

Activism and dissemination

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Critical reflexivity and research on state responses

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Critical reflexivity and research on state responses to the far right

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“If whiteness gains currency by being unnoticed, what does it mean to notice whiteness?” asks Sara Ahmed in the introduction to her essay, ‘The phenomenology of whiteness’ (Ahmed 2007: 149). In this short chapter, I attempt to ‘notice’ whiteness in research on white supremacist violence. Put differently, what does it mean to be a white researcher in white-dominated spaces researching topics deeply entangled with whiteness? How do we reckon, in Ahmed’s words, with a “project of critique [that is] complicit with its object”?

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Such questions are crucial not only due to heightened interest among research communities in recent years in studying white supremacist violence, but also because white supremacist violence is often understood through the lens of counterterrorism, itself a white supremacist institution. Scholars of colour, and in particular racialised Muslim scholars, have long underscored that racism and Islamophobia in counterterrorism are intentional, not incidental, components of a national security apparatus that exists to preserve a status quo in white majority countries. This status quo uses violence against communities of colour to protect whites’ sociopolitical status, even when particular national security actors do not intend to do this (e.g. Cainkar and Selod 2018; Kundnani 2014). I focus here on these actors: the bureaucrats, staffers, and other elites tasked with making and enforcing policy to counter violent white supremacy. Studying such actors, while important, raises questions of researcher access, positionality, and complicity at the heart of state institutions that may be more closely aligned with the ideologies of violent white supremacy than they would like to believe.

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My argument in this short chapter is that research with policy elites is important for understanding not only what policy surrounding white supremacist violence looks like, but also why it continues to look that way. Nevertheless, the people best positioned to do this research – that is, white people – are also the most likely to reproduce white supremacy, even if inadvertently. On the one hand, white access to overwhelmingly white elites can reproduce dynamics likely to occur in policymaking spaces to which researchers do *not* have access, thereby providing opportunities to capture something closer to elites' true attitudes. Being racialised as white also affords safety when talking about sensitive issues such as racism. On the other, doing critical work on white supremacy in such a space requires constant reflexivity so as not to overlook how white supremacy itself constitutes those spaces. Succinctly, whiteness offers both unique access and unique limitations in the study of white supremacy.

To demonstrate this point, I use autoethnography to examine my own research with national security elites in Berlin, Germany, and Washington, DC. Autoethnography is a method that underscores the co-constitution of knowledge in research encounters by using the researcher's experience as a source of data (Brigg and Bleiker 2010; Lapadat 2017). I apply an autoethnographic sensibility to three encounters from 2019: one with a former bureaucrat in the German chancellor's office, one with a current staffer in the German Bundestag, and one with two former US Congressional staffers, ~~turned think-tank~~ researchers. All occurred as part of a larger project on elite sense-making in designing and implementing counterterrorism policy. I use pseudonyms for all of my interlocutors.

In describing my own praxis, I follow Ahmed's call to leave open the door for critique, rather than prescribing solutions (Ahmed 2004: 165). Contrary to what conventional wisdom might suggest, the challenges of research with policy elites arose not from issues of access but rather from the need for constant, critical reflexivity. By 'critical reflexivity' I refer to a combination of structural intersectionality and practical reflexivity as laid out by Crenshaw (1991) and Berling and Bueger (2013). Critical reflexivity acknowledges the larger sociopolitical contexts in which researcher and researched are positioned, accompanied by a critical examination of how power operates in those contexts. More

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generally, reflexive analysis reminds us that research does not occur in a vacuum, and what we hear and how we interpret it will vary depending on our identities vis-à-vis those of our interlocutors and the settings in which we find ourselves (Townsend-Bell 2009).

In practice, I followed roughly the guidelines codified by Soedirgo and Glas (2020) for doing reflexive analysis, including frequent recording of assumptions, consideration of positionality pre-interview, and discussions of interview data (to the extent that it was ethical) with non-participant insiders and outsiders in order to address gaps in my own self-reflection. Such an approach does not guarantee anti-racist outcomes, but it does underscore that the power dynamics involved in researching white supremacy are never *not* present and can themselves be a source of insight into how white supremacy functions. Put simply, positionality structures possibility – both for policymakers and research on policy.

Encounter 1: Racism in Berlin

“Oh, a specialist, I see”

No exchange with Otto in the hour we have spent together has gone well. First, I mistook what he thought was lunch for a meeting over coffee. Shortly after resolving the lunch mix-up, I messed up the simplest of German subject-verb agreements, triggering what would become a common interaction with my interlocutors. (“But your name; I thought you were German” “No; my great-great grandparents were immigrants” “Where from?” “Bavaria” “Oh, that is not Germany”) Now I have provoked something in the vicinity of sarcasm by being familiar with a book Otto likes. We are discussing counterterrorism in twenty-first-century Germany, already a sensitive topic, but that is not why our conversation has taken place on eggshells.

