calls "the 'white is right' perspective"—uses White experience as "the backing for the construction of the warrant/rules that are employed as to evaluate black experiences," thus pathologizing the experiences of non-Whites when they do not "conform to the parameters of white methods of navigating the social world."[32] Welcome addresses DuBois' important question of "How does it feel to be a problem?" by defining "problems" as "any deviations from the 'typical' white experience that do not produce the benefits that are associated with the relevant white mode of behavior."[33] When non-White groups deviate from the White norm but experience White-normed success, they are not seen as problematic. Non-White deviators that do not experience White-typified success, however, become problems, particularly in educational institutions and educational research; after all, if success is "normal," why can't these "problem people" be successful? Welcome discusses this further: "This process occurs because the cause of the status of whites is falsely attributed to the white methods of navigating the social world, while the paramount influence of the privilege and power of whiteness are obscured."[34]

A closer look at White supremacy's history in the United States, from its conceptualization to its present-day obscuring, reveals a pattern of thought and action that has long-been discussed in the Islamic framework. I posit that this pattern is an example of *shirk*.

Shirk

Abdel Haleem notes that *shirk*, which can be translated as "partnership" is "the sharing of several gods in the creation and government of the universe."[35] While many associate this definition with idolatry in the sense of worshiping man-made statues or images, *shirk*'s definition has also been connected to a life-consuming attention to wealth or another living being.[36] Qur'anist scholar Edip Yuksel even extends the definition of *shirk* to many Muslims' attribution of Christ-like status to the Prophet Muhammad, noting that "those who acknowledge the Quran do not favor one messenger over another (2:285), since all the messengers belong to the same community."[37] While the potential object of *shirk* may be debated, Yuksel notes three aspects of it that are useful here: (1) the attribution of The Creator's power to humans; (2) humans' instituting prohibitions

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31. Dwyer and Jones, "White Socio-Spatial Epistemology," 215.
32. H. Alexander Welcome, "'White is Right': The Utilization of an Improper Ontological Perspective in Analyses of Black Experiences," *Journal of African American Studies* 8, 2004:61, 62.
33. Ibid., 62.
34. Ibid.
35. *Qur'an*, trans. Abdel Haleem, xviii.
36. Yuksel references the following verses when discussing these objects of *shirk*: 7:90; 9:31; and 18:42. *Qur'an: A Reformist Translation,* trans. Yuksel, al-Shaiban, and Schulte-Nafeh. Please note that references to Qur'anic verses will be parenthetical in the body of this article, but will appear without parentheses in the footnotes.
37. *Qur'an: A Reformist Translation,* trans. Yuksel, al-Shaiban, and Schulte-Nafeh, 63, 89.

and their subsequent attribution of those prohibitions to The Creator; and, (3) human denial of *shirk* when it is evidently being committed.[38]

The Qur'an discusses "the polytheists" who are untruthful about their shirk, who argue against the truth of God's messengers, and avoid the truth while encouraging others to do the same (6:22-26). One translation notes that "[e]ven if they [the polytheists] saw every sign [of God's message] they would not believe in them," and that "they ruin no one but themselves, though they fail to realize this" (6:25, 26). Others attribute their *shirk* to the worship practices of their forefathers (6:148; 16:35) or as a way to get closer to The Creator (39:3), while others employ *shirk* to gain strength (19:81). Some say that God actually wills their *shirk* and has historically done so (6:148), while others knowingly tell lies about The Divine Will (3:78; 10:60). While not an exhaustive list of Qur'anic verses connected to the concept of *shirk*, these verses give a general idea of the concept of *shirk* and, perhaps most importantly for this article, its effects. The Qur'an extensively discusses, first, the willful, then the seemingly irreversible ignorance of those who commit *shirk*, so that offenders are eventually unable to access the truth, even if they try. It discusses ungrateful people living on lands and in communities that they did not cultivate or build, and how they benefit from others' labor. It discusses God's provision of messengers to different groups around the world, how reminders of the Oneness of God have come in different languages and in different regions throughout human history, and how those reminders have gone ignored.

