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On the Mythical Rise of White Nationalism and Other Stranger Things

By Brian Lozenski, Macalester College

Perceiving the World Beyond

The first season of the popular Netflix series *Stranger Things* (Duffer, M. & Duffer, R., 2016) is centered on the disappearance of a teenage boy, Will Byers. Viewers come to discover that Will has been dragged by a demon-like creature—a [Demogorgon](#)—to a netherworld coined the “Upside Down” by his friends. The *Stranger Things* [wiki](#) describes the Upside Down as an alternate dimension existing in parallel to the human world. It contains the same locations and infrastructure as the human world, but it is much darker, colder and obscured by an omnipresent fog. The Upside Down is devoid of human life, being overgrown with ropy, root-like tendrils and biological membranes covering practically every surface. The Upside Down is an anti-human, toxic environment.

In the show, Will spends weeks in this environment until he is rescued and brought home to the “human” world—our world. Yet, in season two, elements of the Upside Down remain in Will, both physiologically and psychologically. His body becomes a conduit for a more insidious beast—a shadow monster—to access our world, desiring the Upside Down to metastasize from beneath. If the strict delineations between the Upside Down and the “human” world are to be breached, as it was in the show, the insinuation is that that Upside Down would eventually spread until it swallows our world, like cancer.

From a sociocultural perspective, Will’s immersion in the Upside Down, although traumatizing, altered his perception of reality, effectively allowing him to live in and perceive both worlds simultaneously. Will would periodically, and with increasing violence, find himself in the Upside Down until he would be jolted back into the “reality” of the regular world—the

world deemed more nurturing to human life. If nothing else, *Stranger Things* asks viewers to question the nature of our reality, and not take for granted that there is a world beyond our perception where anti-human forces lurk (e.g. toxic atmosphere, infertile land, carnivorous predators).

The Upside Down Notion of White Nationalism

Between the first two seasons of *Stranger Things*, notable events took place in the United States. Donald Trump was elected president on promises of border security, unprecedented economic revitalization, and nationalist fervor. “America” was to be made “great again”. In August of 2017, a group, labeled white nationalists, gathered in Charlottesville at the University of Virginia, provoking a spectacle of rage, violence, protest, counter-protest, and also death¹. The (tiki) torch-wielding men grimaced with anger, shouting slogans like “white lives matter!”, “Jews will not replace us!”, and “blood and soil!”. [Mainstream media outlets](#) described the events in Charlottesville as a “rising white nationalist” tide linked to the ascendancy of Trump. CBS News quoted the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), saying,

“There are currently more than 900 hate groups—organizations with beliefs that attack an entire group of people—operating in the country. Many of these hate groups subscribe to the ideals of white supremacy...the number of hate groups has doubled over the past two decades—a trend that appears to follow the impact minorities, financial crisis and political elections have on society...there’s a new generation of so-called white nationalism being run by millennials” (Meltzer & Dokoupil, 2017).

Charlottesville was certainly a flashpoint of racially violent rhetoric and animosity, but it was not by any means an anomaly, as [schools across the country](#) (Tareen, 2017) have also seen numerous incidents of racial aggression. The fact that young adults and adolescents have been involved in these incidents is alarming to many because it runs counter to the liberal logic of racial progress: that racism is an old idea practiced by a dying generation of racists who will eventually take it to their graves.

¹ Activist Heather Heyer was killed in Charlottesville when a car, driven by a man identifying with the alt-right, plowed into counter-protesters.

Herein lies the fundamental dilemma I address in the remainder of this essay. Logics of linear progress are an essential mythology of Western and US national thought. The idea that (some) humans continually learn from previous generations and grow toward enlightenment is continually pounded into our heads as the thing that makes Western societies and nations unique or strange to more “primitive” societies. We are given evidence of technological advancement as proof of linear progress, enveloped in the rhetoric of national (US) exceptionalism. “Growing” white nationalism confounds the nation because it does not align with progress. It is an anathema, something to be banished to the past, another time, another world. White nationalism should belong to the Upside Down, and yet, here it is staring us in the face. So, what went wrong?

The Alienation in Whiteness

I do not profess to have answers to the phenomena we are witnessing, but I offer a perspective that can clarify our understanding of white nationalism. It is not on the rise. Like the Upside Down, it is an environment, totalizing and anti-human. It seeks to metastasize, meaning that growth and accumulation is its mission.

