

Knee-Deep Preaching: A Homiletical Engagement of White Bullshit

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ABSTRACT

Homiletical white bullshit is any attempt by preachers, homiletical scholars, teachers of homiletics, and participants in preaching events to escape recognition and acknowledgement—on the part of ourselves and on the part of others—of the ways in which social structures of whiteness create and maintain vast disparities in access to social status, economic resources, and political power in the USA. In locating white preaching as knee-deep in white bullshit, I will address the ways in which white preachers have too often been complicit in the ideologies and systems that consume those persons who are not deemed white. I will offer an initial theoretical framework of white bullshit by locating whiteness in a framework of social excrement, providing initial definitions of bullshit and whiteness, and exploring the method and process of white bullshit. Building upon this theoretical framework, I employ the metaphor of “knee-deep preaching” as I engage white bullshit in the theory and practice of preaching.

White bullshit, as I construct the term, can be briefly defined as an attempt to escape recognition and acknowledgement—on the part of ourselves and on the part of others—of the ways in which social structures of whiteness create and maintain vast disparities in access to social status, economic resources, and political power in the United States of America (USA). The costs of whiteness paid by persons deemed non-white are so indicting and horrific. However, instead of eliminating the sources of these injustices, white bullshit is an attempt, whether explicitly acknowledged or not, by white persons to have their cake—white privilege—and eat it too—maintaining the illusion of white innocence.

The problem of white bullshit is at least partially expressed rhetorically, and this is of profound

concern for the practice of preaching. I am concerned that preaching, particularly privileged white preaching, has had a fluid relationship with and even outright disregard for the horrors of anti-black racism in the USA.¹ I am also concerned that preaching, particularly privileged white preaching, has for too long served to misdirect attention away from the problem of anti-black racism. It has too often functioned to maintain the racial status quo of white dominance rather than to liberate those deemed non-white and those deemed white from the evil of whiteness.

In order to achieve my purpose of rendering as problematic the shit of whiteness and white bullshit as they are manifested in preaching, I will develop a theoretical framework of whiteness, social excrement, and white bullshit. I will draw from philosophy of bullshit, critical race theory, and current events related to the election and presidential administration of Donald Trump in the USA. Building upon this theoretical foundation, I will examine the practical implications of white bullshit for homiletics. By locating white preaching knee-deep in the shit and bullshit of whiteness, I will soil perceptions of the purity of white preaching and render white preaching visible, problematic, and subject to ethical critique.² This is an initial step toward addressing the complicity of white preachers in the ideologies and systems of whiteness that consume and excrete those persons who are not deemed white.

Since I am deploying the theory of bullshit in the social context of whiteness, it is necessary to provide an initial framework of excrement. I will divide white excrement into two categories: white shit and white bullshit. While this essay will focus on the second category of white bullshit, it is the first dimension which frames and necessitates this work. The shit and bullshit of whiteness are distinct yet connected. The degree to which the structures of whiteness excrete white bullshit is directly proportionate to the degree to which the structures of whiteness refuse to reckon with their consumption of human bodies that are deemed less valuable, less desirable, or less human simply because of the assignation of a race. Structures of whiteness consume, excrete, and discard those bodies, i.e. the shit of whiteness. The bullshit of whiteness is simultaneously excreted as a means of distracting from, distancing from, and even dissuading persons from interrogating the political, economic, and social structures which extract resources from persons who are not deemed white and then expel them without so much as a downward glance.³ As it relates to preaching, this analysis of the excrement of whiteness situates the sermonic event and sermonic discourse in our society's consumption and subsequent wasting of black bodies. It provides an accounting of how so many preachers and congregants have been rendered unable or unwilling to recognize and possibly subvert the deadly horrors of whiteness.⁴

THE BULLSHIT OF WHITENESS

When confronted by phrases like “All lives matter,” claims of “post-racism,” “color-blindness,” “reverse racism,” or “white innocence,” or manifestations of tokenism, the bootstrap theory, paternalism, and the white savior complex, I imagine that many activists, critical race theorists and victims of racism have expressed something quite similar to “that’s bullshit!” It is the goal of this work to elucidate this claim by examining how whiteness relies upon and simultaneously creates bullshit while seducing those who benefit from whiteness into a perpetual state of bullshit.⁵

Two schools of thought in philosophical discourse have emerged on bullshit, the Frankfurt school and the Cohen school. These can be engaged within Harry Frankfurt's *On Bullshit* and subsequent writings and G.A. Cohen's essay, "Deeper into Bullshit."⁶ The Frankfurt school of bullshit focuses on bullshit as a method while the Cohen school of bullshit recognizes bullshit as both a process, similar here to Frankfurt's methodological approach to bullshit, and as a product.⁷ These two distinct approaches to bullshit were classified by Scott Kimbrough in his essay, "On Letting It Slide."⁸ These two schools of philosophy of bullshit interpret bullshit as 1) a deceptive method of achieving a specific personal, social, political, or economic agenda and 2) a product that is socially active, fluid, and continuously emerges long after its initial production, oftentimes completely apart from the participant's intentions and awareness.

