The Promise of Whiteness: *Fifty Shades of Grey* as White Racial Archive

Moon Charania
Spelman College

Abstract

This paper looks closely at how whiteness—a key demonstrative site of power in Sam Taylor-Johnson's egregious *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015)—scripts a repertoire of behaviours on sexual, gender, racial, and class lines. Positioning *Fifty Shades of Grey* in the post 9/11 globalised media machine, I argue that this internationally bestselling erotic phenomenon is haunted by the master narrative of white racism and heterosexual compulsion, where both are reconstituted as desirable in growing social climate of gay cosmopolitanism and anti-racist awareness. Wrought through a lexicon white superiority, *Fifty Shades* offers us a way of thinking about how dominant fe/male subject(s) employ whiteness as a crucial practice of producing social subordination, and how a close reading of this film underscores the private and public pleasures of white subjectivity, and the inherent stability of white affluent subjectivity, despite its excesses—a position disallowed to queer and colored subjects. Analyzing various narrative moments in the film, I show how Christian Grey, despite his eroticization of violence, is nonetheless secured by distinctive individuality most closely associated with white bodies and the privileges of the white body politic. Grey's irreducible and extradiagetic white presence demand further thinking about how *Fifty Shades* is fundamentally about the pleasures (and promises) of whiteness. I argue that the ultimate duplicity of *Fifty Shades of Grey* is that it seduces viewers through a promise of explicit sex and wealth, even though the film's true offering is much more simple: the promise of whiteness.

Introduction

One of the most popularly circulated images of Sam Taylor-Johnson's film *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015) depicts young, handsome, Christian Grey (Jamie Dornan) in a classic black suit with the top of the white shirt casually unbuttoned.[1] We see his bare, white imperious hand resting at his slim waistline, gently folded into a fist. His fist is wrapped in a tie that dangles downward as a perfected aestheticised symbolic phallus. The top of the movie poster stops just before his eyes. Instead, what we see is his mouth, slightly cocky, his chiseled, yet slightly unshaven cheek line, and the nape of his neck. Toying with a Jekyll and Hyde quality through lighting, the image creates an aura of darkness; the background of the image is opaquely black, with half of his face in light and the other hidden in gray shadow. The image is seductive, stylish, and slightly naughty, emblematizing youth, masculinity, privilege, power, wealth, and whiteness.

This photograph of Grey from *Fifty Shades of Grey* offers a visual mask of white elite heterosexuality, a commodity vision of wealth and sex on and through white bodies. What appears to be primarily an image of class-based masculinity is also represented by a more fundamental image of race. The image reveals most clearly the appeal of masculine aesthetics through the economy of looking—we see Grey as powerful, handsome and mischievous, even as he also remains mysterious, aloof and in control. The image is, of course, meant to be a sort of foreplay, a tease. But within the symbolic lexicon of US culture

and politics, this photograph of Grey does not function merely in the old patriarchal model but utilizes and moves through a network of meanings within the neoliberal economy, new forms of global power, and practices of masculinity. The visual iconography of Grey works in perfect conjunction with this particular ferocious mediatised moment that seeks to (re)constitute the power of whiteness, heterosexuality and the American Dream. Indeed, the colorisation of the movie poster—from white to gray to black—signifies a dominant imaginary that always and already posits white as good, and black and the movement toward black (Gray/Grey) as dubious and dangerous. Part of a hybrid commercial theatre of (excused) whiteness (among other films like *American Sniper* [Dir. Clint Eastwood, 2014], *Zero Dark Thirty* [Dir. Kathryn Bigelow, 2012] and *Sex and in the City 2* [Dir. Michael Patrick King, 2010]), *Fifty Shades of Grey* functions perfectly in the post 9/11 globalized media machine; where whiteness, heterosexuality and American wealth come to occupy both melancholic and privileged positions.

In this article, I look closely at an area of representation—and a key aspect of the *Fifty* series—which is largely absent within academic and popular commentary: the promise of whiteness. I am, then, less concerned with persecuting the character of Christian Grey (and his imagineers) for his perfected patriarchal stance toward women and female sexuality or the wo/men who have taken public or clandestine pleasure in the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon. Instead, I am interested in illuminating the ways in which whiteness in *Fifty Shades* functions as a key site of power, beauty, and redemption and situating each of these vectors alongside and against the current persecution, powerlessness, and pathology directed at black and brown bodies in US film and politics.