While *shirk* could look like people bowing down before a wooden or stone statue, the above examples show that it is not limited to such actions. Rather, *shirk* is the act of giving anything else the attention and respect only due to The All-Knowing and All-Powerful Creator. To commit *shirk*, in the Qur'anic sense, means denying our basic humanity—indeed, it means denying the very purpose of our lives, which is living in the constant remembrance of the Oneness and Supremacy of God. Committing *shirk*, denying our purpose as humans, means that we get things confused: we think we have the power (i.e., the right) to do things that we should not; we create systems of abstraction and discourse to justify our actions, as well as mythologies and histories to establish them; then, we refuse to admit that we have gotten anything confused at all. We tell ourselves and our children that this is the way it always has been, and the way it always will be. We forget that our assertions are not true, though we vehemently defend them.

I use the personal plural pronoun here because, despite the subject of this article, committing *shirk* is not a White problem; rather, the Qur'an tells us is it a human problem, rooted in pride, and that this pride first emerged from the Qur'anic character Iblis:

> Your Lord said to the angels, "I will create a man from clay. When I have shaped him and breathed from My Spirit into him, bow down before him." The angels all bowed down together, but not Iblis, who was too proud. He became a rebel. God said, "Iblis, what prevents you from bowing down to the man I have made with My own hands? Are you too high and mighty?" Iblis said, "I am better than him: You made me from fire, and him from clay" (38:71-76).[39]

Iblis' subsequent response to The Creator's anger was to swear that he would "tempt all" except God's "chosen servants" (38:82-83), meaning that nearly all of humanity would struggle with pride, or, in other words, we would struggle with the idea that The Creator is Supreme—at all times, and in all ways. Randolph Ware speaks of this story as the first example of racism, since

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38. Ibid., 131, 135.
39. *Qur'an*, trans. Abdel Haleem, 458.

the Qur'anic character Iblis expressed his superiority over a man by arguing that he was made of better stuff.[40] While I do not disagree with Ware, I want to extend his example: in this story, the Qur'anic character Iblis exemplified the pride involved when human beings think they are superior to each other for any reason, including (though not limited to) race. This pride causes us to consider ourselves something we are not—namely, inherently better than others—which, in turn, causes us to participate in systemic racism, sexism, classism, xenophobia, homophobia, and other forms of oppression.

While clearly based on an Islamic framework, the concepts discussed here also extend to contexts not often perceived as religiously connected. Many Muslims read the stories in the Qur'an literally—that non-believers will suffer a fiery afterlife, that angels and demons are real and among us, that a physical paradise awaits the believers. While I have no opinion about the validity of this type of literal reading, I do believe that the Qur'anic text can help us understand the U.S. American sociocultural context. While the previous section addressed the history of U.S. American White supremacy, it, like most mainstream and academic historical discussions, does not address the spiritual influences of past events or their current spiritual implications, causing us to misunderstand the causes and effects what has occurred in our society. If we reconsider history of U.S American White supremacy within an Islamic framework, we can observe clear similarities.

In alignment with the aforementioned Qur'anic verses about *shirk*, history of White supremacy features the disbelief and willful ignorance regarding the existence and effects of supremacy (again, see 6:22-26). Religion has been used in myriad ways to justify, excuse, and further the project of White supremacy (see 39:3), as has been the perpetuation of family/community traditions and history-creation (6:148; 16:35). Others have intentionally lied or obscured the truth in the name of White supremacy, from the individual to institutional levels (3:78; 10:60), and others, of course, recognize the power and privilege attendant to White supremacy, and will do whatever they can to maintain it (19:81). U.S. White supremacy was instituted in order to establish control over others' lands, steal others' resources, and kidnap and use others' bodies. White America's refusal to honestly and completely recognize and address White supremacy often defies reason, as it kills anti-supremacy messengers then posthumously extols their virtues. It is a baffling, troubled society that prefers its heroes dead, but such societies are not new to mankind; indeed, while we lament White supremacy in this country, we should be heartened to know that a framework for addressing such ideologies has been in place for over 1,400 years. We just need to pay attention to it.

