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## Unhappy Confessions: The Temptation of Admitting to White Privilege

Claire A. Lockard  
*Elon University*, [clockard@elon.edu](mailto:clockard@elon.edu)

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## Unhappy Confessions: The Temptation of Admitting to White Privilege<sup>1</sup>

Claire A. Lockard

### Abstract

Admissions of white privilege and/or racism are common among white anti-racists and others who want to combat their racism. In this article, I argue that because such admissions are conscious attempts to address unconscious habits, they are unhappy speech acts and contrary to their implied aims. Admissions of white privilege or racism can be conceptualized as Foucauldian confessions that are pleasurable to enact but ultimately reinforce white people's feelings of goodness and allow them to avoid addressing this racism. I ground my argument in Shannon Sullivan's analysis of white privilege and Sara Ahmed's critique of confessions of racism/privilege to show that in addition to doing no anti-racist work at the moment of saying, these confessions actually reify white privilege deeper into the unconscious and make it harder to address. Sullivan's work, I conclude, offers white people a more productive way forward than their unhappy performative declarations of privilege. A white person's understanding of her confessing habit cannot break this habit, but it might orient her toward examining what sorts of anti-racist moves *do* work.

**Keywords:** non-performative, Ahmed, Sullivan, Foucault, whiteness, confession, racism, anti-racist work, race

In this paper, I put Sara Ahmed's work on the non-performativity of admissions of racial privilege into conversation with Shannon Sullivan's work on unconscious habits of racial privilege. I agree with Ahmed that admissions of privilege or racism do not do the anti-racist work they intend and in fact extend

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rather than challenge white privilege (Ahmed 2004, 52).<sup>2</sup> I suggest that if we take seriously Sullivan's claim that white privilege operates as a set of unconscious habits, we can understand this extension as the reification of racism and privilege deeper into the unconscious. Given that admissions of racism actually reinforce rather than challenge white privilege, my second aim in this paper is to ask why it is so tempting to believe that these admissions of privilege do anti-racist work. I begin by agreeing with Ahmed that admissions of racism or racial privilege are unhappy performatives—that is, they are speech acts that do not actually do the anti-racist work they intend (Ahmed 2004). I then argue that Sullivan's vision of white privilege as a set of unconscious habits can explain why these admissions don't work and in fact do negative work. These declarations can be thought of as Foucauldian confessions; they make white people feel as though they have purified and transformed their core selves, which is why they/we think the statements work to combat racism or privilege.<sup>3</sup> I conclude by suggesting that a better understanding of the unconscious habits of white privilege that tempt us toward confession can actually offer white people a more productive way forward than our confessions of privilege.

### **Sara Ahmed's Analysis of Anti-Racism as Non-Performative**

In her essay "Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism," Sara Ahmed analyzes six different ways that whiteness is declared in academic writing, conversation, and/or official/institutional policy. While Ahmed is describing declarations made mostly by white scholars of whiteness, I am interested in how these admissions function for white people who are *not* consistently engaged

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<sup>2</sup> Ahmed's article was published in an online journal that does not use page numbers. Instead, each paragraph is numbered. The numbers I list in my parenthetical citations are the paragraph numbers rather than the page numbers.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this paper, I use a variety of pronouns when referring to white people. Ahmed uses "they" or "one" to refer to whites; Sullivan uses "she" for singular and "they" for plural. I use a combination of these pronouns when quoting or describing their work, and I sometimes also use first-person pronouns in order to signal my own whiteness. I also use the collective "we," though I try to be specific about whether I am referring to "we" (white people) or "we" (all people). I recognize that using "we" to talk about white people implies a solely white audience, but I hesitate to refer to white folks only in the third person because I do not want to distance myself from this group.

in anti-racist theory or anti-racist work.<sup>4</sup> The admissions I refer to in this paper are primarily admissions made by white people who position themselves as anti-racist but lack experience with anti-racist conversations, theory, or activism. While this population is different from the group Ahmed is concerned with, it seems to me that the admissions function similarly, whether made by white scholars of whiteness or by white people trying to enter into conversations about race, racism, and privilege.

Ahmed argues that “such declarations [of racism or privilege] are non-performative: they do not do what they say” (Ahmed 2004, 50). Using J. L. Austin’s conception of performative speech acts, Ahmed contends that when well-intentioned white people admit to their privilege or racism, they are not intending to make declarative claims; rather, they believe that their utterance does something at the moment of saying (10). Ahmed places admissions of racism/privilege in the category of unhappy performatives: statements that *would* be performative but fail to meet the required criteria. As Austin puts it, unhappy performatives occur when “something *goes wrong* and the act—marrying, betting, bequeathing, christening, or what not—is therefore at least to some extent a failure: the utterance is then, we may say, not indeed false but in general *unhappy*” (Austin 1962, 14, emphasis in original). Ahmed contends that admissions of privilege or racism are examples of such unhappy speech acts.

Of the six types of unhappy utterances of racism Ahmed analyzes, I am most interested in the one she describes as “I am/we are racist” (Ahmed 2004, 17). Ahmed explains that “the claim to be racist by being able to see racism in this or that form of practice is also a claim not to be racist in the same way. . . . The logic goes: we say ‘we are racist,’ and insofar as we can admit to being racist (and racists are unwitting), then we are showing that ‘we are not racist,’ or at least, that we are not racist in the same way” (20). For Ahmed, admitting to racism does the opposite—admitting to it becomes a way to show that one is actually not a racist, or at least not as bad a racist as the people who do not even recognize their racism. In trying to perform an acknowledgement of racism, white people actually refuse to acknowledge it.

