'You Shall Not Replace Us!' White supremacy, psychotherapy and decolonisation

Dwight D. L. Turner

SUMMARY: Through the lens of an experiential seminar, this article considers the role unconscious white supremacy plays within counselling and psychotherapy. Offering a plea for counselling organisations to consider whiteness studies as an integral aspect of their trainings, this article sees decolonization as a route towards this, and towards a greater engagement with the other both as trainees and as potential clients.

KEY WORDS: white supremacy, diversity, otherness, othering, decolonisation

Several years ago, I was running an experiential seminar in South East London for psychotherapy trainees. One of the participants was a white middle-class woman of a comparable age to myself. Perhaps because of this personal nature, I found myself being regularly attacked by her. Often, she would interrupt me, make tutting noises when I spoke, or sigh whenever I asked how everyone was. The attacks were also verbal, ranging from being told that I did not know what I was doing, to the fact that I could not possibly be a psychotherapist because I did not look like one, to my making her fearful because I was so aggressive. My every intervention was challenged and undermined, and at times the vitriol aimed at myself was difficult to hold. And yet, during the breaks in the day when

Dr Dwight Turner is Senior Lecturer within the School of Applied Social Sciences at the University of Brighton, UK, where he lectures on their Psychodynamic PG Dip and MSc courses in Counselling and Psychotherapy. He is a part-time lecturer, supervisor and tutor for the PGDip, MA and Supervision courses at the Centre for Counselling and Psychotherapy (CCPE), in London. He is contactable via his website www.dwightturnercounselling.co.uk or through the University of Brighton on d.d.turner@brighton.ac.uk

I would normally sit with myself and ponder my own counter-transferences, I found myself feeling an unbelievable amount of shame; shame for not being right, for not being good enough, shame for not being able to measure up to whatever these students needed from myself.

A few weeks later though, during the next stage, she returned to the group saying that with the help of her therapist she had considered her position in relation to myself. She acknowledged to feeling an immense amount of shame for her actions towards me, acknowledging that her position of privilege and the impact of this upon herself had greatly influenced her interactions with me. Mentally checking in with myself as she spoke, I could feel the shame lift like a morning mist.

Whilst not ignoring the other means of understanding the interactions presented above, this article is based around the fact that for this participant, our racial difference played a major factor in how she treated me as a trainer. And that as this article is based around an exploration of both the conscious and, perhaps more importantly, unconscious nature of white supremacy, this article will explore this immense topic from within a psychotherapeutic paradigm. It also considers that to ignore white supremacy as a factor within psychotherapy out of a fear of political correctness is to force its influence into the shadowy depths of the unconscious. It also recognises that to do so means it will inevitably express itself in microaggressions, passive aggressive slights, and the ignoring of the other be they as trainees, practitioners, or even as theorists of difference who have written about our trade. This article therefore considers some of the colonial roots of racial distancing, how supremacy works as a construct both in the world and within psychotherapy trainings, and the steps psychotherapy would need to take to engage with the racialised other.

White supremacy

As I have discussed in other papers, explorations of race and difference within psychotherapy trainings, and also occasionally in practice as well, can prove problematic because of the struggle of the white majority to acknowledge their own cultural narcissism around difference (Turner, 2009, 2016). This is one of the reasons that potential clients and trainees of colour avoid some trainings or practitioners out of a fear that their difference will not be recognised or respected. For example, I often hear comments from minority students about how they often feel unseen or unheard, and when do find their voice and express their pain and dissatisfaction their invisibility is then pathologized.

One means of understanding these experiences is through the lens of whiteness, and for this article white supremacy. To understand how white

supremacy originated in its totality is a longer and more complicated study than I have space for within this article. This does not mean there have not been extensive efforts to discuss this topic though. For example, Biewen (2017), in an excellent series of podcasts, looks at the formation of whiteness from a colonial perspective. Although from an American perspective, this formation of the black race holds echoes and distinct links to those here in the United Kingdom and Europe, his exploration of the many avenues that then led to the construction of the black race as a lesser counterpoint is also well made. His work offers a deep thought provoking explication of just how science, religion, and the political then all function to maintain a sense of white superiority over other races.

This is a point also raised by the British Ghanaian philosopher Appiah (2016) in a series of lectures where he challenges the formation of a racial other as more for the white culture's continued need to define itself against an other, than as a true study of that same other. The importance here is the recognition of the culturally created nature of the racial other, a formulation maintained in the modern era I will argue here not just by the white culture but also by these same racial minorities, echoing Hegel's and Fanon's ideas around the didactic nature of identity and power (Fanon, 2005; Hegel, 1976).