Situating *Fifty Shades*: The Missing Discourse of Whiteness

Fifty Shades Of Grey has become Universal's 10th highest-grossing film of all time, worldwide, grossing $546.5M (161 million U.S.). The film is a major Hollywood blockbuster aimed at a mass popular audience, complete with titillating sexuality, romance, beauty and material wealth. Often described as an erotic

phenomenon (even referred to as the *Fifty Shades* effect), the film boosted sales of sex toys, including but not limited to leather whips and handcuffs. The film may appear to have made more 'adventurous' sex mainstream, and has even been blamed for the rise of STI's among older adults (Glanfield 2014). Carrying indulgence and warning all rolled into one story, the heuristic impulse that sits at the center of *Fifty* revolves around the main character, Anastasia Steele (Dakota Johnson), a bright-eyed, sexually innocent college student who enters a tormeted and (potentially) violent sexual affair with sexually kinky, BDSM-oriented and wealthy Christian Grey. The film, like E.L. James' erotic novel, has aroused anger in some feminist cultural critics and tepid distaste in others, ranging from critiques of the film's anti-feminist message and its romanticization of male power, to the perfected female docility and mere utter boredom. Feminist cultural critic Gail Dines (2015) writes that few things are more dull than two hours of *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

In 2013, just two years earlier, the novel's popularity sparked so much debate among feminist, media and sexualities scholars that *Feminist Media Studies* (a Taylor and Francis Journal) created a special issue on *Fifty Shades of Grey*. In this issue, *Fifty* is positioned as a complex text and cultural commentary on feminism, sexuality, relationships, and perceptions of sexual normalcy. Scholars in this volume engage in wide-ranging and theoretically nuanced analysis of erotica and consumer culture, along with the eroticisation of patriarchal violence and the politics of hetero-normativity; it even includes a dynamic Deleuzean reading (Silva and Mendez 2013). Much of the criticism around *Fifty Shades* centers on the power dynamics of gender, sexuality and class, the politics of spectatorship, and the pleasure of public/private erotica. What has remained unexamined, however, is how the consumption of *Fifty Shades of Grey* is also clearly a consumption of whiteness.

In my work, the question of cultural politics is inseparable from the question of transnational racial politics or contemporary geopolitics. Visual criticism and political criticism are not disparate enterprises or divorced materialities but in fact are process largely indebted to each other for legitimacy, validation

and hubris. *Fifty Shades*' status as an internationally bestselling erotic phenomenon must be situated in the broader context of an ongoing and deeply racialised war, the visible brutality directed at Muslims globally and Black citisens domestically, the rise of the tolerance 'trap' around LBGT lives and rights, and the varying transnational movements that usurp neat articulations of rights, justice and power (Walters 2014; McKenzie 2014). The popular protagonists of the film (Christian Grey and Anastasia Steele) are haunted by, yet participate in the master narrative of white racism and heterosexual compulsion, where both are reconstituted as desirable in a growing social climate of gay cosmopolitanism and anti-racist awareness. In fact, I would argue, that the popular structure of heterosexual desire formulated and mobilised in *Fifty Shades of Grey* relies on a conception of a subject who is *a priori* anti-Black/Brown/*Other.*

Specifically, in the U.S. context of the Black Lives Matter movement and within U.S. LGBT rights discourses, there appears to be a strong impulsive desire to redeem and reinvent whiteness and heterosexuality. A mere look at the whiteness of the LBGT marriage movement in the U.S. speaks volumes. For instance, there is a kind of global cosmopolitanism around being gay, which becomes an important flashpoint of organising globally. However, the proliferation of LGBT rights is also implicated in other modes of silent violence, such as the increasing racialisation of the Muslim body, which occurs precisely alongside the proliferation of the de-embodiment of the queer body (now increasingly a liberal subject disembodied from his/her queerness). This juxtaposition makes it patently clear that LGBT liberation also works to distract attention from other intense forms of racialised regulation that seeks to constrict the sexual and familial practices of all bodies deemed unsuitable for or to the state (Puar 2006; Alexander 2005). As heteronormativity in all its forms becomes stronger, the sexual deviant is further circumscribed, ready to be pinned down and studied in a later age. We know that LGBT movements in the U.S. have been largely successful—from the recent celebratory ethos around Caitlyn Jenner to the general consensus that LGBT citizens should have access to the institution of marriage. Liberal inclusion,

however, here is imbricated with a kind of racism. Hence, such accomplishments too require our close attention. We must continue to ask: for whom are these progressive accomplishments triumphs? And at whose expense?