Before I continue with my description of Ahmed’s argument, I want to make two clarifying points about her use of Austin’s work on performative speech acts. First, I will discuss Ahmed’s conflation of the terms “non-performative” and “unhappy performative,” and second, I will suggest that what she names as declarations are actually better understood as admissions.

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<sup>4</sup> It is also important to note that neither Ahmed nor I am interested in declarations of racism/whiteness made by white supremacists who are quite proud of their status as racists.

For Austin, there is a distinction between non-performative utterances and unhappy performative utterances. Non-performatives are utterances like descriptions or statements of fact: they do not perform an action and are not intended to be performing an action. In contrast, as stated above, unhappy performatives are speech acts that *would* be performative if certain conditions were met, but that fail to meet these necessary conditions and thus fail to perform what they intend. In other words, with unhappy performatives, something has failed/gone wrong such that the utterance does not do the action it purports to do (Austin 1962, 14), whereas non-performatives were not purporting to do an action at all. For example, the statement “it is raining outside” is a non-performative statement; it is a description. But (to use Austin’s example) if I utter the statement “I name this ship the *Mr. Stalin*” without having the proper authority to name a ship, my utterance is an unhappy performative: a type of utterance that would normally be performative (the naming of something) failed to meet the necessary conditions of performativity (23).

Throughout her essay, Ahmed seems to conflate non-performativity and failed/unhappy performativity. In the title of the work, she claims that declarations of whiteness are non-performative, but as early on as her abstract, she suggests that “declarations of whiteness could be described as ‘unhappy performatives,’ the conditions are not in place that would allow such declarations to do what they say” (Ahmed 2004). While Ahmed uses the term “non-performativity” throughout much of the essay, it seems to me that what she really wants to say is that these declarations are failed/unhappy performatives. They *can* be placed in the category of performative speech acts because these declarations are not mere descriptions, though they do describe one’s whiteness/racism. Ahmed would suggest that what I mean when I say “I’m a racist” is actually that I am not a racist, because real racists do not know they are racists (53). When I make that admission, I intend to perform the action of showing my goodness, or proving that I am on my way to being less racist by at least admitting to my racism.

But what I am *actually* performing is an act of defining racism in a particular way (by implying that the *real* racists cannot even admit to their racism), implying that I am really *not* a racist (because I *can* admit to my racism), and reproducing my white privilege (because in my admission, I can feel good about myself and my efforts) (54). This utterance *has* performed, but it has performed an action contrary to its intended one. This places it into the category of unhappy performatives and not non-performatives.

One might also wonder whether Ahmed is correct in categorizing admissions of whiteness as Austinian declarations. Declarations for Austin are one type of performative; they are utterances like “I declare war.” For Austin, what characterizes a declaration is that it commits one to a certain course of action

(Austin 1962, 155). While an utterance like “I am racist” is grammatically a declarative sentence, it does not seem to be this future-oriented, Austinian sort of declaration; it can be better categorized as an expositive performative. These are statements that shift from descriptive to performative when “the main body of the utterance has generally or often the straightforward form of a 'statement,' but there is an explicit performative verb at its head which shows how the 'statement' is to be fitted into the context of conversation, interlocution, dialogue, or in general of exposition” (85). In other words, an expositive performative develops when utterances that initially look like statements are paired with a verb that performs some action. One of his examples is the utterance “I admit (or concede) that there is no backside to the moon” (85). An utterance like “I admit that I am a racist” functions similarly: each admission is performative because they are not claims with truth value (we can’t ask “did that person *really* admit to it?”), they require the utterance in order to be admissions, they were uttered deliberately, and they cannot literally be false (though they can be insincere, which would make them unhappy) (84).

While the utterance “I am a racist” might appear distinct from “I admit that I am a racist,” it seems to me that the “I admit” is almost always implied when people affirm their status as racists (particularly the population I have in mind: well-intentioned white folks who are newly or inconsistently engaged in anti-racist work). In fact, if we think about how utterances of individuals’ racism are made in our day-to-day lives, it is hard to make sense of them as anything other than admissions. No white person says casually, upon meeting a non-white person, “Just to let you know, I am a racist.” Statements about one’s racism are not made or heard as descriptive truth claims like this. Ahmed is concerned with statements that serve not only to describe one’s racism but also to provide the speaker with a way *out* of this racism.

Ultimately, despite her departure from Austin’s terminology, I think Ahmed’s main point stands: admissions of whiteness or racism do not achieve their intended effect of being anti-racist acts in and of themselves. In Austinian terms, it is perhaps more accurate to say that Ahmed is concerned with *admissions* of whiteness/racism because they function as *unhappy performatives*, rather than saying, as she does, that she is concerned with *declarations* of whiteness/racism that are *non-performative*. Or we could think of these utterances as performative contradictions: they are performative, but they perform the opposite action they intended.<sup>5</sup> In my description of Ahmed’s work, I will use the terms *unhappy performatives* and *admissions* in order to keep her terminology in line with Austin’s.

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<sup>5</sup> Thank you to the anonymous reviewer who suggested that I look more carefully at how Ahmed takes up Austin’s work and for suggesting that the utterances Ahmed describes could be called performative contradictions.