To offer another angle on how white supremacy originated it is also worth returning to the British schooling system, a system dating back a thousand years, and later built to create individuals who were malleable enough to be directed into battle during colonial times. Duffell (2014b) has written extensively about the wounds of those who were educated in boarding schools, and now run our country. His idea, termed the 'entitlement illusion' (Duffell, 2014a, p10) involves shining a light upon a schooling system which encouraged the objectification of the other, and a form of collective personal dissociation which allowed this to flourish. Schaverien (2004, 2011) roots this more within psychodynamic theories, suggesting that the passageway towards privilege was one where attachments were broken early on in life, leaving children with a traumatic wound that often continues into adulthood. This type of education Duffell (2014a) says, means that in the modern era our leaders cannot imagine a type of collective European project. No, they would have to have dominion over it.

This sense of superiority and entitlement though is not just rooted within the upper classes. Given the top-down nature of a good number of cultures in the Global North, this elitism is an aspect of our culture we have often been told to aspire towards achieving. What this means though is that although the idea of an educational system built upon privilege begins with the upper classes, its influence reverberates down through the layers of our differing cultures and societies. For example, through the projection of the American Dream, or the lexicon that immigrants adopt British values, or the valorisation of this same British education

system by rich migrants from the former colonies, these speak of the valuing of the 'eliteness' of those who have already gained privilege and authority over the other. It is a system that is so embedded within our cultural education systems that it is only now, over the past hundred years, that university students have begun to regularly complain about the whiteness of the education they receive (Peters, 2015). Even as a transpersonal psychotherapist, during my training the preponderance of white male heterosexual theorists was often an issue raised by the Others within my year. Yet, this challenging of the curriculum was often problematised or pathologized as a negative aspect of the students' psyche.

This issue is so prevalent within our society, and we are so consumed by it, that we rarely question what else might be behind it; it holds elements of Freud's (1930) ideas that culturally many of us literally seek out subjugation by a majority. It is the maintenance of this superiority that the chart below explores further, with the varying levels of white supremacy and privilege. Figure 1, the Triangle of Overt and Covert White Supremacy (Various, 2005), offers a guide to how white supremacy informs the world that cultural others inhabit. It presents both the more overt forms of supremacy, the hatred of the other, and the more covert forms which are more subtle, and are more culturally acceptable, but I would argue inform the painful daily life of the racialised other.
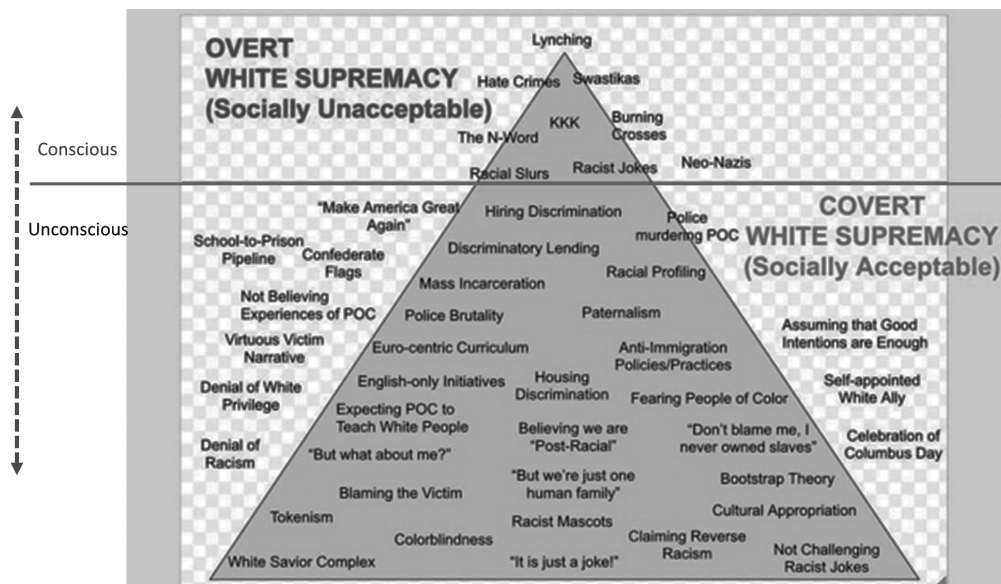

Figure 1: Covert and Overt White Supremacy

For example, in the very last row, Freire (1970) in his excellent work wrote extensively about the White Saviour Complex, presenting it as a form of oppression of the other. In the modern era we see this as much within the need of 'first world

countries' to save the rest of the world, and Spivak (1988) in her excellent writings discusses as much where she considers this inherent need within the colonisers to rescue the other. Yet, within psychotherapy trainings we view the wounded healer as being a desirable aspect of the trainee which trainers can hopefully mould into a fully formed psychotherapist, not recognising that is may also hold covert supremacist connotations.