Whiteness is the organizing power in the creation and maintenance of white bullshit, but before I can clearly articulate the framework of whiteness as bullshit, I must sketch a brief definition of whiteness. Baker and I characterize whiteness as "a structure of power at work in the world. It is a non-material power, and should not be overly personified, but it is a power that attaches itself to persons and groups of persons who then unjustly benefit from it at the expense of others, those racialized bodies deemed various forms of non-white."⁹ This power is manifested in white privilege and white normativity—often unrecognizably so to white persons. Both white privilege and white normativity are material manifestations of the dominant ideology of white supremacy.¹⁰

WHITNESS AS BULLSHIT METHOD

Interpreted through the Frankfurt school of bullshit as method, whiteness is bullshit method in that it entails four distinct and necessary characteristics. The first characteristic is a racialized social, political, and economic agenda that cannot be directly named, because its revelation would endanger the fulfillment of that agenda and subject the bullshitter to social critique. The second characteristic is an audience that shares in and/or benefits from the racialized social, political, and economic agenda of the bullshitter. Their sympathy to the bullshitter's agenda renders them prone to or willing to accept the claims of the bullshitter. The third characteristic is a loyalty to the fixed point of the racialized agenda of the bullshitter which then overrides regard for truth and falsity, rendering claims about what is "true" or "false" flexible, adaptable, and fluid. The fourth characteristic is the subsequent—intentional or unintentional—deception or misdirection of self and/or others that occurs on the part of the bullshitter and the bullshitted as to the racialized agenda which they are really about.¹¹

The primary agenda of whiteness, as it has been expressed in the USA, has always been the plundering of political influence, social status, and economic resources from non-Euro-American persons for the benefit of white, Euro-Americans. The very term "white" emerged in North America as a means of furthering this agenda. A scholar like Theodore Allen has suggested that "white" emerged as a means of overcoming restrictions against owning Christians as slaves.¹² The shared agenda on the part of the white populace was Euro-American domination and exploitation of non-Euro-American bodies, access to which had been restricted because of shared religious identity. "White" was merely the means—itsself an expression of Euro-American bullshit concocted to provide legal justification—to differentiate between

and thus validate Euro-American access to any non-Euro-American body.

While whiteness has evolved over the past centuries, the social, political and economic agenda of Euro-American, white domination of bodies deemed non-white remains active today as the primary source of white bullshit. We only need to delve back into recent history to the presidential campaign of 2016 to find a similar example of a political, economic, and social agenda from which white bullshit emerged. Donald Trump, who even apart from a deeper reading of whiteness can be characterized as a bullshitter par excellence, ran on a campaign slogan of “Make America great again!” While he generally avoided making explicitly racist statements, his economic, social, and political agendas were focused on revitalizing the white, working class and white, middle class at direct cost to non-white residents of the USA. His return to “American greatness” is a code, or dog whistle, for a return to a time of more formalized racism and white prosperity.¹³

Donald Trump’s campaign was a manifestation of white bullshit, misdirecting and misrepresenting its true political agenda of white dominance. Tapping into the concerns of white voters who shared similar economic, social, and political agendas resulted in these white voters embracing his campaign, including his lack of loyalty to truth or falsity.¹⁴ In the end, for many, his slogan and accompanying campaign positions were received as a promise of white renewal, which, whether intended or not, as they are being implemented, are coming at a steep cost to non-white persons. Within the racialized coding of Trump and his followers, “Americans” has been weaponized against those who are not deemed white.

Whiteness as bullshit method is characterized by loyalty to the fixed point of the racialized agenda of the bullshitter, which overrides regard for truth and falsity and renders claims about what is “true” or “false” flexible, adaptable, and fluid. The Euro-American colonists’ commitment to their social, political, and economic agenda compelled them to construct a new racial category of “white” to differentiate between and subsequently enable them to purchase non-Euro-American Christians as slaves. However, who is deemed “white” has always been flexible. The fixed political, economic, and social agendas and subsequent moving parts of “truth” and “falsity” are evident in the fluidity of what has or might constitute “white.” Whiteness is less biological, e.g. a skin color, and more appropriately understood as a socio-political structure that adapts itself to “fluid racial constructs.”¹⁵ In other words, “white” always was and continues to be bullshit intended both to render certain bodies accessible to Euro-American exploitation and to prioritize Euro-American prosperity at direct cost to others.¹⁶