In his seminar "White Supremacy—The Beginnings of Modern Day Shirk?," Sherman Jackson connects the ideas of the Islamic concept to the global phenomenon of White supremacy. While he notes some of my aforementioned points about White supremacy, such as the positioning of Whiteness as normalcy, he also quite significantly asserts that White supremacy is not an "automatic tendency that runs through the blood of White people."[41] Instead, Jackson says that White supremacy is "not about White people. It's about ideas."[42]

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40. Ware mentions this story in various talks. For more on Ware's discussions on Islam in the West African and Black American contexts, see his presentations "The Qur'an in Chains," "Principled Pacifism in Islamic West Africa," "Key Lessons From the History of Islam in West Africa," and "Rethinking Islam in West Africa: The Walking Qur'an." Also see *The Walking Qur'an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

41. Sherman Jackson, "White Supremacy—The Beginnings of Modern Day Shirk?" (presentation, Lamppost Productions, March 1, 2017).

42. Ibid.

This is an important assertion for present-day considerations of White supremacy, which tends to be Jackson's focus here. The concept of an idea-based White supremacy (rather than idea- and body-based White supremacy more dominant in the past[43]) means that those who believe in and enact White supremacist ideas do not have to be White themselves; indeed, Jackson argues that the modernity simply represents the era in which White supremacy has become a global phenomenon, which would have been impossible without the "buy-in" of non-White peoples. This concept of "buy-in" can be troubled, of course. Jackson presents this "buy-in" as if there has always been the option of accepting any other ideology instead of a White supremacist one in this country, and he seems to ignore that White supremacy has long been the default worldview based on the often-violently oppressive White supremacist state (or, before the state was formally established, state-makers) and its requisite control of all validated means of knowledge creation and transmission. While Wynter similarly discusses the modernity as the era of European global dominance, she also notes that it was fueled by a Church-inspired, Enlightenment-age dichotomy that replaced the previous poles of heaven and earth, sacred and profane, God and man with the Old World and New, European and non-European, (White) Man and Other.[44]

While "buy-in" may not be the best phrasing for describing why non-Whites may have been forced to take on (or at least perform) White-supremacist ideals in the past, Jackson's discussion of the effect of White normalization is important here. Many scholars, including those referenced in this article, have long discussed the power of representations of White normalcy. Jackson asserts, however, that it is the establishment of Whiteness as *normal*—rather than *superior*—that has given White supremacy its true power.

Jackson calls all humans, regardless of race, "contingent beings."[45] Being "contingent" means that we are not self-sufficient beings, exemplified by the fact that we have no control over when our lives begin or end. One of our most deep-seeded understandings is that we are contingent beings, whether we like it or not. The primacy of this understanding is evident: in very first surah revealed to Prophet Muhammad, God harshly critiques those humans who imagine some sense of non-contingency:

> [God] created man from a clinging form. Read! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One who taught by the pen, who taught man what he did not know. But man exceeds all founds when he thinks he is self-sufficient: [Prophet], all will return to your Lord. (96:2-8)[46]

Jackson further notes that this state of contingence is not only a biological one, but is psychological and emotional as well. We cannot even understand ourselves as individuals without the conformation of other "human subjectivities."[47] Jackson notes that, in the Islamic context, our need for outside validation exists because we are designed to need and worship God. Indeed, our entire self-worth is based on events outside of ourselves, and we cannot help it. As contingent beings, it's just how we're made. Further, Jackson asserts that the historic examples of idolatry—from a passing acknowledgement to a fervent devotion to physical objects, images, or representations—

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43. While non-Whites still suffer harm within the White supremacist context, this sort of harm is qualitatively different from the harm of the past in this country. This is primarily because, in the past, it did not matter if you accepted the idea of White supremacy or not; your body would immediately suffer punishment if you did not at least pretend you accepted it.

44. Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality."

45. Jackson, "White Supremacy."

46. *Qur'an*, trans. Abdel Haleem, 598.