In order to illustrate this perspective, we need to reconsider our understandings of white nationalism. Today, the white nationalist label is extended to a fringe minority of emboldened US citizens—the alt-right—who are socially positioned as white, conservative, and rural. They are portrayed as adhering to supremacist ideologies with regard to race, religion, and sexuality. However, in order to understand white nationalism, we need to clarify the basic notions of whiteness and nationalism. I argue that those who are deemed “white nationalists” are typically scapegoated as the carriers of supremacist ideologies. They are seen as the Will Byers of the human world who allow the toxicity of the Upside Down entry. I disagree.

White nationalism is more violently and virulently produced and transmitted by those who do not articulate supremacist ideology, but practice it, often unwittingly. The torch-wielding madmen in Charlottesville are not the major threat to racial justice, although they should obviously be condemned. They become easy targets to allow the rest of us to believe we²

² I intentionally use the pronoun “we” to cast a wide net of implication for the production of whiteness. Even those of us who are not socially positioned as white are complicit in producing whiteness through our adherence to

are not white nationalists. White nationalism is a byproduct of US national identity, produced and maintained in the cracks and crevices of the imagined identity taken up by the nation's citizenry. By US national identity, I am not referring simply to the construct of citizenship, but to the feeling of ownership and connection to the nation-state. US identity is wrapped in the idea that "we are of this place" and thus invested in its existence and vitality.

Critical race theorists and whiteness scholars have come to well-conceived depictions of whiteness as property (Harris, 1993), investment (Lipsitz, 2006), a psychological wage (DuBois, 2017; Roediger, 1999), and an ontology (i.e. an existential environment that constructs our notions of reality; Leonardo, 2009; Mills, 2014). Indigenous and decolonial scholars have further argued that scholarship on whiteness must specifically account for settlement (Smith, 2012; Smith, 1999), the destruction of Indigenous sovereignty (Williams, 1991), and settler moves toward nativism (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Smith (2012) argues that any analysis of whiteness absent its implications for the maintenance of settler colonization risks "Native peoples disappear(ing) into whiteness so that white people, in turn, become the inheritors of all that is indigenous" (p. 74). For Smith, racial binaries (black-white) must be joined with Indigenous-settler binaries in order to complicate our racial analyses. These Indigenous perspectives on whiteness are critical because they refuse to allow us to disassociate racialism from land acquisition, alienation, and commodification. In other words, as Robinson (1983) argues, racial ideologies are never benign. They are always employed for the purpose of social and/or natural stratification, whether it be for land appropriation, imperial conquest, labor exploitation, or cultural formations that support these repressive arrangements.

My purpose in providing this insufficiently brief overview is to remind us that the US, as a nation-state derived from an imperialist history of the alienation of land, cannot be conceived of without the production of whiteness. "In the alienation of land from life, alienable rights are produced: the right to own (property), the right to law (protection through legitimated violence), the right to govern (supremacist sovereignty), the right to have rights (humanity). In a word, what is produced is whiteness" (la paperson, p.4). la paperson reminds us that whiteness is a natural product of the

national identity and the ways in which the institutions we are part of continue to maintain the core tenets of whiteness.

settler colonial nation-state that transcends reductive notions of race through phenotype and blood lineage. Any adherence to the maintenance of the land-alienating nation-state, including through the insistence on national identity, is thus colluding with the production of whiteness in all of its forms. Like the Upside Down, whiteness cannot be destroyed, as it is a mirror image of the human world. It is always there.

The Redundancy of White Nationalism

Nation-states are constitutive of and constituted by national identity. Nationalism relies on this symbiotic relationship. Nationalist constructs are recent phenomena in human history, emerging only in the last 300 years. In his foundational text on national identity, Anderson (2006), defines a nation as “an imagined political community—and imagined as both limited and sovereign” (p. 6). He explores four dimensions necessary to construct a nationalist identity: imagination, limit, sovereignty, and community.

Without going into each of these aspects specifically, I argue that the *imagined political community* in the US is *limited* in its adherence to the ways in which whiteness manifests alienable rights and colonial settlement. With regard to *sovereignty*, Harney and Moten (2013) provide an illustrative perspective about settlers’ perceptions of their sovereign lands being under constant threat.

