

Desublimating the Unconscious of Diversity Rhetoric
Christine Wang's *White People* Series

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Christine Wang makes paintings about shame, violence, and whiteness. Many of the paintings in Wang's oeuvre, including the paintings in the *White People* series on which this essay focuses, are reproduced, pop cultural images with superimposed text. The frequently first-person, painted text relays sardonic jokes, embarrassing confessions, and desires that transgress normative moral givens. In psychoanalytic terms, the "I" in Wang's paintings speaks a trove of repressed thoughts and feelings, inadmissible to liberal, public discourse. Wang's paintings desublimate the unconscious of liberal, feminist, multicultural, Twenty-First Century norms. In the case of the *White People* paintings, this political unconscious contains semi-ironic yearnings for alternate racial embodiments. The *White People* paintings read "I just want to be a white girl;" "I wish I was a white man;" and "I wish I were a white man." This stated desire for whiteness transgresses the neoliberal ethic of multicultural diversity by foregrounding the appeal of white privilege to nonwhite subjects.

The white women in the paintings are celebrity actresses performing in films from the 1990s and 2000s, including Kristen Stewart in *Twilight* and Uma Thurman in *Pulp Fiction*. Two of the white men in the series, Harvey Weinstein and Louis C. K., are celebrities who perpetrated sexual violence and were criticized in the #MeToo movement. The third white man Wang depicted was Prince Harry, a white man celebrated for his marriage to nonwhite Meghan Markle. Wang uses these celebrity images with whiteness-desiring text to urge alternatives carceral feminism, patriarchal, capitalist regimes of desire and sexuality, and liberal multiculturalism.

The meanings of works of art often greatly depend on context, and Wang's *White People* series is no exception. When understood as a critique of liberalism from the left, Wang's paintings serve a progressive politics, but Wang's paintings have been recontextualized and improperly interpreted as reifications of white nationalism. Indeed, the utterance "I just want to

be a white girl” could be understood without irony as a white supremacist longing. A racist Instagram user posted one of Wang’s *White People* paintings on her Instagram feed, which included memes that read “‘Diversity’ is a weapon against white people.”¹ Understood as ironic or sardonic, Wang’s *White People* paintings critique the limitations of simplistic, neoliberal diversity rhetoric that fails to recognize the power of white supremacy. Understood too literally, Wang’s paintings can be coopted into a reactionary politics. This essay provides crucial, interpretive context for the *White People* series, such that the paintings are understood as leftist critiques of neoliberal ethics.

The “I” in Wang’s work is slippery, and can refer to many subjects, including the viewer, the artist, and the person depicted. In the case of Prince Harry, however, Wang says “I literally wish I was Prince Harry... When a white man marries a woman of color, they are considered anti-racist and good. As an Asian woman marrying a white man,” Wang explains, “I feel a certain amount of shame.”² By marrying a white man, Wang fears that she is imagined as complicit in the “general feminization and desexualization of Asian men.”³ Whereas, white men who marry non-white women are celebrated. Wang would have a clear advantage as a white man in this situation. In a painting series full of ambiguity and complexity, the Prince Harry painting is far more literal. The “I” is Wang herself, as she desires the privileges of white manhood in interracial marriage.

All of the celebrities depicted in the *White People* series benefited from white privilege in unique ways that intersected with gender and sexuality. The white women in Wang’s paintings were represented in film as beautiful even as they were sexually exploited, and their agency was

¹ @Frida_gallery, “YT #Diversity,” *Instagram*, August 3, 2018. Accessed May 28, 2021.

https://www.instagram.com/p/BmAsCdKluXt/?utm_medium=copy_link.

² Christine Wang (artist) in discussion with the author, May 21, 2021.

³ Christine Wang (artist) in discussion with the author, May 21, 2021.

taken away. Wang reflects, early in my teenage years “I would watch these white women perform victimhood on screen and be very beautiful while they were sad... When my sexuality was developing,” Wang continues “I equated suffering with beauty... I thought that in order to be beautiful I had to be mentally ill, lonely, [or] be engaged in unrequited love...”⁴ In the films, the women were “objectified and rendered passive props in male characters’ narratives and desires.”⁵ The white women were successful through their very passivity and sadness. In contrast, Wang, an Asian woman, writes “In my own life I have to do extra, work extra hard to be successful—maybe even act extra sexy to be beautiful or desired.”⁶ White womanhood is rendered most beautiful through white supremacist beauty standards, and female exploitation and passivity are rendered beautiful through patriarchy. Wang’s paintings critique this ugly imbrication of beauty, patriarchy, and white supremacy.