Alison Bailey provides a helpful distinction between the literal and functional meaning of speech acts like these admissions of racism:

The utterance "I'm not a member of the Aryan Nation" is not meant to be taken literally in this context; that is, its function is not to alert listeners to an interesting factual aside about my political alliances, or about who I don't hang out with after work. The actual content of the sentences uttered in white talk may be true, but that's not the point. When asserted in response to the white problem question, the remarks do something else: they are offered as evidence of one's innocence. (Bailey 2015, 44)

Although the admissions Ahmed talks about and the example Bailey gives above are not explicitly claiming anti-racism on the surface, their function is intended to be anti-racist. These utterances can be described as what Bailey, building from the work of Alice McIntyre (1997), calls "white talk" (2015, 38). White talk is "a predictable set of discursive patterns that white folks habitually deploy when asked directly about the connections between white privilege and institutional racism" (38). It allows white people to move away from acknowledging that we are responsible for the perpetuation of racial injustices (39) and instead, lets us focus on our own experiences and our desire to be good. For Bailey, white talk is not only a set of conversational moves; it is also a set of bodily comportments. White talk *can* be verbal, but the nonverbal and unconscious bodily signals that white people send out as they talk about race are for Bailey just as revealing about the nature of white privilege and white racism as the words they say (42).

Bailey explains that white talk fails to engage deeply or critically with issues of race or racism (42). It serves as a distancing strategy that refocuses the conversation on the white person and shields them from vulnerability (41, 43). Bailey argues that one "can't engage whiteness critically using the fluttering grammar of white talk because these utterances bolster white privilege on moral, ontological, and epistemological grounds" (47). Although Bailey does not cite Ahmed, Bailey's account of white talk is in accordance with Ahmed's account of admissions of racism: each is incapable of doing anti-racist work.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> One might argue that while white talk prevents whites from engaging with conversations about race, admissions of white privilege may act as a first step toward engaging this conversation. But I argue that because of the unconscious nature of habits of white privilege (see pages 12–13 of this paper), this admission is actually more likely to stop future conversation than prompt it.

For Ahmed, these admissions allow white people to avoid engaging with their/our racism and white privilege while also reinforcing this racism and white privilege. This happens because in admitting to privilege or racism, we might think we have taken action to address it—the admission becomes “a fantasy of transcendence in which ‘what’ is transcended is the very ‘thing’ admitted to in the declaration [admission]” (52). She explains that “declaring [admitting to] whiteness . . . is not an anti-racist action, and nor does it necessarily commit a state, institution, or person to a form of action that we could describe as anti-racist” (Ahmed 2004, 12).<sup>7</sup> Here, Ahmed is describing Austin’s sixth way that a performative can fail or be unhappy (Austin 1962, 10), arguing that because they fail to commit speakers to a future course of anti-racist action, anti-racist statements intended as actions are not effective anti-racist actions at all. Ahmed’s concern about these admissions leads her to a broader argument that “anti-racism is not performative” (11), though it is more accurate to summarize her argument as “anti-racism is unhappily performative.”

To put it another way, Ahmed’s worry about these speech acts is not only that they don’t do anti-racist work but also that they “can actually extend rather than challenge racism” (Ahmed 2004, 52) by blocking future action. For example, at my own university, education sessions on race and racism often end with white students asking what they can do to combat racism (a question Ahmed argues is itself a manifestation of white privilege because it again refocuses the conversation on white people [56]). Quite often, the answer given is that white people must educate themselves on racial issues and become aware of their own biases. On the surface, this answer appears helpful: even if it does not decrease my internalized racism to learn about my biases or learn about non-white people, it is a worthy goal to become more informed about issues besides those affecting white people and to recognize how the world has been shaped by the interests of what Charles Mills calls the political system of “global white supremacy” (Mills 1997, 2).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In her essay, Ahmed talks both about admissions of racism and admissions of whiteness. She views declarations of whiteness and declarations of racism as both being unhappy performatives (though perhaps in different ways). I would add that declarations of white privilege attempt the same work as declarations of racism or whiteness.

<sup>8</sup> I echo Shannon Sullivan’s concern that the term “non-white” centers on whiteness as the norm, but I also share her worry that using the term “people of color” implies that white people do not have a race. I have chosen to use “white” and “non-white” but like Sullivan, I recognize that this linguistic choice is not unproblematic (see Sullivan 2006, 199n2).



But besides assuming that white people have access to our own biases, this solution of self-education encourages white students to merely think about and express the existence of their biases and racism, and think that they “get it” because they are more knowledgeable about racism than their peers. Before they were told to think about their own biases or privileges, white students may at least have thought racism was complex and hard to understand. After being told to “study up” on their privilege but not taught how to be critical of that privilege or use it against itself, white students will, I fear, begin feeling bad about their racism, then admit to it, then feel better and continue to act in white-privileged ways that make their communities worse. This surface-level engagement seems to satisfy white people’s desire for goodness more than it allows them to engage critically in conversations about whiteness and racism (Bailey 2015, 43), and it permits white people to, as Bailey suggests, continue to “feel as if we are thoughtfully engaging race and racism, but . . . from a place of imagined invulnerability, comfort, and safety” (43). Learning about my biases with earnest determination is a perfect way for me to later engage in white talk that shores up my perception of myself as a good white person. Thus, it seems that admitting to racism is an easy way to prove one’s desire to be anti-racist and good but is an ineffective tool for breaking down racial hierarchy.