In Parenti’s (1992) classic anti-imperial analysis of Hollywood movies, he points to the ‘upside down’ way that the ‘make-believe media’ portrays colonial settlement...the settler is portrayed as surrounded by ‘natives,’ inverting...the role of aggressor so that colonialism is made to look like self-defense. Indeed, aggression and self-defense are reversed...but the image of a surrounded fort is not false. The fort really was surrounded, is besieged by what still surrounds it, the common beyond and beneath—before and before—enclosure (p. 17).

For Harney and Moten, settlers are surrounded by what they have disturbed. The disruption of indigenous sovereignty then stands as a rationale for their need for sovereignty amidst hostile conditions. This reactionary sovereignty is paranoid and manifests in hyper-militarism, armament, proactive aggression, and a toxic belligerence toward calls for

reparations and land repatriation. Thus, their toxic sovereignty is constantly under threat from those living in community—beyond national identity—where proximity, kinship, and collective struggle for humanity are seen as antithetical to the social and economic hierarchy that is the trademark of settler colonization. This community does not need to be imagined, because families, tribes, and people living in communal ways build it.

Again, the production of nationalism in the US is already white, already supremacist, thus white nationalism is redundant. So, torch-wielding men chanting “blood and soil!” are producing whiteness through nationalism in similar ways to an 8th grade social studies teacher asking about the pros and cons of westward expansion, an educational researcher exploring ways to use schools to make the country more competitive on the global market, a kindergarten teacher having her class recite the pledge of allegiance.

Educating from the Upside Down

If US nationalism is inherently white nationalism, what does that mean for our work in education? Let’s return to the metaphor of the Upside Down. I began this essay by positioning the Upside Down as an alternate dimension that has the possibility of infiltrating and overtaking the human world. I suggested that white supremacy is the Upside Down. But what if our world—the world of white nationalism, the settler colonial nation, the US—is the Upside Down? The atmosphere, the fog, the ropy tendrils that choke humanity, the Demogorgon, demidogs, and shadow monsters, perhaps those are the things produced by whiteness. They continue to grow and overtake our environment, leaving us to act in anti-human ways. In this metaphor, we are the citizenry of the Upside Down—all of us who take up this national identity.

For educators, our role in the Freirian sense is to read the word and world, to understand the conditions we are presented with, and to become conscious of our environment. In the Upside Down, educators are tasked with helping young people understand that this world is not ok. It is anti-human. Baldwin (2008) confronted teachers of dispossessed black youth with this challenge,

“If I were a teacher in this school, or any Negro school, and I was dealing with Negro children...I would try to make them know—that those streets, those houses, those dangers, those agonies by which they are surrounded, are criminal. I would try to make each child know that these things are the result of a criminal conspiracy to destroy him.... I would suggest to him that the popular culture—as represented...on television and in comic books and in movies—is based on fantasies created by very ill people, and he must be aware that these are fantasies that have nothing to do with reality.... I would teach him that he doesn’t have to be bound by the expediencies of any given administration, any given policy, any given morality; that he has the right and the necessity to examine everything” (p. 20).

This examination of everything is still our charge as educators. We need to help our students become Will Byers, or someone who can perceive beyond their present environment. We want young people to see what exists beyond the fort, beyond the nation. The alt-right is not the conduit permitting the Upside Down to emerge into a healthy world. They are symptoms of a sick society. They are symptoms that make themselves known. They are the barometers of our collective atmosphere. The problem is in thinking they are part of a different atmosphere than the one in which we live, and that the rest of us are not symptoms, only with better camouflage. We are all sick, infected by the toxicity of US nationalism—white nationalism. Until we recognize this, we will continue to assume we are living in the human world. The human world exists, but we must push ourselves to take up Harney and Moten’s call to see the “beyond and beneath—before and before”.

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Brian Lozenski is an assistant professor of urban and multicultural education at Macalester College in St. Paul, MN. His teaching and research explore educational disparity, the cultural contexts of teaching and learning, and participatory educational projects derived from heritage studies. Dr. Lozenski is affiliated with the Institute for Urban & Minority Education at Teachers College, the African Diaspora Consortium, the Network for the Development of Children of African Descent, and the Education for Liberation Network.