In addition to depicting suffering women, Wang depicted sexually violent men. Harvey Weinstein suffered legal and professional repercussions for his abuse of women and Louis C.K. suffered career damage for his sexual misconduct, but restorative justice was never realized for these men’s victims. The #MeToo movement engaged punitive techniques related to the prison industrial complex. While some feminists may feel that Weinstein and Louis C.K. got their just deserts, this view overlooks the restorative dimensions of justice beyond punishment. Indeed, shame and punishment can be counterproductive. The more fear and shame instilled in perpetrators by the threat of punishment and humiliation, the more perpetrators will insist on

⁴ Christine Wang (artist) in discussion with the author, May 21, 2021.

⁵ Christine Wang, “Notes About White Girl/White Man” (unpublished artist’s writing, in the author’s possession. 2019), 1.

⁶ Christine Wang, “Notes About White Girl/White Man” (unpublished artist’s writing, in the author’s possession. 2019), 1.

denial. The more perpetrators insist on denial, the more barriers there are to reparations. Thusly, the punitive #MeToo movement illustrates the limits of carceral feminism.

Although these high-profile men were punished for the violence they perpetrated, they never fully named and acknowledged the harm they caused, and they never made reparations. Indeed, Louis C. K. issued what Wang characterizes as a “non-apology” in the *New York Times*.⁷ These carceral dimensions of the #MeToo movement mirror broader statist tendencies in the anti-domestic/sexual violence movement. INCITE! and Critical Resistance write, “Instead of resisting prisons and policing because of the way this system creates, motivates, and reinforces rape and domestic violence both inside and outside of prisons, the anti-violence movement had developed a practice of *collaborating* with the state to increase police and prisons as a (frequently failed) means to increase safety for survivors of violence.”⁸ Through an emphasis on punishment, feminism and the #MeToo movement reify rather than dismantle carceral orders, vis-à-vis advocating for full accountability, reparations, and radical liberation.

Wang continues her rumination on whiteness and sexuality in her painting of Johnny Depp acting in *Cry Baby*, which reads “I wish I had a white boyfriend.” Wang reflects on watching movies with patriarchal representations of gender and desire, saying

I put myself in these situations [watching these films] where I was exposing myself to harm, thinking that this was attractive, beautiful, and good. My Chinese father was extremely sexually repressive. He did not allow me to date or have boyfriends. When I finished the [*White People*] series, I realized that he understood American culture and Hollywood culture as rape culture. This whole series was healing. There was a lot of morning, grief, and loss. [I realized that] my dad tried to protect me, but he actually harmed me.⁹

⁷ Louis Székely, “Louis C.K. Responds to Accusations: ‘These Stories Are True,’” *The New York Times*, November 10, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/10/arts/television/louis-ck-statement.html?action=click&module=RelatedCoverage&pgtype=Article®ion=Footer>.

⁸ Ben Goldstein et al., *Abolition Now: Ten Years of Strategy and Struggle Against the Prison Industrial Complex* (Oakland: AK Press, 2008): 15

⁹ Christine Wang (artist) in discussion with the author, May 21, 2021.

While making the *White People* series helped Wang understand her father's parenting decisions and, to a degree, healed the relationship, the series also brought another conundrum to the fore. While Wang's father's repressiveness came out of a protective impulse, it was ultimately too strict and harmful. "What is the difference between protecting children from sexual abuse and harming them by preventing access to information and safe sexual expression?"¹⁰ Pervasive rape culture leaves parents with few good options for dealing with their child's sexuality in safe and healthy ways. Wang's painting of Depp reflects on this conundrum in formative phases of her sexuality, in the context of Hollywood patriarchy and rape culture.

Wang's "White People" series emphasizes the failures of late capitalist regimes to meet our collective needs. The prison industrial complex and carceral feminism fail to provide physical safety, while occluding restorative justice. Patriarchal rape culture inhibits safe sexual expression. Liberal multiculturalism praises white men who marry women of color but stigmatizes women of color who marry white men. Neoliberal ethics are morally bankrupt and crumble under scrutiny. Wang's sardonic realism critiques these neoliberal ethics and expresses jaded frustration with the longevity and durability of failed and failing neoliberal orders. In the absence of tangible political change, Wang, in the *White People* series and elsewhere turns to bleak humor and darkly ironic personal confessions. Wang desublimates the Twenty-First Century political unconscious, articulating what neoliberalism has rendered unspeakable: the appeal of whiteness, the limitations of diversity rhetoric, and the critique of mainstream feminism.

¹⁰ Christine Wang (artist) in discussion with the author, May 21, 2021.

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