It might seem that learning about bias and privilege could be used strategically; perhaps if students can learn about their biases and privileges (maybe by first admitting to them), they will do future anti-racist actions that are more effective than what they would have done before. It could be that these admissions act as a starting point on an anti-racist journey. But Bailey’s work suggests that this is unlikely; admissions, as white talk, are by definition incapable of leading to useful engagement because their deployment serves as a distancing strategy that allows whites to feel good and to perpetuate their/our ignorance about the nature of racism (39, 43). The admission of racism also allows white people to blame others for the problem of racism when racism is positioned as the fault of those who cannot even recognize it (Ahmed 2004, 53). Thus, while white people may take the advice of learning about their biases and privilege and naming them as such, this learning will not (as much as it can feel like it will) result in effective anti-racist work.

### **Shannon Sullivan’s Account of White Privilege as Unconscious Habit**

Ahmed’s argument about the unhappy performativity of anti-racism explains *how* admissions of racism/privilege fail; Shannon Sullivan’s account of white privilege as a set of unconscious habits can offer, I argue, an even clearer explanation of *why* they fail. Sullivan argues against the idea that white privilege is something that can be easily accessed and addressed; she also distinguishes between white supremacy and white privilege and argues that today, white privilege

is the more common and insidious form of racism.<sup>9</sup> Rather than a white supremacy-based vision of racism as “conscious, deliberate forms of white domination” (Sullivan 2006, 5), Sullivan’s vision of white privilege is one where white domination is unconscious and often invisible (5). Sullivan contends that in contemporary U.S. society, most racism is not the product of overt white supremacist ideas that white people are better, smarter, more capable, or more deserving of human flourishing than non-white people. Rather, “white privilege operates as unseen, invisible, even seemingly nonexistent” (1),<sup>10</sup> a set of unconscious habits that “actively work[s] to disrupt attempts to reveal its existence” (2).

Sullivan defines habit as “an organism’s subconscious predisposition to transact with its physical, social, political, and natural worlds in particular ways” (23). Habits are “mental and physical patterns of engagement with the world that operate without conscious attention or reflection” (4), and they are often not easily revealed or transformed. For Sullivan, viewing white privilege as habit is crucial because it explains “how white privilege often functions as if invisible” (4). In fact, part of what constitutes white privilege is the strong resistance to conscious recognition of racist and privileged habits. Habits (including those of white privilege) are thoroughgoing; they are “deeply constitutive of who a person is and therefore . . . difficult and slow (though not impossible) to change” (21). If these unconscious habits of racial privilege are ignored in favor of conscious argumentation or conversation about them, much of white privilege remains unaddressed.

This is because a conscious desire to change one’s habits will not likely have much of an effect on them; in fact, Sullivan contends that “as unconscious, habits of white privilege do not merely go unnoticed. They actively thwart the process of conscious reflection on them, which allows them to seem nonexistent even as they continue to function” (6). What makes white privilege so much harder to combat than white supremacy for Sullivan is the fact that white privilege simply makes up the background of white people’s lives; white people do not notice (and have a

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<sup>9</sup> While I disagree with Sullivan’s positioning in *Revealing Whiteness* of white supremacy and white privilege as mutually exclusive (Sullivan 2006, 5), I find her contrasting of white privilege with white supremacy to be a helpful description of why *de facto* racism is so hard to address. Thanks to Helen Meskhidze for pointing out to me the problems with conflating white supremacy and white privilege.

<sup>10</sup> While it is too soon to know the long-term impact of white supremacy on the U.S. political climate, in light of the 2016 presidential campaign, I am now curious about how Sullivan would respond to white supremacists like David Duke endorsing Donald Trump, and to the blatantly racist rhetoric of various candidates being met with fairly widespread approval. It seems that white supremacy is perhaps more prevalent than Sullivan accounts for.

great stake in never noticing) that they are, for example, more likely to be called for job interviews (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004, 991), that they are more likely to have a choice about the spaces they occupy, or that they engage with non-white cultures as though they are interchangeably exotic others (Sullivan 2006, 192).

The fact that white privilege is unconscious is part of how it resists being transformed, though this is not because the unconscious is some untouchable core within each of us (Sullivan 2006, 57). While Sullivan believes that many habits of white privilege are developed unconsciously and that they are difficult to know and change (50), she does not agree with a Freudian vision of the unconscious as completely formed and unchangeable after infancy; this leaves no hope for changing unconscious racist habits. Sullivan instead calls for a vision of the unconscious as transactional (61), grounded in Jean Leplanche's theory of the unconscious as relational. A detailed account of Sullivan's reading of Laplanche is beyond the scope of this paper, but a brief summary will be important for my later argument about why declarations of racism don't work. Sullivan contends that the transactional unconscious is formed and constantly re-formed as habits develop via interactions with the social and political world (61). It is not the case that an infant is a passive vessel into which various ideologies are deposited and coalesce to form an unchangeable core. Rather, for Laplanche, the unconscious continues to form after infancy (85) and from various sources in addition to the parents or caregivers. Sullivan pushes this argument further, suggesting that we think of the unconscious not as a thing inside of us but rather as "an adjective describing certain bodily and psychological habits" (62). Under Sullivan's vision of the unconscious, social context matters greatly, and it continues to matter throughout one's life as habits develop and respond to their environments.