Otto is a former bureaucrat in the German chancellor’s office. He worked on a national security portfolio during the 9/11 attacks and so has unique insight into how discourses of terrorism developed at the highest levels of the German government. I am in the early days of my research; nevertheless, getting access to Otto and people like him has been surprisingly straightforward. I get the sense that some view

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me as a curiosity, which makes me feel insecure. I am also conscious of being a young woman in the early days of my first scholarly fieldwork trip, interviewing mostly older men. Every interaction involves negotiating age, gender, and seniority – all heuristics for ‘expertise’. I don’t feel that I am passing Otto’s test.

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Eventually, however, Otto decides he is comfortable enough to speak relatively freely. He begins laying out reactions to the influx of asylum-seekers into Germany in the early days of the Syrian Civil War. “It was clear”, he rationalises, “that some would be violent”. Why? I wonder. Otto’s assertion plays into nativist narratives from the German right about terrorist infiltrators, even though Otto is a lifelong member of a left-wing party. I am surprised to hear him accept this uncritically, but I don’t say anything; I want him to keep talking. “This isn’t a left or right issue”, he continues. “The refugees are an issue, even though it isn’t politically correct to say so”.

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Encapsulated in this anecdote is a key component of doing research on white supremacist violence with white elites as a white researcher. Whatever other identities I may hold, I am squarely in the insider camp on the dimension that matters: race. Otto is not the only elite I will encounter who will comfortably express racist views despite having just met me. These views are never intended to shock. I get the impression Otto, and others, either expect me to agree already or believe me capable of understanding and sympathising with their position. My interpretation is that, to them, such a position is completely normal in a conversation between two white ‘specialists’ who have independently assessed the national security landscape but come to similar conclusions coloured by race in unacknowledged ways, even as shared race makes the conversation possible in the first place.

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Critical reflexivity requires noticing moments of surprise that are not intended to be surprising. Though my whiteness afforded me unique access to the racist views embedded in mainstream national security discourses, it also positioned me insofar as I did not expect to encounter those views with so little effort expended on my part. That I could still find a surprise in that space produces an opportunity for insight – to paraphrase feminist scholar Caron Gentry, discomfort *tells us something* (Gentry 2020). My discomfort

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instructed that if I had to work to ‘see’ a space dealing with white supremacy as structurally white supremacist, then my interlocutors might also not ‘see’ white supremacy as constitutive of their work, rather than simply a target of that work.

Taking a critically reflexive approach thus required changing the starting point of my inquiry. Rather than simply pay attention to how my interlocutors answered my questions, I also needed to understand something about the environments in which they worked and lived – in other words, how their social worlds shaped what was thinkable and normal to them. The importance of this came sharply into focus in an encounter with a very different sort of bureaucrat, which I describe below.

Encounter 2: the limits of the left

I meet Paul in his office at one of the many buildings housing operations for German MPs that ring Berlin’s Pariser Platz, a tourist destination crowded with selfie sticks and street performers. Paul is a staff researcher for a leftist member of the Bundestag, and as a fellow young leftist, I find our conversation one of the most relaxed and natural I have had during my fieldwork.

Indeed, Paul’s discussion of his own language surrounding white supremacist violence forces me to reflect on how I use ‘white supremacist violence’ to encompass a wide range of activities, sacrificing one kind of precision to focus on what, to me, is the key thread of structural oppression underlying the far right. He is conscious of his own political biases and how they shape his views of the world. I notice, for instance, that he uses the explicit language of ‘terrorism’ to describe white supremacist organisations – a rhetorical choice not common in Germany unless formal charges of terrorism have been filed. “I’m not perfect in my language”, he says. “There is more than terrorism out there – neo-Nazi music, art, culture – and sometimes when I say ‘terrorism’ [*Terrorismus*], I’m referring to all of that”. He continues: “I also say the ‘extreme right’ [*Rechtsextremismus*] sometimes. There’s not a huge difference. ... But I think these terms are only as useful as the policies that follow from them”.

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Yet Paul's reflections on policies countering white supremacist violence feel surprisingly non-radical. I ask all of my interlocutors, who universally agree that the German government has not taken white supremacist violence seriously, how they would know if the government *were* to take it seriously. "There would be more personnel working on the issue", Paul explains. He does not elaborate much. When pressed, he clarifies that he doesn't think intelligence and law enforcement officials know enough about the threat – though he is careful to note that what such officials know and don't know only becomes clear after attacks occur.