47. Jackson, "White Supremacy."

were not based on ancient people's thinking that, say, a wooden statue could guarantee rainfall or cure an illness. Rather, idolatry was a way for contingent beings to manage their anxiety about their own contingency. And if, as Jackson cites the Prophet Muhammad, the best descriptors for humans are "worker/toiler" and "anxious," then much of human existence is likely centered on doing things to alleviate the insecurity inspired by our own contingency.[48]

In the Islamic context, then, humans have a basic sense of insecurity. Jackson notes that this is understood even in the "secular" world, where politicians and advertisers exploit the basic sense of human insecurity as a matter of course, and to much success.[49] Jackson further contends that the same insecurity has led White and non-White peoples alike to accept and internalize White supremacy: humans' need to feel accepted and secure makes us more likely to aspire toward whatever is perceived as "normal," rather than what is seen as "superior" (a sense of superiority makes cohesion and fitting in more difficult). While non-Whites living in the early modern era had little choice about whether they could openly reject White dominance, there is, relatively speaking, more choice for most of us today. So why does it feel so difficult to challenge and reject White supremacy—both for Whites that gain relatively little benefit in the White supremacist systems in which they find themselves, and for non-White people in general? It may have to do with the fact that, though we are clear that White supremacist systems are, at best, of little benefit to us and, at worst, actively harm us, they provide a semblance of security. At the risk of using a confusing pun, White supremacy is the devil we know: an identifiable nemesis, an ever-present thing to critique or rail against, a handy way to ignore the direness of our conditions. Within the White supremacist context, we may not be happy, and we may not be healthy, but we are as secure in our unhappiness and unhealthiness. What would the world *really* be like without White dominance? In truth, we have no idea, and that lack of knowledge, that insecurity, is frightening.

Jackson notes that, because we are contingent beings, humans will work for, attend to, fixate upon—indeed, worship—whatever we believe will bring us the security that we seek, and that tendency to worship anything that feels secure has led to a "mismanagement of how the human condition is supposed to be managed."[50] A major example of this mismanagement is the dominance of the White ideal in our lives. The only way to properly "manage" our anxious, ever-seeking condition is to worship (work for, attend to, fixate upon) The Creator, as that is The Only One that can give us purpose and hope within our own contingency. Other created, contingent things (i.e., everything else besides God) cannot do it—from tiny wooden statues to the grandest of ideologies. Submission (the very definition of the word *Islam*) to The Creator is the only thing that can bring peace to us created beings. I believe that the Islamic understanding of peace from submission to God has interesting implications for both religious and non-religious people interested in resisting White supremacy.

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48. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid.

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The New Ummah

Jackson closes his lecture with questions to help us consider White supremacy and *shirk*:

1. What value do we attach to the White West's validation?[51]
2. Whatever the valuation we ascribe to White Western validation, what price are we willing to pay for it?
3. To what extent will we allow the validation of the White West to serve as a substitute for validation that we should be seeking through connection with The Creator?

While Jackson invites us to consider our completely natural needs for outside validation and security using the above questions, he cautions against his assertions being understood as anti-White, anti-Western, or anti-non-Muslim, as all Western ideas are not inherently antithetical to Islamic concepts, and there are numerous White people that are actively working against White supremacy. I will also add here that there are many, many Muslims that find ourselves living at various intersections of Western Christian-influenced and Islamic worldviews. Jackson and others have also extensively discussed the White supremacy and anti-Black racism rampant in the so-called Muslim world, noting that non-White Muslims can more vehemently protect White supremacist ideals than many White people ever would nowadays, regardless of their religious, national, or ethnic backgrounds.

A consideration of the above questions, in conjunction with the reminder that current White supremacy is an *idea* issue rather than a *body* issue, brings us back to an Islamic framework. To consider solutions we are going to move from a discussion of *shirk* to take a closer look at the Islamic idea of *ummah*.