Another example arises out of tokenism. Tokenism in this context becomes the apparent willingness of white cultures to accept the position of the other into their ranks, but without giving the other any real power, or a voice, with which they might effect change. Complaints about the lack of trainers of colour on psychotherapy courses sit within this bracket, as do the complaints of those trainers who are in positions on courses where their own voices are not heard and they occasionally feel marginalised. Often there can be a sense that the other has to be willing to be assimilated into the already established environment. This is problematic as on the one hand it pays service to the politically correct need for a more diverse workforce, even within psychotherapy, whilst on the other there is a refusal to recognise that assimilation is enforced from a position of power (Brubaker, 2001). It is therefore important when hiring through difference as psychotherapists we consider the considerable change that will come with a different perspective, and through the willingness to change in the organisation growth for both parties can occur.

Next, on training courses I often hear the 'we are just one family' line or claims of colourblindness, uttered by students and sometimes trainers, as a means of trying to placate, depress, or dismiss discussions of difference. Often these are presented from a 'well meaning' place within individuals from white culture, but what they unconsciously express is the covert superiority of that person. An excellent way to express this further is by recognising that if the discussion were about some other presentation from our clients, like abuse, issues around sex, or money, that the need to normalise, hide, or generalise the experience would not occur. In fact, it is a cornerstone of psychotherapy trainings that we should look at difficult presenting issues as they may have invaluable information for us about our clients, and also about ourselves as trainees and practitioners. So, returning to my example, whilst others in the group I was running were uncomfortable around discussions of race in the seminar with myself, it felt important for me to do so with the woman who had apologised for her actions as she herself had recognised the impact on her.

The only reason I have not covered more of these examples in this paper is because of a lack of space, but my point is when we consider how many of the more covert supremacist aspects are culturally accepted, we begin to recognise that there is a strong unconscious bias towards the other which holds sway within

the world we live in, and therefore also within psychotherapy. The issue now is how is this maintained?

White fragility

One of the standout video clips from the Charlottesville troubles, and others, during August 2017, was the chant 'You will not replace us!" as shouted by a group of supremacists as they marched across the University of Virginia (Vice News Tonight on HBO, 2017). These sorts of demonstrations were not just limited to the US. When Saffiyah Khan stood up to the English Defence League in April 2017, she did so in the face of hostility at her difference (Horton, 2017). On the surface of it, whilst it could be assumed that the Virginia chant is about white American culture's belief in its own superiority, what both examples illustrate is an underlying fear of being supplanted by the other be they cultural, gendered, or otherwise.

Although the fear here is one presented in a more conscious fashion, one that sits at the top of the supremacist pyramid presented earlier, this fear of being supplanted is also an unconscious one. Examples of this emerge out of Mantel's (2017) excellent series of talks, which discusses the rewriting of history as a form of othering. For Mantel, this involves the pluralising of historical narratives to fit modern day sensibilities, or the excluding of characters who might have added much but were now seen as extraneous. Building upon her well-made point, I would though add a pair of important caveats. The first is that this need to change the historical past is also borne out of the difficulty the modern-day hero has with sitting with their previous perceived weakness, a weakness which is really created out of a judgement placed upon our past selves by those here in the present. A perfect example emerges out of the film Dunkirk (Nolan, 2017). Telling the story of the three hundred thousand soldiers who had to flee German occupied France between the end of May and early June 1940, the film has justly been accused of covert racism in its failure to recognise the role in the evacuation of three contingents of the Indian Army Service Corps who also played a significant part in these historical events (Soutik, 2017). This then leads into my second point, that this form of othering is often driven by white culture's struggle to acknowledge its own weaknesses and need for the other.

This contrasts with how minorities use their medias outlets, where there are regular presentations of honest accounts of their suppression and the struggles for equality. For example, the film Milk (Van Sant, 2008) depicts the gay rights struggle of that time, and the television series Roots (Beresford, Carter, Noyce, & Van Peebles, 2016), about the passage through slavery. The experiences of watching often range from painful to harrowing, but these accounts are important for the other in the grounding and recognition of their experiences. The problem

with this inability of the white culture to stay with this same sense of reality is that it leads to an avoidance of the truth and an adoption of a supremacist position, a position of superiority over the weaknesses presented both on the screen and then internalised by the watcher.