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I find this response confusing for several reasons, which is a signal that I need to pay attention to it. A number of my interlocutors have explained, contrary to Paul's position, that hiring more personnel to work on issues of white supremacist violence is an insufficient move at best and a smokescreen at worst. That Paul offers this seemingly inadequate solution and suggests no others does not track with the expectations I have formed. I am surprised that Paul's otherwise careful attention to structural components of racism and white supremacy does not extend to the area of policy solutions. "Diversity is not part of the *Selbstverständnis* in Germany", he says in response to an earlier question, using a word that means an intuitive sense of what it means to be German. To make sense of what he views as a lack of government action, he points to the mainstreaming of far-right ideology and a refusal to reckon with racism. Yet his vision for an improved policy environment involves more of the same policy Band-Aids, rather than deeper anti-racist change.

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It takes me several weeks to process my conversation with Paul, which was at once among the most enjoyable and most frustrating of my fieldwork. Eventually, I classify it as the most enlightening. What I have done with Paul, unintentionally, is replicate discussions in white leftist spaces that purport to be radical but that remain constrained by the bounded imagination of whiteness. I come to recognise the same dynamics repeating themselves in other activist spaces of which I am a part. I believe Paul, like so many of these activists, is genuinely interested in such solutions but finds it challenging to imagine what

they might look like in practice – a challenge I find myself also confronting, even as I demand more of my interlocutors.

This difficulty in imagining solutions becomes legible when one considers the workings of structural white supremacy. After all, structural white supremacy persists by being unremarkable: those who do remark on it are characterised as misguided or, at worst, pathological (Davis and Ernst 2019). A critically reflexive approach to doing research on the far right, then, requires asking not *whether* white supremacy is present, but *how it manifests*. For some, like Otto, it may be in casual racism masquerading as objectivity. For others, like Paul, it may be in limitations on what Robin D.G. Kelley (2003) calls ‘freedom dreaming’ about the actions that will help us achieve anti-racist futures (see also Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2021). And for Black, Brown, and Indigenous individuals, it may be far more personal.

Encounter 3: ruptures in Washington

Far from temperate Berlin, I meet Claire and Jenna in a glass-walled office in Washington, DC at the crest of a heat wave. Both are former US Congressional staffers who now work at a think tank. Claire is a white woman; Jenna belongs to a historically excluded racial group.¹

It is immediately clear that Claire and Jenna respect each other a great deal. This goes beyond professionalism in the presence of a stranger (me): they regularly reference each others’ expertise as we talk and bounce examples back and forth to form the most comprehensive answers that they can.

Nevertheless, Jenna’s statements occasionally make Claire vocally uncomfortable. According to Jenna, the US counterterrorism apparatus post-9/11 views terrorism as an identity – ‘terrorist’ as something one is, rather than ‘terrorism’ as something one does. The endpoint of this logic, she explains, is eradication:

Jenna: The response that we’ve had for terrorism as identity is, you hold that identity and you are irredeemable. ... If terrorism is identity, your [policy] answer is genocide.

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Invoking the language of genocide to describe counterterrorism is contentious, and I had heard nothing similar even in leftist texts advocating for the abolition of counterterrorism institutions. It is clearly a carefully considered choice: Jenna slows the pace of her speech during this interlude and articulates every word. It is also clear that Claire is not quite sure what to do with this declaration from Jenna. She works through her thoughts verbally, breaking apart the category of 'terrorism' that Jenna has brought up:

Claire: I'm not sure I totally agree, in the sense that I don't think the IRA and al-Qaeda are one in the same. ... In the case of al-Qaeda or ISIS, there is a political end ... but also they're willing to die for the cause and that is a goal in and of itself and you're fighting an entire ideology. ... They're very very very different groups.

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In retrospect, this train of thought – responding as it does to Jenna's foundational assumption that terrorism is always equated with identity, rather than her assertion that this equation implies genocide – feels more like a non sequitur than it appeared in the moment. Yet by this point in my research, I am better equipped to analyse what may be happening here. By avoiding Jenna's invocation of the term 'genocide', Claire has moved our conversation in a more comfortable direction by trying to find examples where a more extreme policy response, even if not genocide, is appropriate because of something extreme about the actors themselves – in her view, actors such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. Jenna's analysis had unsettled Claire's understanding of counterterrorism as a space that frequently did harm but within which some actors were still fundamentally different and thus deserving of different treatment (while, conspicuously, avoiding the varying racialisation of the average IRA member vs. the average al-Qaeda member). Claire had therefore provided an explanation for that differentiation that was at odds with Jenna's *worldview* – one which replaced Jenna's frame of 'genocide', with all its important connotations, with one of different types of actors in order to make sense of counterterrorism's systematic violence against historically excluded communities.