### **A Sullivanian Explanation of Unhappy Admissions of White Privilege**

Now that I have talked generally about Sullivan's vision of white privilege and the unconscious, I want to apply some of her claims to Ahmed's argument that declarations of white privilege and/or racism are unhappy. Ahmed asserts that one reason that admissions of white privilege/racism don't work is that they rely on the assumption of many white people that "real" racists cannot admit to their own racism (Ahmed 2004, 53). Thus, those who *do* admit it cannot possibly be the "real" racists. Sullivan would likely not be at all surprised at Ahmed's claims. Recall that for Sullivan, it isn't merely that white privilege is habitual and unconscious; it is also that conscious efforts to address it will not undo the privilege (1). Thus, Sullivan's work can provide two additional reasons that admissions of white privilege or racism are ineffective: first, they are best positioned to address conscious experience, but most examples of white privilege and racism are unconscious; and second, they can reify

habits of racism further into the unconscious, making them even harder to transform later.<sup>11</sup>

To explore these two ways of being ineffective, I will offer an example of a set of speech acts that would, according to Ahmed, be considered unhappy admissions of racism/privilege. I will then explore the reasons Sullivan might offer to explain how and why they are not doing the kind of anti-racist work they want to. In the spring of 2015, I attended a rally sponsored by my former institution in response to a series of racial bias incidents that occurred on the campus. At the rally, both black and white students spoke about how issues of racism affected their experiences on campus. The black students who spoke were justifiably angry that they could not walk across campus feeling safe from racial slurs being shouted at them from passing cars, and the white students spoke at length about white privilege. One student in particular listed the ways her privilege made her able to ignore racial tensions on campus. She admitted to her privilege and even admitted to using what she referred to as “the n-word.” She also claimed that even though her privilege allowed her to ignore racial problems on campus, she had chosen to continue the conversation about privilege and racism.

I do not reference this student’s comment to shame her or claim that her white privilege or racism are worse than that of any other white college student. Rather, I am interested in the way the rally turned into an opportunity for her and for several other white students to attempt to show their solidarity by talking at length about their privilege and racism, rather than using their privileged voices to encourage other white students to engage in critical conversations about race or stepping back and helping create a space for non-white students to share more of their experiences and ideas. The rally concluded with students, staff, faculty, and administrators signing banners pledging something (it was never clear what), and the general sentiment that everyone who attended the rally should feel good about themselves for having taken the first step toward working for racial justice. Ahmed might suspect that the rally was framed in such a way as to make attendees think that having the rally about racism on campus was actually evidence that racism on campus is not so bad.

This rally is an instructive example for thinking about Ahmed and Sullivan together. It illustrates both ways that Sullivan’s argument contributes to Ahmed’s

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<sup>11</sup> Of course, habits are not solely conscious or unconscious; one might briefly become conscious of her racist habit but lose that consciousness over time even as she tries to change her habit. What Sullivan suggests (and what I think her work can bring to Ahmed’s work) is that even though we *can* become conscious of our racist/white privileged habits, this is much more difficult than it might first appear, and much more of our privilege operates unconsciously than we might assume.

view of unhappy admissions. First, the rally does not change unconscious habits of white students. Since white privilege is rooted in unconscious bodily and psychic habit, the purposeful declaration of privilege or racism on the conscious level cannot address these habits. Sullivan argues that white privilege “require[s] indirect, roundabout strategies for transformation. . . . A person cannot merely intellectualize a change of habit by telling herself that she will no longer think or behave in particular ways” (9). This is particularly true for unconscious bodily habits of privilege; consciously desiring to change the way one comports one’s body provides no mechanism for doing so. Speaking about past racist actions is, it seems to me, a clear example of an attempt to address racist habits intellectually rather than employing Sullivan’s recommended roundabout strategies.

Habits were not the only things the white students speaking at the rally failed to change; they were also not bringing about a change in the wider world as they vocalized their privilege and racism. A performative speech act is, for Austin and for Ahmed, one that brings about a change in the world. There *are* some anti-racist speech acts that do bring about a change in the world, such as a declaration from a state’s governor that a school will no longer be segregated by race. Such a declaration breaks down rather than builds up white privilege.<sup>12</sup> But although the speech acts at the rally were likely intended as anti-racist statements, they did not work because they did not commit the students to a particular action. Worse, they contributed to a feeling that if the university was able to have a rally about race in the first place, things were okay.

It could be true that attending this rally was an important first step for some white students who had not previously engaged with questions of racism, but as argued above, Sullivan would likely contend that a conscious statement about privilege or racism does not itself transform those habits. Ahmed would add that it’s unlikely that such an admission would lead to further action, since it masquerades as sufficient in and of itself (Ahmed 2004, 9). Furthermore, the fact that so much of the rally was dedicated to white students talking about their white privilege revealed the rally as a venue for white confessions and white feelings of goodness rather than a space for anti-racist action.

To be fair to the rally, correcting these white privileged habits is not simple or straightforward; Sullivan would remind us that since habits are deeply constitutive of the self, they are incredibly difficult to change. Sullivan cautions against this impulse to rest easy as one tries to fight their privilege, arguing that instead, one must “continually be questioning the effects of her activism on both self and world” (Sullivan 2006, 197). White people trying to combat their white privilege will inevitably reproduce privilege in some ways, but it is crucial for Sullivan

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<sup>12</sup> Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this comparison.

that white people give up “the privilege of always feeling that they are in the right” (184). Furthermore, “unless she [the white person] recognizes the stubborn, manipulative resistances that arise from the desire to ignore the repugnant aspects of her habits, those resistances are likely to derail her efforts to change them” (9). When the rally speakers assume that they can know and speak about their privilege and thus fight it, they are likely to be derailed from understanding its complexity and pervasiveness.