White bullshit as method is always characterized by the intentional or unintentional deception or misdirection of self and/or others that occurs on the part of the bullshitter and the bullshitted. The white bullshitter and the white bullshitted cannot acknowledge their true agenda, racial domination, so they come up with alternative coding that misdirects themselves and others while accomplishing the same end. This functions to ensure that whiteness, as it is manifested in white privilege, white normativity and white supremacy, are often invisible to white observation. This is the code of “Make America great again!” To supporters it is perceived as a benign or even positive statement, yet it implicitly identifies and prioritizes a return to a time of even more pronounced racism and white privilege.¹⁷

WHITNESS AS BULLSHIT PRODUCT

Interpreted through the Cohen school of bullshit as product, white bullshit is initially created, and then it continues develops over time like a virus—always adapting to a particular host and environment.¹⁸ There are several potential points of development in the process that must be examined. The first development is that whiteness is initially produced by employing white bullshit method. The second development is that it may then be uncritically adopted or promoted by those who are themselves deceived or misdirected about the true aim and effect of the white bullshit.¹⁹ These persons may or may not have the explicit intention of furthering a racialized political, social, and economic agenda. The third development is that it fluidly evolves as it is passed along, enters new social spaces, and meets new resistance. The fourth development is that as it evolves it is rendered highly resistant to identification, critique and resistance, all while still maintaining critically identifiable characteristics common to white bullshit.

These developments are helpful, because they frame how whiteness can take on a life of its own, continually rippling out, reinventing and impacting society over periods of time and across social space. White bullshit has become a product that can be adopted or promoted by persons who may or may not have the explicit intention of furthering a racialized political, social, and economic agenda. However, what emerges is a both a recapitulation of the original white bullshit and the excretion of a new expression of white bullshit ever-adapting to a particular time and place.²⁰ Naiveté, perceived innocence or alleged impartiality cannot render a person immune from playing a part in the drama of white bullshit.

The fluid and evolving nature of white bullshit and the participation of persons who may or may not be conscious of white bullshit in which they are participating render whiteness difficult to address. White bullshit's fixed point is racialized domination, and its relationship with truth and falsity via "facts" simultaneously renders it a fluid and evolving target.²¹ This is compounded, because confronting white bullshit head on is a direct challenge to the misdirection and "evasion" of white persons who have been sheltered from smelling and thus grappling with the shit and bullshit of whiteness. Such confrontation is a shocking affront to their perception of themselves as innocent or pure, and as such, it will almost certainly be met with a high degree of active resistance.

I have suggested that the characteristics and developments of white bullshit center around a primary commitment to white domination. A key to recognizing it is to identify symbolic and rhetorical flexibility that dances around and attempts to misdirect from a core commitment to whiteness as manifested in white normativity, white supremacy, or white privilege. This commitment will be manifested in discourse that renders logic and empirical evidence subservient to the agenda of whiteness, and it may be manifested in many ways including but not limited to historical revisionism, ad hominem attacks, "irretrievably speculative comment," claims of reverse racism, appeals to good will, and even calls to ethical "high-mindedness," e.g. "all lives matter."

White bullshit, as a product and a method, will always entail silence, never naming or grappling with the shit of whiteness in a sustained manner and misdirecting in any way to ensure that whiteness is not critiqued. It will never self-acknowledge its own racialized agenda, and the white bullshitter will never

acknowledge that they are a racist or have a racialized agenda. On the micro-level the product of white bullshit can be said to be any public or private words, gestures, or postures that direct attention away from both the ongoing creation and maintenance of systems of whiteness and the potential subversion and eradication of white supremacy.

KNEE-DEEP PREACHING

As preachers, we find ourselves standing knee-deep in white shit and white bullshit.²² The election of Donald Trump, a man endorsed by the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazis, whose rallies too frequently stirred up racialized aggression and outright violence, can serve to remind those of us who may have been privileged enough to forget that whiteness is still a guiding power in our nation today.²³ Regardless of a preacher's denomination, theological stream, ethnicity, class, geographical location, or where a religious community falls between the labels of "conservative" and "liberal," white bullshit and its manifestations in the theory and practice of preaching are a pressing problem that we must address in our theory and practice.²⁴

Homiletical white bullshit is any attempt by preachers, homiletical scholars, teachers of homiletics, and participants in preaching events to escape recognition and acknowledgement—on the part of ourselves and others—of the ways in which social structures of whiteness create and maintain vast disparities in access to social status, economic resources, and political power in the USA. The costs of whiteness paid by persons deemed non-white are indicting and horrific. However, instead of shifting our theory and practice of preaching to acknowledge and work to eliminate the sources of these injustices, too often we bullshit ourselves and others. Homiletical white bullshit is an attempt, whether explicitly acknowledged or not, by white persons to have their cake—white privilege—and eat it too—maintaining the illusion of white innocence even in the practice of preaching.²⁵

By locating preaching knee-deep in the shit and bullshit of whiteness, I am primarily interpreting this metaphor in two senses. The first sense is that of being mired or stuck. Being mired or stuck in the bullshit of whiteness can speak to a number of dimensions of whiteness. First, it speaks to white bullshit as a condition, a state of being, occurring over expanses of time. Second, it helps us to name how difficult it is for one person, let alone a whole society, to liberate themselves.²⁶ Third, this metaphor fundamentally relocates the ethical and spiritual location of white preaching into the shit and bullshit of whiteness.

