

EDITORIAL

Beyond White Privilege: Toward White Supremacy and Settler Colonialism in Mathematics Education

David W. Stinson
Georgia State University

As I write, I try to remember when the word “racism” ceased to be the term which best expressed for me exploitation of black people and other people of color in this society and when I began to understand that the most useful term was “white supremacy.”

– bell hooks

There are numerous incidents over the past several months that bring into stark relief that society at large, here in the United States and around the globe, just possibly has been thinking, reading, talking, researching, writing, presenting, and so forth about the wrong thing; an inference I make from the bell hooks (1995, p. 184) statement above. Perhaps in this twenty-fifth anniversary year of Cornel West’s (1993/1994) powerful book *Race Matters* it is time to “flip the coin,” so to speak, so that we might begin to think, read, talk, research, write, present, and so forth about the other side of the coin: White supremacy. Perhaps the statement has moved beyond race matters and its derivative White privilege matters toward White supremacy matters; a point that W. E. B. Du Bois (1920/1999), I believe, explicitly made nearly 100 years ago in his essay “The Souls of White Folk.”¹ Of course, White supremacy is what most Black folk—laypersons and scholars alike, of the

¹ “The Souls of White Folk” is the second essay in Du Bois’s (1920/1999) collection of essays *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil*. In celebration of the hundredth anniversary of Du Bois’s (1903/1989) collection of essays *The Souls of Black Folk*, the editors (2003) of the *Monthly Review* reprinted “The Souls of White Folk,” they wrote:

On the hundredth anniversary of *The Souls of Black Folk* we are once again face to face with the ongoing absence of “racial democracy” at home and with an imperialism that walks naked abroad. “The Souls of White Folk,” like *The Souls of Black Folk* before it, remains required reading. (p. 44)

The Souls of Black Folk and *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* are available freely online:
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/408/408-h/408-h.htm>
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15210/15210-h/15210-h.htm>

DAVID W. STINSON is Professor of Mathematics Education in the Department of Middle and Secondary Education in the College of Education and Human Development, at Georgia State University, P.O. Box 3978, Atlanta, GA, 30303; e-mail: dstinson@gsu.edu. His research interests include exploring socio-cultural, -historical, and -political aspects of mathematics and mathematics teaching and learning from a critical postmodern theoretical (and methodological) perspective. He is a co-founder and current editor in chief of the *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education*.

past and present—have always been thinking, reading, talking, ... and so forth about; it is just that many? most? White folk—laypersons and scholars alike, of the past and present—choose not to listen. (The *choice* to not listen is just one of the numerous privileges that White supremacy continuously and consistently affords all White folk.)

Nonetheless, over the past several months, it has been interesting to listen for how the terms race, racism, whiteness, White privilege, and especially, White supremacy have been taken up and used by both White and non-White folk since the campaign, election, and inauguration of “America’s first white president” (Coates, 2017, para. 6). These terms are clearly being taken up and used differently as well as provoking different reactions today than they did say just 18 or 24 months ago. I certainly have felt the shift in folk’s reactions as I continue to push into the idea that White supremacy is the most useful term to express the current and historical exploration of Black folk and other folk of color in the United States and around the globe—in mathematics education and in society at large.

For instance, although exploring the discourses and discursive practices of racism has been at the center of my research and scholarship, in my earlier work (e.g., Stinson, 2006, 2008), I mention the term White supremacy in a cursory manner, almost as a footnote. It was not until a symposium at the 2014 National Council of Teachers of Mathematics Research Conference in New Orleans, Louisiana (United States) that I began to equate White privilege/supremacy as the flipside to racism (Stinson, 2014). In 2016 at the Mathematics Education and Contemporary Theory Conference 3 in Manchester, England (United Kingdom), I made the absence of researching White supremacy in mathematics education—both in my work and in the larger mathematics education community—the concluding talking point of my presentation (Stinson, 2016). And then in 2017 at the 9th International Mathematics Education and Society Conference in Volos, Greece (European Union), I argued that the virtual absence, numerically evidenced, of researching White supremacy in mathematics education has been a strategic discursive practice (Stinson, 2017). As I reflect on these last three experiences, I can easily say that the seen and heard reactions to the very term White supremacy in mathematics education have become increasingly more emotional and more resistant.² That is to say, as I continue to push myself, and others, into moving beyond racism and White privilege toward a new space of critically examining and deconstructing White supremacy, I