The second way that an admission of racism or privilege fails to do anti-racist work is one that Ahmed outlines, but that Sullivan’s work can even more clearly illustrate: admissions of racism actually make racism harder to address by appearing to be effective anti-racist actions in and of themselves. My admission of racism or privilege might encourage me, as Ahmed worries, to stop doing anti-racist work because, since I (apparently) understand my own racism, I cannot possibly be the problem. Using Sullivan’s reading of Laplanche’s vision of the unconscious, we can make an even stronger statement: since the unconscious continues to form and change after infancy,<sup>13</sup> conscious, verbal admissions of racism or privilege (even admissions made by adults) reify white privilege. The admissions repeat the privileged habit and make it less likely to be revealed *as privilege*. Furthermore, people making these admissions are performing an old privileged habit *and* creating a new habit of thinking these unhappy performative acts are anti-racist acts.

While Alison Bailey does not provide a psychoanalytic analysis of white privilege and the unconscious, her analysis of white talk provides additional support for my claim that admissions of white privilege/racism can make anti-racist work harder. She contends that “when we fall back on white talk we *actively* give ourselves permission to put racism and genocide in the past, dismiss historic atrocities as insignificant, dismiss people of color’s very real day-to-day grievances, or to privilege our own desire not to talk about it” (Bailey 2015, 49, emphasis in original). We can think again of the rally. The student who admitted to her racism is now able to put it in the past and sever it from the present reality; she has, she might think, become a non-racist in her admission of racism, and her statement does not provide the critical perspective necessary for it to lead to useful anti-racist action in the future.

Sullivan might say that the student admitting to using a racial slur has just done something to protect her white privilege. She may have been rewarded by her

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<sup>13</sup> Sullivan does not believe that the unconscious is subject to change easily; since it is habitual it is far easier to reify parts of the unconscious than change them. So she would likely suggest that new unconscious behaviors that preserve white privilege contribute to an already-privileged psyche far more easily than any habit that would challenge this privilege.

context for admitting to her racist action. Perhaps other white students have confided in her that they too used racial slurs in the past (another example of Ahmed's unhappy admissions). Perhaps Black students felt compelled to tell her they were glad she was brave enough to admit it; perhaps some Black students really were glad she admitted it. We can imagine all sorts of scenarios where the student is socially rewarded for her unhappy admission. She may begin to associate her admissions of racism with being anti-racist, and so she might continue to make them. She may build an unconscious habit of confessing to her privilege each time a conversation about race or racism occurs. In this case, and understandably so, she has succumbed to the seduction of the confession.

### **A Foucauldian Explanation of Why Confessing to Privilege Is Appealing**

If it is true that admitting to racism or white privilege does not do anti-racist work because 1) it fails to address unconscious habits and 2) it reifies the very privilege admitted, why is it so hard to resist thinking we are being effective when we make these admissions? Why might this confessional habit develop? While Ahmed and Bailey discuss the harms of admitting to one's whiteness or racism and Sullivan suggests the hidden complexity of combating this privilege/racism, none of them ask why confessing remains such a common way for white people to talk about race. In my view, these kinds of comments are particularly prevalent among people who are newly engaging in or have not consistently engaged with anti-racist theory or politics, and their prevalence is something that folks doing anti-racist work need to understand in order to develop more effective anti-racist practices.

One possible reason that many white people persistently think they/we are being effective anti-racist allies when we admit to our privilege/racism is that we think our admission of racism indicates that we are not as much of a racist problem as racist whites who do *not* acknowledge their racism. I argue that Foucault's work on the confession can provide us one additional answer to why so many white people keep admitting to racism/privilege as a means of doing anti-racism.

I will first summarize Foucault's description of the confession, and then suggest ways it connects to unhappy admissions of racism/privilege. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault describes the Western construction of the confession. He suggests that historically, the truth about sex has been produced in two ways. The first is truth "drawn from pleasure itself" (Foucault 1978, 57), where the erotic was considered a skill set that one gained through practice, experience, and often, work with an instructor. From this perspective, speaking in detail about one's sexual practices would cause the experiences to lose their intensity—that is, sexual knowledge "would lose its effectiveness and its virtue by being divulged" (57). We might think here of the ancient Greek pederasty, where older men had sex with young boys as part of the boys' educational and intellectual development. Sex was

viewed as a skill set one could practice and that one needed for a virtuous life, rather than as a secret to be shared out of a sense of shame or impurity.

This mode of truth production stands in contrast to the second way that truth about sex has been produced: through the confession. Western civilization has, according to Foucault, developed “procedures for telling the truth of sex which are geared to a form of knowledge-power strictly opposed to the art of initiations and the masterful secret” (58). Here he refers to the confession. No longer was talking about a sex act a way for it to lose its distinctiveness; instead, confession became a central way of producing truth, particularly in civil and religious contexts. Think here of the Catholic confessional or of police work centered on persuading suspects to confess their crimes. Foucault marvels at how widespread confession has become, explaining that “it plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life. . . . Western man [*sic*] has become a confessing animal” (59). Confession, in Foucault’s view, allows for “men’s subjection: their constitution as subjects in both senses of the word” (60). By confessing their sexual deviances or secrets, people come to believe they understand themselves *as* subjects; in fact, people must subjugate themselves to this constructed truth-in-confession system in order to *be* subjects.