I am deploying this term in order to relocate white preaching from a perceived pure location apart from the shit and bullshit of whiteness to being situated in, stuck in, and even soiled by white shit and white bullshit. To locate white preaching in the blackness and brownness of white shit and white bullshit troubles notions of the purity and innocence of white preaching. In fact, it reveals white persons and our white preaching to be horrifically problematic. Within this metaphor, white shit and white bullshit, as they have been soiled into the very fabric of our preaching, are the fundamental problem and the most dominating characteristic of white preaching.

For far too long white homiletical discourse have been too silent about how whiteness, as it is manifested in white supremacy, white privilege, and white normativity, has been embedded into many

dimensions of the theory and practice of white preaching. Taking my previous micro-level definition of white bullshit as any public word, gesture, or posture that directs attention away from both the ongoing creation and maintenance of systems of whiteness and the subversion and eradication of white supremacy, even a brief survey of white homiletical discourse will reveal that too much of white homiletical theory and practice neither explicitly or implicitly expresses concern for and alternatives to the evils of whiteness. To the degree that white homiletical discourse—as it is particularly manifested in individual journal articles, books, lectures, panels, and conversations—is silent about whiteness, it is potentially functioning as white bullshit, directing attention away from both the ongoing creation and maintenance of systems of whiteness and the potential subversion and eradication of white supremacy.²⁷

However, there are some examples in white homiletical discourse of incorporating critical approaches of whiteness into theory and practice. One practice-centered example is Carolyn Browning Hesel's essay, "A Word to the 'Whites': Whites Preaching about Racism in White Congregations," in which she engages the developmental psychology of Janet Helms and Beverly Daniel Tatum.²⁸ In this essay Browning Hesel guides white preachers through the stages of white racial identity development in order to help them incorporate it into their preaching practice. An example of white homiletical literature incorporating a critical approach to whiteness at its very theoretical core is Sarah Travis's *Decolonizing Preaching: The Pulpit as Postcolonial Space*.²⁹ In this work, Travis grapples with the legacy of the white, European colonial project, showing how it has infiltrated our theologies, imaginations and interpretations of the Bible. She constructs a decolonizing homiletic intended to help deconstruct the white, European colonial project.³⁰

It is indicting that white homiletical discourse on whiteness is thin. In this age of Trump, as with the centuries prior, white homileticians find ourselves with much work to do. An example of a homiletician grappling with this particular moment in our history is the work of O. Wesley Allen, *Preaching in the Era of Trump*, a collection of essays published soon after the 2016 inauguration providing practical suggestions primarily for white preachers. Allen engages whiteness and preaching; however, he does so in a fairly thin manner. Ultimately, Allen does not encourage pastors to take an outspoken stance on issues of race. Instead, he suggests inviting conversation and leading congregations by setting example. I see the conundrum of white preachers who are mired in homiletical white bullshit reflected in Allen's work. White preachers preaching to white congregations often have to choose either to preach explicitly and honestly about whiteness to congregations that very well might resist or to soft-pedal a critique of whiteness hoping over a length of time to move a white congregation to honesty about its racial location.³¹ That is to say, preachers may have to intentionally continue to preach white bullshit in order to strategically guide their congregations to racial awareness—or simply to keep their jobs.

The clearest perspectives on white preaching as located in white shit and white bullshit have emerged from preachers who are not deemed white. A clear example of this is evident in *Preaching in Black and White: What We Can Learn From Each Other* by E.K. Bailey and Warren Wiersbe.³² This particular work records an extended conversation between these two popular preachers about the differences between black and white preaching. In the initial portions of the discourse, E.K. Bailey clearly connects black preaching to the brutal realities experienced by black persons under white supremacy;

however, Wiersbe does not explicitly replicate that critical awareness of whiteness in relationship to white preaching. In Wiersbe's portion of the conversation there is little to no evidence of a critical approach to whiteness, and his comments render it seemingly innocuous even as he is conversing with Bailey's vivid connections between black preaching and the horrific drama of racism in the USA.