² It is important to note that these experiences were with largely White audiences in the United States, United Kingdom, and European Union; as Valoyes-Chávez and Martin (2016) argue:

The meanings of *race* and *racial categories* are created, politically contested, and re-created in any given sociohistorical and geopolitical context as a way to maintain boundaries of difference related to domination and oppression. ... No matter what country (e.g., the USA, South Africa, Brazil, and throughout the European Union), these meanings emerge to shape all social structures and institutions in a given society..., including mathematics education. (p. 1)

have encountered some impassioned reactions. These reactions have come from academic colleagues as well as from family members and long-time friends. Maybe it has been my most recent approach—*All White folk are inherently White supremacists*—that has evoked such visceral reactions.

My reactions to their reactions: I have stopped speaking to certain family members, I have continued to seek entry points with some long-time friends, and I have searched the literature in hopes of engaging academic colleagues. It was while searching the literature some months ago that I discovered the Anne Bonds and Joshua Inwood's (2016) essay "Beyond White Privilege: Geographies of White Supremacy and Settler Colonialism," which inspired both the title of this editorial and the possible beginnings of a new approach of getting others to push into the exploration and deconstruction of White supremacy—at least in mathematics education. Limited space does not provide for a complete theoretical argument (a forthcoming project); therefore, here I just present some of the larger ideas from Bonds and Inwood in hopes of provoking some productive thinking and questioning around the analytic frames White supremacy and settler colonialism in mathematic education. Some descriptions or definitions of White supremacy and settler colonialism, pulling from Bonds and Inwood's synthesis, are in order first however. With these definitions in mind, I then ask mathematics educators (i.e., mathematics classroom teachers and teacher educators, mathematics education researchers and scholars, and mathematicians) to participate in a thought experiment; but first, the definitions.

Bonds and Inwood (2016), in their definitions of White supremacy and settler colonialism, make explicit the differences between the analytic frames White privilege and White supremacy and between (post) colonialism and settler colonialism. They do so by pulling from a wide range of research and scholarship found in a variety of intellectual fields. One key aspect of Bonds and Inwood's definitions is the positioning of both White supremacy and settler colonialism in historicized rather than historical contexts—historicized contexts locate the frames in the here and now rather than the past. In making their argument for engaging with the analytic frames White supremacy and settler colonialism, Bonds and Inwood do not entirely dismiss the more commonly used frames of White privilege and colonialism. But rather, they show how these commonly used frames are incomplete in identifying and documenting the ongoing violence perpetrated by the hegemony of the White racial frame (cf. Feagin, 2013).

To move beyond White privilege, Bonds and Inwood (2016) identify racism and White privilege as mere symptoms and White supremacy as the disease—their interest is in the disease. White supremacy simply defined, according to Bonds and Inwood, "is the presumed superiority of white racial identities . . . in support of the cultural, political, and economic domination of non-white groups" (pp. 719–720). White supremacy, therefore, "is the *defining logic* of both racism and privilege as

they are culturally and materially produced” (p. 720, emphasis in original). White supremacy as an analytic frame highlights—

both the social condition of whiteness, including the unearned assets afforded to white people, as well [as] the processes, structures, and historical foundations upon which these privileges rest. European and, later, North American colonists created and developed a logic of race that placed white, European men at the pinnacle of the social hierarchy and all others in various positions of subordination. . . . These imaginations valorized whiteness and sanctioned the violence of white domination, enslavement, and genocide while bolstering Eurocentric understandings of land use, private property, and wealth accumulation. . . . White supremacy is not only a rationalization for race; it is the foundational logic of the modern capitalist system and must be at the center of efforts to understand the significance of whiteness. . . . (p. 720)

Through a historicized understanding, White supremacy then is no longer located only in historical pasts or extremist groups but rather “reveals its stubborn endurance and the ways its every-day logics are reproduced through spectacular and mundane violences that reaffirm empire and the economic, social, cultural, and political power of white racial identities” (p. 721).