As noted at the beginning of this article, Wynter encourages all those interested in undoing White supremacy to push our ideas of humanity past any relation (or lack thereof) to the Western White normed ideal to understanding humanity as "a unit," based on our own truths about what it means to be human, and using the Islamic concept of global religious community, the *ummah*, as an example.[52] Elsewhere, she notes that this definition of humanness should extend to include all of those who experience oppression and marginalization within White supremacist systems.[53] An extensive portion of this article directly addresses aspects of Islamic thought that take certain things for granted, like an assumption of The Existence and Oneness of God, and the importance of using Islamic scholarship and the Qur'anic text to address societal ills. However, suggestions like Wynter's represent the true purpose of this article: to recognize some of the ways that Islamic frameworks (and, as I discuss elsewhere, other marginalized frameworks) can address the deleterious effects of Western White supremacy.

Though I am a Muslim, I would not tell anyone that they must adhere to a specific religious practice in order to resist White supremacy. However, I do believe that those of us interested in undoing supremacy should recognize the value of marginalized frameworks as an important first step. Further, these frameworks often offer clues and perspectives about oppression and resistance that way not appear elsewhere. Thus, whether the reader believes that an actual divine being

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51. Jackson notes that there may be a *pragmatic/tactical value* in our consideration of White validation, and there is also what Jackson calls a *real valuation* of Western validation, where we do not feel whole or valued unless we are considered valuable by Western standards.

52. Thomas and Wynter, "Fanon, 'the Man,' Humanism and 'Consciousness,'" 22.

53. King and Wynter, "Race and Our Biocentric Belief System."

directly instructed humans against idolatry in all of its forms, or that this discussion of The Creator and *shirk* would be better understood as a metaphor for the destructive effects of pride and insecurity, a consideration of White supremacy from the Islamic context provides a way of evaluating and rejecting White supremacy in the myriad ways we encounter it, whether in our everyday lives or in our hearts.

The Islamic context further provides a more specific roadmap for resisting the *shirk* of White supremacy. If we recognize ourselves for what we truly are—insecure, contingent creations, no one any more capable than the other of changing the ebb and flow of life—perhaps we can move from structures that thrive on and exploit our contingent state through the use of false idols like White supremacy, and instead validate our shared existence as very small beings in a very big universe—a universe which we cannot control and about which we know so little. In other words, the Islamic framework can help us shift from the pervasive, sometimes invisible *shirk* of White supremacy to the conceptualization of an *ummah* whose shared "religion" is the very brief (relative to other created things, like, say, bristlecone pine trees or bowhead whales) experience of being human together. While I, of course, use the word religion very lightly in the previous sentence, our considering ourselves as evolutionarily unlikely, living, breathing, laughing, loving clumps of atoms and molecules and cells—indeed, mounds of elements that can *think*—may encourage us to resist any ideology that foolishly and dangerously assumes that one clump of cells is somehow better than another clump.

This brings me to our final Islamic concept, one that is discussed extensively on news media and in Muslim and non-Muslim contexts alike: the *jihad*. As opposed to other treatments of this oft-evoked word, Jackson describes what he believes is the "real" *jihad*: freeing ourselves from the "false god" of White supremacy. Jackson asserts that this *jihad* is

> not for the purpose of conquering the world. It is for the purpose of saving world from false gods and false regimes of validation that can never deliver humanity to the ultimate peace and serenity that men and women were naturally created to seek.[54]

While speaking from the standpoint of a religious adherent, Jackson's call is significant for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Though there are relatively few present-day examples of people who worship physical images or representations of deities, the conceptualization of Whiteness and adherence to a White standard affects nearly every aspect of our lives and represents the primary thing to which many of us strive. It is difficult for us to imagine the procurement and dissemination of knowledge, our relationship with the environment, our work and home lives, our beauty standards, and countless other things outside of the Western White standard. Even those of us that claim to fight against it have a hard time imagining or attempting life too far outside of it, and our efforts of resistance tend to fall safely within what is deemed allowable (and even predictable and/or encouraged) by the dominant system.[55]

When Jackson exhorts us to "rescue humanity from the false regimes of validation," he is encouraging us to work to free ourselves as well as each other. In an age where there are no longer golden calves on the way from Mount Sinai or hundreds of silent statues around the Kaaba, White supremacy is the idol that the religious and non-religious alike must resist and dismantle. In its place, may we work to create a world that validates each of us in our full humanity, as finite, unexpected sparks of life that are quickly here and too soon gone. Whether we think it took a few

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54. Jackson, "White Supremacy."
55. Writing this article is an example of an 'acceptable' form of resistance.