This critical perspective on white homiletics repeatedly appears throughout homiletical discourse by persons not deemed white. A key theme in black homiletical discourse has been the identification, development, critique, and promotion of the theory and practice of black preaching.³³ This theme has been accompanied by implicit and explicit critiques of white preaching, white hermeneutics, and embedded white racialized agendas. In *Preaching Liberation*, James Harris is explicitly critical of white hermeneutics, white philosophy, and, by implication, white preaching. He suggests that too often these reflect a dangerous disinterest in the liberation of the black person and that they are ideologically loyal to the maintenance of the racialized hierarchy.³⁴ Henry Mitchell argues in *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* that white culture and white language while denoting respectability and normativity to some cannot be separated from white oppression and a corrosive impact on black persons.³⁵

In *The Liberating Pulpit* Justo and Catherine González do not use language of white bullshit, but they note that white male preachers tend to be more comfortable than their female and minority colleagues in disregarding the biblical text and “rely[ing] on public presence, jokes, irrelevant illustrations, voice characteristic, and so forth” instead of a faithful, liberative reading of the biblical text. They argue that social hierarchies have conditioned white males and their congregations to assume their competence.³⁶ They also note that when white, male preachers move toward preaching liberation that they will find that they can no longer rely on the means above to be heard by their congregation. I argue that what the Gonzálezes describe is effectively white bullshit. When a white male preacher's goal is simply to maintain the status quo, they can—and even must—depend on a number of charismatic, rhetorical, and even homiletical ploys that functionally distract from the liberative proclamation of the Bible.

The depth to which white bullshit impacts white homiletics even relates to white histories of preaching. Dale Andrews calls out what could be interpreted as academic homiletical white bullshit in his brief response on the topic of the New Homiletic in *The Renewed Homiletic*.³⁷ He observes how what had been labeled the “New Homiletic” was actually already present in “more oral traditions of homiletics, like black preaching.”³⁸ In effect, the primarily Euro-American New Homiletic disregarded that much of what it offered had already existed in black preaching traditions and as such misdirected acknowledgement of the wisdom of these traditions back toward the primarily white scholars of the New Homiletic. In lifting up this work as the result of white creativity and brilliance, white homileticians may have believed their own bullshit, reflecting broader social patterns of appropriation and white refusal to acknowledge and recompense wisdom and innovation from persons not deemed white.

ADDRESSING KNEE-DEEP PREACHING

White bullshit is a pressing homiletical issue, and I argue that white preachers must begin to address the particular challenges of preaching while knee-deep in white bullshit. In order to slow the

flow of white bullshit, white homiletical theorists and practitioners must address the primary issue of misdirection. Bullshit is always a misdirection, a speaking about anything other than what the bullshitter is actually doing. As misdirection, bullshit also necessarily entails silence. Within this framework, bullshit is always noisy silence or at least silence surrounded by and camouflaged in distracting noise. This noise is white bullshit that misdirects away from the violent silence of white privilege, white normativity, and white supremacy. If white preaching and white theory about preaching misdirects away from or is silent about racialized violence and the evils of whiteness then it cannot be separated from white bullshit.

However, in addition to silence on racialized violence and the evils of whiteness, the misdirection of white bullshit can be manifested in any number of ways even while naming racism in the context of a sermon or lecture. This requires repeating. We are not rendered immune from white bullshit simply because we talk about racism or racial justice.³⁹ As an example, white preaching can frequently mention abstract, unapplied notions of “racial justice” without ever following them up with material gestures, effectively misdirecting from the maintenance of the racialized status quo. Such is the pervasive nature of white bullshit. Even noble words such “justice” or “racial justice” can have a misdirecting function and be appropriated as white bullshit.⁴⁰

As teachers of homiletics, we need to acknowledge that our classes provide time for us to cast a vision of preaching that accounts for whiteness. Students should leave our classes knowing that they bring their racialized conditioning and experience to bear on preaching complete with an implicit or explicit racialized political, economic, and social agenda. Our classes have the potential to disrupt the white bullshit and misdirection of our institutions, our students, and even ourselves by exegeting whiteness as a powerful personal and social force and by lifting up as authorities in the field those who are not white, whose political and homiletical agenda directly contradicts whiteness, and whose wisdom might disrupt the bullshit of whiteness.

In disrupting the misdirection of white bullshit, we will meet with resistance. Preachers and teachers who highlight and resist white bullshit may arouse varied and intense responses from congregants and students. As we encounter these responses, we must be aware that the emotions stirred up may themselves be expressions of white bullshit. Lewis Gordon observes that the emotions stirred up by critique of anti-black bad faith actually function to attempt to prolong and extend anti-black bad faith.⁴¹ Expressions of white resistance are white bullshit functioning to misdirect or distract the critique of whiteness.