The acknowledgment of the enduring violences (e.g., macro and micro racial aggressions) of the empire and the economic, social, cultural, and political power of White supremacy is what distinguishes settler colonialism from colonialism (Bonds & Inwood, 2016). Settler colonialism is positioned in the here and now, a permanent and “unfolding project [that] involves the interplay between the removal of First Peoples from the land and the creation of labor systems and infrastructures that make the land productive” (p. 721). That is to say, settler colonialism—

licenses the disappearance of indigenous peoples, the expropriation of indigenous spaces, and makes others infinitely exploitable and/or expendable (e.g., slaves, immigrant labor, prisoners). It is thus foundational in establishing processes that separate humanity into distinct groups *and* in placing those groups into a larger hierarchy. The political, economic, and social processes necessary to contain, exterminate, and permanently occupy territory are premised on a continuously reworked white supremacist dialectic that underwrites racial capitalism. (p. 721)

Settler colonialism, then, as a historicized process, similar to White supremacy, is no longer located only in historical pasts or conquering empires. But rather, settler colonialism is a dialectic that “drives the socio-spatial logics of contemporary settler colonial nationalism and identity and is not only central to the production of white supremacist discourses, but the very materiality of whiteness itself” (pp. 721–722).

So, with these definitions of White supremacy and settler colonialism in mind, I now ask mathematics educators to participate in a simple thought experiment by reaching back to 1984—the publication year of the first “equity” special

issue of the *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education (JRME)*, the leading mathematics education journal in the United States. Below, in its entirety, is the editorial of the first special issue, written by the then editor and associate editor of *JRME*, Jeremy Kilpatrick and Laurie Hart Reyes (1984), respectively; the special issue was guest edited by Westina Matthews (1984):

The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics has been instrumental in making mathematics educators more aware of the special problems faced by members of minority groups in learning mathematics. The Council has a long history of involving members of minority groups in its activities, but its sponsorship of the Core Conference on Equity in Mathematics, held at Reston, Virginia, in February 1981, began a new phase of concern and positive action.

The *JRME* Editorial Board has for some time been interested in bringing to the attention of our readers various aspects of research into the learning of mathematics by minorities. When we learned that Westina Matthews had been assembling a collection of manuscripts on the topic, we invited her to serve as the guest editor for a special issue of the journal. Matthews identified a set of potential manuscripts. Working with us and with the authors, she reduced the set somewhat, obtained revisions, and emerged with a balanced and polished collection of articles that together portray the status of research on minorities and mathematics in the United States today. The manuscripts were given a final editorial review at the meeting of the Editorial Board in October 1983.

Research on the learning of mathematics by minorities, as noted in several articles in this issue, has followed in the footsteps of research on the learning of mathematics by women. Unfortunately, the climate of funding for research has become less favorable just as researchers working with minority students have begun to explore some deeper questions. There are, however, indications that private foundations—such as Carnegie, Ford, and Rockefeller—will continue to support research on minorities and mathematics. We applaud their efforts, and we hope to be able to publish manuscripts representing the fruits of that research in the near future.

Efforts to improve the learning of mathematics by minorities are often hampered by a lack of information about successful work done elsewhere. One effort to improve communication among people interested in such efforts is the Minorities and Mathematics Network, organized in 1981 and coordinated by Westina Matthews. The network now contains over 200 members who share resources, ideas, and research findings.

International communication is also important. In editing the manuscripts for this issue, we were struck by the limited number of references to research conducted beyond the borders of the United States. Surely there must be a body of work that has been done in other countries as they attempt to provide a sound education in mathematics to the members of minority groups among their citizens. We hope to provide a continuing forum in the *JRME* so that reliable knowledge on the learning of mathematics by minorities is shared as widely as possible with people who can put that knowledge into practice. (p. 82)

Now for a Foucauldian thought experiment (see Foucault, 1966/1994, 1969/1972): think about how the first sentence back in 1984 might have read if we had the tools to think with back then that we do today:

The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics has been instrumental in making mathematics educators more aware of the special problems faced by [the] **white supremacist dialectic that underwrites racial capitalism** in [the teaching and] learning [of] mathematics.

Read through the 1984 editorial again. What other different “statements”³ might have been possible? What else might have changed? What might the mathematics education research community have begun to think, read, talk, research, write, present, and so forth about back then if only we had chosen to listen to what most Black folk—laypersons and scholars alike—were always thinking, reading, talking, ... and so forth about? Where might we be today if White folk had just chosen to listen to Black and other folk of color?

– **What will we (you) choose to listen to today?**

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³ For a brief discussion on *statements* and Foucault, see Stinson (2010).

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