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This encounter further crystallised, for me, that worldviews are where we must begin when doing critical research on the far right. For white researchers and political elites alike, the default assumption is that racism *could* surface in policy spaces but will not *inevitably* do so – in other words, that white supremacy is not structural. Shifting to assume that white supremacy is constitutive of and perpetuated by national security institutions, which act as referenda on who is a threat and who is familiar, not only aligns research with empirical reality but also changes the questions we ask. ‘Are institutions racist?’ is a very different question from ‘How does racism manifest in institutions?’ Each starts us in a different place. Critical reflexivity demands that we at least entertain the second question; making space for inevitability, in turn, moves the challenge of not reproducing white supremacy front and centre.

Discussion: critical reflexivity and the white imagination

My encounters with Otto, Paul, Claire, and Jenna, alongside numerous others in the course of my research on elites working to counter white supremacist violence, carry significant implications for those doing work on national security policy. First and foremost is the need to do this research in the first place. Had I not physically walked into bureaucrats’ offices and listened to them explain their work in their own words, I may have continued to believe narratives about resource constraints driving responses to white supremacist violence – or, conversely, the outright bad intentions of some policy elites. Both of these stories miss the complexity of making and enforcing policy against white supremacist violence while inhabiting structurally white supremacist institutions tasked with upholding imperial and racist systems.

Yet the risk of reproducing structural white supremacy remains, underscoring the need to actively work against it. Critical reflexivity, I argue, can render visible whiteness “for those who inhabit it” (Ahmed 2004). I caveat this statement forcefully, because the workings of whiteness-as-institution rely on those who benefit from the institution not noticing its tendrils, such that ‘visibility’ may never be complete. What to do, then, when those best positioned to *access* whiteness-as-institution are simultaneously the worst positioned to *understand* whiteness-as-institution?

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Fundamentally, we must change our starting points. Ethical research requires not working, or writing, for an audience that discounts the reality of structural white supremacy shaping policymaking. Instead of leaving open the possibility for observing racism in my interviews, I learned to ask, instead: what would happen if I started from the position that racism *is* present, foundationally so, and what are the implications for how I as a racial insider can talk about policy in the first place? For me, this has meant adjusting the analytical frames that I turn to when interpreting my interview data. Insights from Black and queer political thought have proven indispensable at shedding light on national security dynamics I once found surprising (e.g. Shakur 1988; Puar 2007), and I hope their inclusion in literature on the far right becomes far more commonplace.

Following this is the need for attentiveness to the language we both hear and use ourselves. As a white insider, I can allow racist utterances in private conversations if they arise naturally without worrying about harm to myself, allowing me to capture something closer to my interlocutors' true attitudes absent any concern on their part about respectability or 'political correctness' that might arise were my racial identity different. That such exchanges likely occur in policy conversations to which researchers are not privy is important to acknowledge. Simultaneously, though, I must be cautious of the language I myself use to describe what I hear, an obligation made more complex when translating across languages. As Schaffer (2006) notes, uncritical reproduction of language assumes that everyone describes the world in the same way. Understanding how the people making policy surrounding white supremacist violence in turn describe 'white supremacist violence' shines light on how concepts are constructed in real time – and how linguistic choices may constrain what policy responses are viewed as possible or appropriate. To return to Gentry, hearing a policy described as 'genocidal' – and finding that description unexpected – *tells us something*, and it is the duty of the ethical researcher to take this utterance and its implications seriously.

I conclude with a note of caution via Sonia Ryang, who warns that centring oneself in one's analysis, as I have done here, risks reproducing Western notions of individualism and the positioning of the white

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individual as the default, rather than something that emerges from particular historical and socio-political contexts (Ryang 2000). Certainly, there is a risk of privileging one's own interpretations over those of one's interlocutors – and, moreover, of reading a research encounter as an opportunity for self-discovery rather than a chance to learn something valuable in the struggle against structural white supremacy. I suggest, however, that working as a white researcher on white supremacist violence is necessarily a process of unlearning particular ways of interpreting politics, which is assisted by a critically reflexive approach. Engaging ethically with that unlearning means noticing the moments of surprise from which insight springs, thereby allowing one's personal unlearning to guide, but not overshadow, one's eventual analysis.

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¹ Thanks to Kelebogile Zvobgo for proposing the language of 'historically excluded' as an alternative to 'minority' or 'marginalised'.