This fragility in the face of the other is also prevalent within psychotherapy. During a recent seminar I attended on difference and diversity for psychotherapists, one of the three persons of difference in the room spoke up about one of their regular, and often difficult, encounters with racism. After she told her story, one of the white women in the room burst into tears. It is what happened next that interested me most of all, as several other white men and women sided with the woman who was crying, immediately calming her and making everything alright for her, with others speaking angrily to the facilitator accusing her of not doing her job correctly. At this same time, the original woman of colour was just sitting there, alone on her chair, totally ignored by everyone else in the room. The facilitator, with a surprised look on her face, did little to nothing to resolve the situation.

What is interesting about this example, is how the exression of fragility in the white woman led to a backlash against, a silencing and the making invisible of the other. This is cultural fragility at its most potent, a fragility masking microaggressions against the other where they are not seen or acknowledged (Sue et al, 2008; Torres-Harding, Andrade, & Romero Diaz, 2012). Not just in her expression of emotions, but also in her fellow participants' need to rescue her, and also in the impotence of the facilitator to challenge this display. One means of working with this material could have been by challenging the display; by asking all the participants to explore or to sculpt the roles they had adopted, in order for them to recognise just how readily they had disconnected themselves from, and therefore othered, the woman of colour in the room.

I have to acknowledge though, that working with otherness poses distinct unconscious challenges for those from white culture. So, for trainings, trainees and experienced practitioners to underestimate this simple factor, is to leave an enormous blind spot in all our growing cultural awareness. Experiences like this are just one of the reasons why so few persons of colour undertake the challenges of counselling and psychotherapy trainings, as this then leads to the regular complaints I have received from trainees from minority backgrounds about how on their courses, their particular difference was often not acknowledged except in the most perfunctory of fashions.

For white culture, one aspect of their continued conscious and unconscious exclusion of the other emerges out of a fear of the other that is driven by a sense of their own white fragility when faced with the other. Would a greater preponderance of trainers of colour on psychotherapy courses help? Possibly, but it would need for all of them (us) to have considered our own internalised prejudices as well.

It would definitely bring up material about the unconscious supremacist within most trainees, an aspect which could then be worked with. What this cannot be though is another form of the tokenism discussed earlier within this paper. And there would need to be a recognition that, for this to work, that both parties will be changed by the experience.

The challenge here is not an external one where white culture would have to engage with the other, at least not initially. Echoing Bhabha (2004), the fear for the liberal anti-colonial psychotherapist is that it would lead to white culture having to deal with its own cultural shadow; that of its own hatred, denigration, genocidal impulses, suppression, dehumanisation, objectification, and annihilation, of the other. But this leaves one obvious question. How does one do so?

White shame

Returning to the example presented at the beginning of this article, one of the things the participant did want to openly discuss was how her education had influenced her perspectives of difference. From an area of the country with very few minorities, she was sent to a boarding school at 13, an experience she found especially challenging. Yet, although this led to a career path through university and into a well paid career, her sense of the other centred around what she read in the media, and anecdotal conversations with friends. At the end of our time together, several months later, the participant recognised that although not totally rid of her prejudices, I had given her much to consider about how they had come into being.

At the beginning of this article, I located one central root for the creation and maintenance of white supremacy within the educational systems of the UK, and their valorisation by the colonies and other countries in the Global North. To challenge such a system of education is nearby impossible as there not the political will to do so as these schools are financially self-sufficient, thereby removing an enormous financial burden to educate the population from the government (Duffell, 2014a). This then means that the top down nature of Western cultures is never challenged, never observed for its flaws. Yet, one of the more successful aspects of denazification involved its implementation through the German educational system, where to this day the history and the lessons of those two World Wars are taught and absorbed by generations of German children, a whole country building a relationship in stark terms with what would otherwise become its unconscious other.