However, this cannot lead us to lack pastoral awareness. White bullshit is intended to envelope white persons, to reorient us completely to an alternative vision of the world. It is the amniotic fluid in which we were formed. It is the air that we breathe. Becoming critically white, the state of living in full view of the horror of our white privilege and actively resisting it, may be a long journey. As those of us who are white and “who once were lost but now are found,” we need to be ready to extend both truth and grace to those whose eyes are being opened.⁴² It is a painful and sometimes costly process—though not as painful as the experience of the oppression of whiteness. We need to be honest, and we need to tell the truth about whiteness. We also need to meet people where they are on their journey and press them to become more fully active in identifying and resisting whiteness. In our journey toward righteousness, we

must never lose sight of who we once were. If those of us who are critically white strive for purity—not meeting our white siblings where they are on their own journey, ignoring our own susceptibility to white bullshit, or deemphasizing our own part in racialized violence—we will more than likely simply reify whiteness. As critical white preachers, we are not called to escape white shit and white bullshit—if such a thing were even possible. We are called to spend our lives toiling knee-deep in the stink of white shit and white bullshit, working to awaken others and to reduce—even eliminate—the consumption and wasting of black and brown bodies for the benefit of white persons.

CONCLUSION

As someone who has attended a number of white churches, has worked at white institutions and frequently engages an ecumenical array of white preachers, I am profoundly aware of the sustained, intense, and organized silence of white preachers, white churches, and other white ecclesial institutions regarding the past and present horrors of white supremacy. Even when racism is addressed, too frequently it is only done in a cursory manner that avoids lingering too long in a deep examination of the spiritual rot of white supremacy that is poisoning our society. Too many of our churches, our other ecclesial institutions, and perhaps even ourselves as individual preachers cannot bear a sustained, frank engagement of our complicity in the brutality of white supremacy. However, such a lingering and frank engagement of white supremacy and our place within it presents the only path toward the possibility of future racial justice.

In this essay I have attempted begin such a frank and lingering engagement. I have attempted to render white preaching problematic. I have worked to soil it, to render it stinky, offensive, and even horrific.⁴⁴ In doing so, it is my hope that we can begin to see how white preachers have been complicit in the ideologies and systems that consume those persons who are deemed non-white. I believe that whiteness is the most pressing challenge and dilemma facing white preaching today, and it is one of the historical-critical lenses through which future generations of homiletical scholars should evaluate, contextualize, and ultimately critique our contributions to the field. Finally, in spite of much evidence to the contrary, I hold out hope that our preaching can be a powerful force for the eradication of whiteness as manifested in white privilege, white normativity, and white supremacy. However, this cannot even begin to happen within white homiletics until we stop bullshitting ourselves, our congregations, and our world.

ENDNOTES

1 While I recognize the need to move beyond the black/white dichotomy when addressing race, I am working within that dichotomy here for several reasons. First, the limitations of space within this essay do not allow for a fuller treatment of the complexity and diversity of racialization. Second, my goal is to focus on whiteness as the primary problem of racialization. Within the limitations of this essay I will engage whiteness as it broadly relates to those who are “not deemed white”; however, I will read those “not deemed white” with primary attention to those who are deemed “black,” the opposite racial pole as “white,” which can never be coopted or absorbed by whiteness. In addition, I must explicitly note that I engage preaching as a Christian scholar and practitioner, and as I speak about preaching, I am working within the confines of my familiarity.

2 Here I am indebted to my brilliant colleague Chris Baker and the contour of the argument from: Wymer and Baker, “Drowning in Dirty Water” *Worship*, Vol. 90 No. 4, July 2016.

3 I am particularly focused in this essay on bullshit of the oppressor. However, white bullshit is also a problem even for those persons deemed non-white. Due to this essay’s and my own limitations bullshit of the oppressed falls outside of the scope of this essay. I also need to note that even to talk about the “shit of whiteness,” has the potential to reify whiteness. Within the logic of whiteness—to put it bluntly—white is pure and black is, well, shit. I am aware that my use of this imagery of the non-white bodies destroyed and expelled by systems of whiteness as the shit of whiteness has the potential to fit into that same pattern. It could function to elevate the supposed purity of whiteness and simultaneously impose claims of “sinfulness,” even “shitty-ness,” on black bodies. In my use of this language I reject any negative soteriological claims on black bodies but rather attempt to name how black bodies have been consistently consumed—dehumanized, marginalized, exploited, and murdered—by the structures of whiteness in the United States of America and to name this consumption in a manner that disrupts, even offends, the soteriological assumptions of the purity of whiteness and those persons who benefit from and maintain the structures of whiteness.

4 Identifying and acknowledging white bullshit are only small steps toward beginning to work toward racial justice, i.e. the cessation of the consumption of non-white bodies, and this essay is not an attempt to envision racial justice or an attempt to examine how racial justice can be achieved through white preaching.