Rather than being a set of skills, under the confession model sex and sexuality are conceptualized as central to who people *are* (not merely what they *do*). Foucault argues that for people in contemporary Western society, “it is in the confession that truth and sex are joined” (61). Since it is so connected to truth, confession became crucial to purifying one from their sinful sexual behavior. It is difficult to formulate and perform this confession, and it is “a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him [*sic*]; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him his salvation” (62). We believe, in other words, that confession changes and purifies our core selves. We have constructed confessions to be performative speech acts.

Because of their connection to purification, these speech acts are highly pleasurable. Foucault explains that “it is no longer a question simply of saying what was done—the sexual act—and how it was done; but of reconstructing, in and around the act, the thoughts that recapitulated it, the obsessions that accompanied it, the images, desires, modulations, and quality of the pleasure that animated it” (63). The more perverse the sexual act, thought, or desire confessed, the harder it is to confess to it. But in the confession’s difficulty, Foucault argues, is intense pleasure. This is “a different kind of pleasure: pleasure in the truth . . . of confiding it in secret, of luring it out in the open” (71). In fact, the pleasure of orgasm is often overshadowed by “this multiplication and intensification of pleasures connected to the production of the truth about sex” (71). The effort exerted in a confession makes



it particularly pleasurable, and so the pleasure of describing and analyzing our acts and desires has overtaken the physical pleasure or human flourishing we might expect to gain from sexual acts.

While Foucault is focused on confessions related to sex, I argue that his work can also shed light on an analysis of unhappy declarations of white privilege or racism. Perhaps confessing to racism has become pleasurable using a similar process of purification-via-confession. Viewing ourselves (and here I mean white people) as racists is what makes the confession so powerful—it can purify us and change not what we do, but *who we think we are*. Under the confession model, white people are revealed as racists and in this revelation are purified and made into non-racists, or at least people seeking to become non-racists.

Since the confession takes a lot of work to enact, it can feel like white people have already done the hardest part of anti-racism. To be sure, it often does take work for a white person to see themselves as having a race at all, let alone a set of privileges that accompany it. Admitting to our racism can feel like they/we have confessed to some perversion or impurity that wants to remain hidden. Thus, we are not only purified; we are ahead of our white peers who have not even realized their perversion yet.

Admissions of racism may seem a strange type of utterance to categorize as a confession. Foucault suggests that part of what makes confession pleasurable is that it takes an immense amount of effort to discover and admit to one's secret/hidden perversion, and it is certainly not a secret that we live in a racist society. However, while many people concede that we live in a racist society, very few concede that they are partially responsible for or even directly implicated in this racist society. Thus even as the existence of racism (both systemic racism and the racism of other individuals) seems obvious to many white people, their own racism, as Sullivan points out, remains stubbornly out of their view. Learning to see and admit to this hidden (perhaps even secret) racism is, in my view, similar to the confessions about sex that interest Foucault.

Confessing to racism may also produce a pleasure like Foucault describes with sexual confessions. In coming to know ourselves as racists, we paradoxically become non-racist and even anti-racist. This, like the sexual confession, feels like a purification of our core selves. If we are also persuaded by Freud's conception of the unconscious, we might believe we have purified the supposedly untouchable core self that was developed in infancy, and we may feel even more pleasure for thinking we accomplished this. In examining every detail of our racism and our shame for it, we derive a similar pleasure as we do when we confess to sexual deviances. This confession of racism feels like the performance of a purifying anti-racist act.

This analogy may seem to break down because Foucault is describing social institutions (like the Catholic confessional) that require and structure the confession,

and there are no such formal institutions for confessions of racism. But while it is true that there is no social norm requiring confessions of racism and no structured way to verbalize those confessions, there are more and more spaces where confession becomes expected. I am thinking not only of the anti-racist rally I described above, but also of diversity training sessions held at universities, where facilitators often set as one goal for the training that students be able to recognize and admit to their privilege(s).

One might also suggest that in confessions of racism, there is no authority requiring the confession, like a judge or a priest. But Sullivan and Bailey may disagree; often, white people look to non-white people to forgive them for their racism, to educate them about racial issues, or to be friends with them in order to eliminate racial tension (Sullivan 2014, 157; Bailey 2015, 38, 42). In this way, non-white people can become the authority figures even as they remain marginalized. Furthermore, it is possible that institutions like the Catholic confessional and the criminal justice system have already taught us what we ought to think confession is and does, and thus make it easy to apply it in this new area.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, an explanation of *why* it feels good to confess to privilege does not amount to a *justification* for doing so. The connection I draw between confessing to racism and the confessions Foucault outlines is intended as an explanation of why the habit is so engrained and tempting rather than an exoneration of those doing what is tempting.

### **Using Ahmed and Sullivan to Transform Whiteness**

In this paper, I have agreed with Sara Ahmed that admissions of white privilege or racism are unhappy performatives. I have suggested that Shannon Sullivan's vision of white privilege as unconscious habit can further explain why they fail to perform. Finally, I have suggested that white people are nevertheless tempted toward these speech acts because the appeal of confession is so strong. If I am correct, what are the implications? If Ahmed is right that admissions of white privilege are unhappy performatives, and Sullivan's argument in favor of white privilege as unconscious habit can further explain why these speech acts don't work, where are we? And if confessing my racism feels pleasurable but fails to address my unconscious habits and reinscribes white privilege into my unconscious, what hope is there for working against white privilege and racism?