In a similar vein, psychotherapy at its essence is a relational pursuit based predominantly around the varying relationships with the other (Anderson & Cissna, 1997; Buber, 2010; Hand, 2009; Jacobs, 2003). These may be object

relations based, where the learning about the primary other is an emergent theme of coming into life for a baby, or from a more person-centred perspective where the unconditional regard of the other for the client offers a route towards internalised healing. Where both of these positions, and many others, within psychotherapy suggest a humility within the therapist to engage with the client/other, within a post-colonial discourse this offers a different challenge. For a therapist who still holds, even unconsciously as previously explored, the experiences of being superior to the other, there has to be a willingness to recognise their own unconscious racism and to not only witness the pain and destruction wrought by their actions, but also to feel the shame, or even perhaps pride, at the colonial past.

There are post-colonial theorists who have written about this topic. For example, although Dalal (Dalal, 2012) locates his writing around this subject within the dyadic objectification of the other used to create one's own identity, he does though make the interesting point that there needs to be more discourse within psychotherapy about difference and diversity, discussions which would hopefully decolonise the therapist. His paper was written before the behemoth that is White Supremacy reawakened both in the United States and here in Europe. What none of us could have foreseen was the need for writings that challenge the sheer depth of hatred against the other which I am certain many therapists will continue to hold unless processed.

So whilst the need to consciously decolonise psychotherapy in order to make it more amenable to the other is obvious, what is less apparent is how we do this for the therapists themselves (Nakata, Nakata, Keech, & Bolt, 2012; Phoenix, 2009). Considerations of the skills needed will be part of this process in aiding white therapists in accessing their shame, their guilt, or even the acknowledgement of their pride at their colonial past and will be an essential aspect of bringing to the surface the unconscious supremacist, wherever it sits on the triangle presented earlier. Whilst, for trainees from other cultures a close consideration of their unconscious position in relation to the coloniser is just as worthwhile and fruitful allowing them to challenge their own submissiveness perhaps, or retake the unconscious power given away. Creative techniques such as sand play, or gestalt work, when used properly are excellent means of accessing this type of difficult material, both for the psychotherapy trainee and the psychotherapy trainer, as they allow the shame and distress of discovering the supremacist, or the colonised within to be witnessed and held appropriately. This is important as these ways of working are also less likely to result in the repulsive reactivity I witnessed within the seminar discussed earlier within this article, where the supremacy of the 'vulnerable' white woman led to the exclusion of the other both by her peers and by the facilitator.

It would be naïve of me to suggest that decolonising psychotherapy is an easy process. Or that decolonising psychotherapists then leads to numerous apologies for the aggressions, micro, historical, or otherwise, perpetrated against the other. I believe that as we look at the unconscious internalisations within ourselves, this aspect is as important as any other. And challenging the internalised supremacist within therapists should be an essential aspect of their training in order that we all question what we have been left with as an unconscious legacy of colonialism.

Ending thoughts

I mentioned that one of the main complaints concerning why minorities do not engage with psychotherapy is that it is seen as a white, middle class, profession. Clients often hold a sense that should they enter the therapy room they have to leave their cultural difference behind, or that the therapist will not understand them. This plays into the hands of the unconscious supremacist I will argue here, as it is no different from a person of colour having to hide their accent, their Afrocentric name, their blackness, when they are out at work, with friends, or with partners.

In the group example I began this paper with, one means of working with the vitriol aimed at myself could have been by my adapting to the woman and silencing myself, or making myself subservient to her superiority. This would have held echoes of Fanon's (2005) idea where the colonised suppresses its own sense of otherness out of a need to be recognised by the coloniser. Yet I did not, and through not performing for my participant, we both managed to achieve some level of growth; through my supervision, and through her personal therapy. It is this type of adaptation within the psychotherapy room that needs to be recognised and then challenged; where white therapists recognise the unconscious power projected upon them or question the good compliant nature, or the unconscious acting out of the other, for what it could be, their struggle with the supremacy of the therapist.

It is also hugely important for white therapists to do the deep cultural shadow work needed in order to successfully work with cultural difference; where they recognise their own internalised supremacist; where they sit with the upset this aspect probably still causes when they, for example, don't see the other, or perform acts of tokenism; where they learn to recognise the humanity of the other, and their previous dehumanisation of the other, and feel the shame contained therein.

The aim of this article therefore has been to cajole those liberal therapists, trainees or otherwise, into a closer consideration of their own unconscious supremacist in a way which then allows a route for minority clients to also bring these difficult, sometimes taboo, issues into the therapy room. They are major

aspects of who we are as clients, as trainees, and as practitioners, and if the only time we feel we can truly breathe is when with clients from our own cultural background, then this cultural shadow will never be challenged.

And it is time we did so.

References

Anderson R, Cissna KN (1997). *The Martin Buber - Carl Rogers dialogue. A new transcript with commentary*. New York, NY: State University of New York Press.