5 Labeling whiteness as bullshit is not without potential pitfalls. Scott Kimbrough observes that the labeling of something as bullshit can render it insignificant (*Bullshit and Philosophy*, 14). The possibility of rendering whiteness silly or insignificant is a risk that I am taking with this work; however, since whiteness is all too often completely invisible to white observation, the value of naming and problematizing white disregard and white misdirection outweighs the potential for it to be perceived as so trivial that it does not deserve consideration. The concept of whiteness as “bad faith” from has some important similarities to my claim that whiteness is bullshit. In fact, I argue that bad faith is a similar phenomena to bullshit, and as such, the subsequent discourse on whiteness as bad faith builds a suggestive argument for the ontological nature of white bullshit. See (listed chronologically): Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956); Lewis Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiracism*, (New York: Humanity Books, 1999); and Robert Birt, “The Bad Faith of Whiteness” in George Yancy, *What White Looks Like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question*, (New York: Routledge, 2004).

6 For their primary contributions, see: Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) and G.A. Cohen “Deeper Into Bullshit” in *Contours of Agency: Themes from the Philosophy of Harry Frankfurt*, Buss and Overton Eds. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002). See also Frankfurt’s response to Cohen in: Harry Frankfurt, “Reply to G.A. Cohen” in *Contours of Agency: Themes from the Philosophy of Harry Frankfurt*, Buss and Overton Eds. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

7 G.A. Cohen, “Deeper Into Bullshit.”

8 Kimbrough, “On Letting It Slide,” 14.

9 Wymer and Baker, “Drowning,” 7.

10 I briefly define white privilege as the social, economic, and political benefits that come from being deemed white and come at the cost of those who are not deemed white. I briefly define white normativity as the centering of white ideals, aesthetics, and beliefs across the cultural and social realm. I briefly define white supremacy as the assumption that persons deemed white are superior over those not deemed white and thus have the right to dominate those who are not deemed white.

11 The contour of my construction of white bullshit as method is conversant with the methodological contours of Harry Frankfurt’s argument in: Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

12 Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race, Volume I: Racial Oppression and Social Control*, 2nd ed. (London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2012), 80-83, 293n76.

13 It can generally be argued outside of the latter half of the twentieth century that a “return” to a past time in American history implies a return to more fully legalized and state-sponsored racism. This article was written shortly after his inauguration, and Trump’s administration has already taken steps that translate his slogan and campaign positions into policies that harm persons deemed non-white.

14 This phenomenon was widely observed by exasperated political pundits. For an example see: Alfred Hermida, “Emotion sells: Donald Trump supporters took over media by placing feeling over facts,” *Salon*, 11-20-2016, www.salon.com/2016/11/20/trump-supporters-became-the-media-by-privileging-emotions-over-facts_partner/.

15 Andrew Wymer, “The Violence of Preaching: A Homiletical Ethic of Revolutionary Violence,” (Ph.D. Dissertation: Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, 2016), 95.

16 This is true even if it means incorporating persons that had initially been considered racially other such as Irish or Jewish persons. For examples, see Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, (New York: Routledge, 1995); David Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs*, (New York: Basic Books, 2006); Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

17 Here enters the conundrum of the Trump supporter, or even Donald Trump himself, who when confronted with accusations of racism and the racist implication of voting for—or running as—a candidate who talks about “bad hombres,” characterizes Mexican immigrants as “rapists,” and emphasizes “law and order” in response to black protests for racial justice while firmly and even vociferously deny that they could be in any way caught up in racism. Many Trump supporters and even Trump himself have bought their own white bullshit, which has rendered their racialized economic, social, and political agenda invisible to their own observation yet obvious to those non-white person—and their white allies—whom it has immense potential to harm.

18 The contour of my construction of white bullshit as process is conversant with the methodological contours of G. A. Cohen and Scott Kimbrough’s arguments in: G.A. Cohen “Deeper Into Bullshit” in *Contours of Agency: Themes from the Philosophy of Harry Frankfurt*, Buss and Overton Eds. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002) and Scott Kimbrough, “On Letting It Slide” in *Bullshit and Philosophy*, Hardcastle and Reisch Eds. (Chicago: Open Court, 2006).

19 It also can be accepted by those who recognize the white bullshit as a dog whistle and are sympathetic to its aims.

20 It is crucial to note that the role of intention in the creation and maintenance of the product of white bullshit is minimal. Rather, what is important is whether or not the product itself, as it is “warmed over” by others, reifies the methodology and subsequently the agenda of white bullshit (*Bullshit and Philosophy*, 14). When evaluating the conundrum of Trump voter and Trump supporters who, on one hand, do not self-identify as white supremacists and even resist being called racists but who, on the other hand, voted for and continue to support a president who has taken implicitly racist positions, the determining factor in evaluating the nature of the conundrum is the character and agenda of the bullshit that is being passed on.

21 Shortly after this was written, “alternative facts” emerged into the national lexicon. This sentence is speaking directly to “alternative facts” and the term could be inserted.

22 I must credit a conversation with Barbara Blodgett as well as her work for first connecting philosophy of bullshit and preaching. See: Barbara Blodgett, *Lives Entrusted: An Ethic of Trust for Ministry* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).