It is true that Ahmed's argument doesn't leave much room for hope that white people can be effective anti-racists. In the conclusion of her essay, Ahmed asks whether anti-racism is even possible (Ahmed 2004, 46). She goes on to mention

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<sup>14</sup> Thank you to Ann J. Cahill for suggesting this connection between formal confession practices and less formal confessions of racism.

that often when she presents her work on unhappy performatives to white people, the typical response is “but what are white people to do[?]” (56). This jump toward what white people can do instead of confessing their racism is another example of white privilege and the desire to be good (Ahmed 2004, 57; Sullivan 2006, 184; Bailey 2015, 42) rather than a true acknowledgement of or move against racism and injustice. In one way, Ahmed’s resistance of action and hope is important because white privilege tends to make white people want to feel good and hopeful about our efforts; it can be useful to disrupt that. Furthermore, ending this paper about white privilege with the question of what white people can do to finally “do anti-racism right” is another move away from the problem of racism and toward the white experience.

Still, a Sullivanian understanding of Ahmed’s argument about unhappy performativity and a Foucauldian exploration of why white people confess to privilege/racism anyway can, I think, offer a way forward (or an opening for a way forward, which may be the best we can ask for). After all, Sullivan contends that even as white anti-racists are doomed to imperfection, partial transformation of racist/white-privileged habit *is* possible and whites must keep trying. We cannot wallow in white guilt or see our efforts as doomed to fail (Sullivan 2006, 184). Maybe if white people keep confessing and re-forming our unhappy performative habits, the failure is inevitable. But there are alternatives to this cycle of confession; Sullivan might call them ways to transform whiteness (Sullivan 2014). This transformation will not end white privilege, but it might help whites cause less damage to their/our communities than they/we do at present.

We can now ask, for example, how to transform white habits in order to move them away from confession. This could be characterized as part of Sullivan’s recommendation that white people use their privilege against itself (165–166). If confession is habitual (and this habit is unconscious), simply promising oneself or asking others not to confess likely won’t fix the problem. But perhaps confessions can be taken up differently. When someone begins a confession, perhaps there is a way to shift what they say into something performative. To the person admitting to using the n-word, one could ask, “How will you change your verbal habits in the future to avoid using that word or words like it?” This would be asking them to consider their unconscious habits consciously, so it is not a perfect solution. But it moves away from the moment of confession and toward adjusting future actions. To the person fretting over their privilege, we can suggest ways of using that privilege in the future to challenge the racist status quo in ways that emphasize the agency of non-white people and avoid white-centric conversations about white guilt.

Furthermore, even though white privileged/racist habits are often unconscious, there are moments when they emerge at the conscious level. White people armed with a Foucauldian understanding of the racist confession have a

better shot at recognizing and undermining their own confessional tendencies. And white people can learn to recognize our white friends' and peers' confession habits even if we have difficulty recognizing our own, allowing us to help one another, as Bailey suggests, engage our whiteness with vulnerability rather than epistemological resistance (Bailey 2015, 40).

Bailey suggests that while white talk is habitual and pervasive, it is not the only way white people can engage our whiteness; the choice is not one between white talk and silence (Bailey 2015, 48) or as I would put it, between confession and silence. Bailey suggests a new entry point into the question of whiteness; this entry point would resist turning the conversation into one either about white goodness or about the protection of white ignorance (50). She suggests a discourse of vulnerability that would help whites enter conversations about racism and whiteness with the openness to being affected by them and the willingness to affect others (50–51). Perhaps this discourse of vulnerability is one way to interrupt a confession of whiteness and turn it into some action that *does* allow the speaker to take responsibility for racism and engage deeply with their whiteness.

We can also remember the various ways that white people engage in anti-racist work *without* confessing to their white privilege. Whites can attend rallies and marches or campaign for anti-racist political candidates, for example. They could have non-confessional conversations with their white friends and family members, using what they know about the dangers of confession to guide those conversations. White confession is not the only way to begin anti-racist work (and in fact, it is actually not likely to be an effective beginning at all). Once we recognize this impulse toward confession and understand the unconscious habits of white privilege that make it at once pleasurable and privilege-reifying, we can begin using different strategies to work against our white privilege and racism.

At the end of her essay, Ahmed challenges white scholars of whiteness to “stay implicated in what they critique” (Ahmed 2004, 59) in order to clear “some ground, upon which the work of exposing racism might provide the conditions for another kind of [anti-racist] work” (59). I suggest that if Sullivan’s vision of white privilege as unconscious habit is applied to Ahmed’s claims about the unhappy performativity of anti-racism, and the Foucauldian confession is considered as one explanation for this phenomenon, then admissions of privilege or racism can be transformed to become (or start to become) performative. I do not have the desire to offer a comprehensive list of ways that unhappy confessions can be moved toward performativity; rather, it is my hope that I have offered a better understanding of the racist confession. This understanding is perhaps one way toward clearing the ground Ahmed recommends for new types of anti-racist work.

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CLAIRE A. LOCKARD is a graduate student at Loyola University Chicago. She is most interested in questions about whiteness and white privilege; feminist phenomenological accounts of pregnancy and childbirth; and the underrepresentation of female-identified students in philosophy. She can be reached at [clockard@luc.edu](mailto:clockard@luc.edu).