Appiah KA (2016). Mistaken Identities: Creed, Country, Color, Culture. *Reith Lectures*.

Beresford B, Carter T, Noyce P, Van Peebles M (2016). *Roots*. USA: History Channel. Retrieved from http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3315386/?ref_=ttco_ql

Bhabha HK (2004). *Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.

Biewen J (2017). Seeing White (Part 2 How race was made?). Retrieved 20 September 2017, from https://www.acast.com/cdspodcas/how-race-was-made-seeing-white-part-2

Brubaker R (2001). The Return of Assimilation? Changing Perspectives on Immigration and Its Sequels in France, Germany and the United States. *Ethnic and Racial Studies 24*(4): 531–548. https://doi.org/10.1080/0141987012004977

Buber M (2010). *I and Thou*. USA: Martino Publishing Limited.

Dalal F (2012). *Thought Paralysis: the virtues of discrimination*. London: Karnac Books Ltd.

Duffell N (2014a). *Wounded Leaders: British elitism and the entitlement illusion*. London: Lone Arrow Press.

Duffell N (2014b, June). G2: why boarding schools make bad leaders: The elite tradition is to send children away at a young age to be educated. But future politicians who suffer this' privileged abandonment' often turn out as bullies or bumblers. *The Guardian* pp1–5.

Fanon F (2005). *Black Skin, White Mask*. Silverman M (ed). UK: Manchester University Press.

Freire P (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Penguin Books Limited.

Freud S (1930). *Civilisation and its Discontents*. London: Penguin Limited.

Hand S (2009). *Emmanuel Levinas (Routledge Critical Thinkers)* (Vol 53). New York, NY: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2265.2011.00689.x

Hegel G (1976). *Phenomenology of Spirit*. USA: Oxford University Press.

Horton H (2017). Saffiyah Khan reunited with woman she stood up for against EDL.

Jacobs M (2003). *Sigmund Freud - Key figures in counselling and psychotherapy* (2nd ed). London: Sage Publications.

Mantel H (2017). *The Iron Maiden*. Retrieved September 28, 2017, from http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08v08m5

Nakata NM, Nakata V, Keech S, Bolt R (2012). Decolonial goals and pedagogies for Indigenous studies. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society 1*(1): 120140.

Nolan C (2017). *Dunkirk* (p1). USA/UK: Syncopy.

Peters MA (2015). Why is my curriculum white? *Educational Philosophy and Theory 47*(7): 641–646. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2015.1037227

Phoenix A (2009). Decolonising practices: negotiating narratives from racialised and gendered experiences of education. *Race Ethnicity and Education 12*(1): 101114.

Schaverien J (2004). Boarding school: the trauma of the privileged child. *The Journal of Analytical Psychology 49*(5): 683–705. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0021-8774.2004.00495.x

Schaverien J (2011). Boarding school syndrome: broken attachments a hidden trauma. *British Journal of Psychotherapy 27*(2): 138–155. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0118.2011.01229.x

Soutik B (2017). Does Christopher Nolan's Dunkirk ignore the role of the Indian Army. Retrieved September 28, 2017, from http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-40724861

Spivak GC (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (pp271–312). https://doi.org/10.1590/S0102-44501999000200012

Sue DW, Nadal KL, Capodilupo CM, Lin AI, Torino GC, Rivera DP (2008). Racial microaggressions against Black Americans: implications for counseling. *Journal of Counseling Development 86*: 330–338. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2008.tb00517.x

Torres-Harding SR, Andrade AL, Romero Diaz CE (2012). The Racial Microaggressions Scale (RMAS): a new scale to measure experiences of racial microaggressions in people of color. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology 18*(2): 153–164. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0027658

Turner D (2009). Strange relationship. *Therapy Today* (December): 26–28.

Turner D (2016). We are all of us Other. *Therapy Today June*(16): 18–21.

van Sant G (2008). *Milk* (p1). USA: Focus Features. Retrieved from http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1013753/companycredits?ref_=ttfc_ql_5

Various (2005). Building a multi-ethnic, inclusive & antiracist organization. Tools for liberation packet for anti-racist activists, allies & critical thinkers. *Safehouse Progressive Alliance for Nonviolence*. Retrieved from https://radicaldiscipleship.net/2017/07/05/white-supremacy-overt-covert/

Vice News Tonight on HBO (2017). Charlottesville: race and terror. Retrieved from https://youtu.be/RIrcB1sAN8I