23 Donald Trump was endorsed by *The Crusader*, a major KKK publication that promotes itself as “the premier voice of white resistance.” To his campaign’s credit, the campaign rejected this endorsement; however, that does not weaken my point that Donald Trump’s campaign was and his administration is attractive to figures from the KKK and neo-Nazis. See: Scott Detrow, “KKK Paper Endorses Trump; Campaign Calls Outlet ‘Repulsive,’” NPR, 11-2-16, <https://www.npr.org/2016/11/02/500352353/kkk-paper-endorses-trump-campaign-calls-outlet-repulsive> (accessed May 23, 2018). For examples of racialized aggression emerging from Trump rallies see: “Unfiltered Voices From Donald Trump’s Crowds,” *The New York Times*, August 3, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9YPYRaeTW0> (accessed May 24, 2018). For an example of increased violence see: Christopher Morrison et. al., “Assaults on Days of Campaign Rallies During the 2016 US Presidential Election,” *Epidemiology*, Issue: p, March 12, 2018, https://journals.lww.com/epidem/Abstract/publishahead/Assaults_on_Days_of_Campaign_Rallies_During_the.98735.aspx (accessed May 23, 2018).

24 Homiletical white bullshit is a problem in which all preachers are caught up in regardless of our race. Homiletical white bullshit involves 1) those who actively promote and benefit from whiteness, 2) those who are critically white and attempt to subvert systems of whiteness while still benefitting from whiteness, and 3) even those who are exploited, marginalized, or dehumanized by the dominant white society. Here I primarily write to the first and second category, those who actively promote and benefit from whiteness and those who are critically white and attempting to subvert their whiteness all while still benefitting from it. I lack the expertise to speak about what it means to be deemed non-white and to have to contend with white bullshit. I am not implying here that at any point in the memory of our nation we have not been standing in white shit and white bullshit.

25 This reflects what I name as the spiritual deadness present in so much white, preaching today. The spiritual deadness leading to and resulting from homiletical white bullshit, whether explicitly acknowledged or not, has been coldly calculated by many white preachers and communities to be an acceptable cost—in addition to those severe costs paid by those deemed non-white—of maintaining the benefits of whiteness for those of us who are deemed white.

26 Within the Sartrean notion of bad faith mentioned in an earlier footnote, this metaphor also suggests the irony of whiteness in which white persons minimize their facticity and over-emphasize their universality, but in the end, as Sartre argues, the clutching at universality and simultaneous robbing of it from others, instead of liberating us, simply renders us and others more deeply mired in white shit and white bullshit.

27 As I will note later, a sermon or homiletical document still might be white bullshit even if it addresses whiteness. I am arguing here that a critique of whiteness is not at the core of white homiletical discourse broadly speaking, but there have certainly been white homileticians who have addressed race and racism in primary, secondary, or tertiary ways.

28 Carolyn Browning Helsel, “A Word to the Whites’:Whites Preaching About Racism in White Congregations” *Word and World*, 31 No. 2, Spring 2011, p. 196-203.

29 Sarah Travis, *Decolonizing Preaching: The Pulpit as Postcolonial Space* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014).

30 These are two representative examples and by no means the only ones.

31 At the time of editing this for essay for publication three important works are scheduled for release that will critically engage whiteness and preaching (listed alphabetically): Jacob Myers, *Preaching Must Die!: Troubling Homiletical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017); Frank Thomas, *How To Preach a Dangerous Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018); and William Willimon, *Who Lynched Willie Earle?: Preaching to Confront Racism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018).

32 E.K. Bailey and Warren Wiersbe, *Preaching in Black and White: What We Can Learn From Each Other* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

33 Another important theme, which I do not want to minimize, has been consideration of what black preaching has to offer all preaching.

- 34 James Harris, *Preaching Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 43, 62.
- 35 Henry Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 83.
- 36 Justo and Catherine González, *The Liberating Pulpit* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1994), 68.
- 37 Dale Andrews, “Response,” in: O. Wesley Allen Jr., *The Renewed Homiletic* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 96-100.
- 38 Ibid., 96.
- 39 Here I must note the possibility that even this essay could be a manifestation of white bullshit.
- 40 I provide this example knowing that it could be a part of shaping the fluid development of whiteness. White bullshit can easily adapt itself to my—or any—critique, avoiding the behaviors I call out while still misdirecting away from racial justice.
- 41 Lewis Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiracism* (New York: Humanity Books, 1999).
- 42 As I describe this, it is solely a white responsibility.
- 43 This metaphor of knee-deep preaching is primarily a deconstructive metaphor, and as such, it has limitations. It does not—nor was it intended to—provide us with a resource to achieve racial justice; rather, it is a metaphor intended to begin the initial work of accurately diagnosing whiteness and the social context of preaching in the USA. This is a metaphor that is intended to help white folk see the world, our place in it, and our task as preachers as they really are.