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days or hundreds of thousands of years to come to this moment of shared humanness, may we never lose sight of the miracles of creation that we are.

Education

As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, I am hesitant to offer specific instructions incorporating spiritual/religious framework knowledge into academic research practice and schooling curricula, as this article addresses larger themes of how we may understand our world and each other. These new understandings should then, in turn, be shaped to best fit the immediate environment in which the educator or researcher finds him/her/themselves.

That said, it is important that those of us interested in the various forms of education—whether K-12 schooling, higher education, or educational research—come to terms with our positions as the gatekeepers of knowledge in what are White supremacist institutions. The fact that our schools and universities are White supremacist institutions is not particularly pernicious: indeed, institutions that support and are supported by a particular state will be informed by and inform the ideologies of that state. Those of us interested in dismantling White supremacy may feel the tension of working in such institutions. While I would not venture to suggest long-term options for the many people that may find themselves living this tension, I have a few suggestions for these educators and researchers in the immediate future:

- **Be humble.** First, it is important that those of us interested in effecting change do so with an ethic of humility and to remember that, as I have noted elsewhere, "[w]e will get some of it right, but most of it wrong."[56] We will not be able to perfectly execute every moment as we venture into a world unknown to us, that is, a world without White supremacy. And that is okay. Let's be gentle with ourselves, but not so gentle that we avoid the important task that is ahead of us. Further, if we are part of dominant groups whose members have historically marginalized others, we must do the additional work of understanding the effect that our group's existence has had on the marginalized, and how we will enact the next three suggestions based on those new understandings.

- **Question everything**. We must question the information that we have received as fact, whether in our area(s) of expertise, about our institution, and about our society. While there is much that we take for granted in order to live our daily lives, man-made things tend to be created for specific purposes and to benefit specific people. Who benefits from the knowledge that we educators and researchers acquire and share? Does this information shore up a White supremacist framework? Why do our institutions exist in their current capacity? Who is benefitted by these institutions? And, further, who is being harmed? What should we do about it?

- **Seek new knowledges**. There is a wealth of information available to us, and, thanks to the internet, much of it is accessible. We must take the time to explore knowledge systems and frameworks that are unfamiliar to us. We should also note that this exploration primarily involves *independent* research, rather than a dependence on

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56. Kelly Limes-Taylor Henderson and Jennifer Esposito, "Using Others in the Nicest Way Possible: On Colonial and Academic Practice(s), and an Ethic of Humility," *Qualitative Inquiry.* (First published: Dec. 4, 2017).

marginalized people to "teach" us what we want to know. We must consider what stories our knowledge systems leave out and intentionally seek them out. We should learn from them and share your exploration with others, particularly if we work with students.

- **Find the metaphor**. Even if a new knowledge system or framework doesn't feel valuable to us, we can consider the framework's broader lessons about the world. What does this framework tell us about being human? About community? About the environment? About thought? How can these new understandings enhance (but not necessarily replace) our own? How can we gain enhancement without taking, encroaching, or appropriating? How can these lessons be incorporated in our teaching practices? In our research practices?

- **Stay open**. As we are on this journey to consider a world past White supremacy, we are not alone. Fellow travelers on this journey may not look or talk like us, but we all have a need for a healthy existence beyond one that exploits our natural insecurities to benefit a select few (who may not ever experience much benefit anyway). In the same way that we may find the metaphors in their frameworks, consider ways that we can best do the work of resisting White supremacy in our day-to-day life and assist others on their journeys. This openness may feel especially intimidating to those of us in education, as we tend to be the ones that were "schooled" quite well, and enjoy following the rules. As we continue to question everything, however, we must also question our hesitance to resist White supremacy in our classrooms and in our research. We must stay open to the possibility of an existence that will benefit us all, and to the possibility that we can reaching such an existence together.

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