Inversely, the broader regulation of sexuality in Black and Brown lives is fundamentally delimited in discourse and prohibited and isolated from popular movements. Here, we can look specifically at the ways that the events of 9/11 led to a burgeoning of racist images, films and of course, state sanctioned forms of violence against Muslims. While I want to work against any American exceptionalism in my reference to the events of 9/11, I want to note that it is useful index of a certain kind of rupture for periodisation, or as Inderpal Grewal (2005) notes, a fulfillment of earlier histories of Islamophobia, now transnationalised and popularised. Popular films like *Sex and The City 2*, *Zero Dark Thirty* and *American Sniper,* as well as the award-winning Showtime television series *Homeland* (2011-) all function as active and power-bearing transnational media of knowledge production about the Muslim/brown *other* that serve as both cultural entertainment and technologies of political power. These popular films mobilize the narrative spectacle of Muslim/brown subjects and the perfected feminism of the white west. In fact, at least three of these examples have powerful white women. These cinematic sites demonstrate that even something as incidental as mainstream entertainment codifies forms of domination masked as simultaneous (Muslim) documentation and (white) entertainment. The popularity and controversy surrounding these films exceptionalise 9/11 as a unique event of terror against American lives and rationalise the mechanism of violence and degradation that have been mobilised against Muslims in the past 14 years.

The grandeur, then, of *Fifty Shades* only makes sense through an erasure of this moment—a disavowal of US politics and war, coloured and queer bodies, and the failure of the American Dream while simultaneously avowing white liberality, gentility, and (faux) feminist white womanhood (the subject that can and will walk away from her own sexual disempowerment). When we read *Fifty Shades* as part

of a white racial archive, we must resist the common literal reading, which means an active disbelief in the necessary alignment of pleasure (here located in wealthy and white heterosexuality) and romance (through which the darker side of whiteness can be reformed). We must, instead, consider how whiteness circulates within *Fifty Shades* and what it allows. To deconstruct *Fifty Shades* is to demystify the exposure the film received, to uncover the material interests at stake in the film's (quasi/anti) feminist symbolization and to ask: through *Fifty*, what fantasies of whiteness and sexuality and Americanism advance and what is deferred, displaced, defeated?

My own inculcation into *Fifty Shades* came from my students, who would incessantly solicit my opinion. In a cultural studies course titled 'Girls', where we engaged in a very critical discussion around Stephanie Myers' *Twilight* series (as girls' narrative), *Fifty Shades of Grey* was, I suppose, bound to come up. My students were fans of the film but as students of sociology and women's studies, many of whom were women of colour, they simultaneously articulated a discomfort and even shame for watching and enjoying the film. It is common knowledge that E.L. James, *Fifty Shades* trilogy was originally conceived as fan fiction of the vampire *Twilight* series and that the *Fifty Shades* characters (Anastasia, Christian Grey, and even the mostly invisible racial sidekick, Jose) are based on *Twilight* characters. Stephanie Meyer's (2005) series, *Twilight*, pivots off the story of a young white teenage girl, Bella, who falls in love with blood-sucking, model-esque vampire Edward, who has to rival with Jacob (a Native American who is really a werewolf—in fact, we learn, they all are) for Bella's love. The triumph, unsurprisingly, belongs to Edward who is glowingly white and wealthy. On a literal level, *Fifty Shades* (like its *Twilight* inspiration), 'validates white patriarchal capitalism that suggests that normative heterosexuality is crucial to a successful society while substantiating viewers' belief that love conquers all' (Driscoll 2012: 96). Ana (like Bella) is associated with feminine innocence and coming-of-age, Grey (like Edward) is associated with wealth, worldliness and arrival. However, the fandom around *Fifty Shades* and its adolescent predecessor *Twilight* cannot simply be located in the realm of sexual and gender pleasure. It must also be firmly questioned within a critical race discourse in this particular moment wherein white identity and its insistent relationship to power and beauty is increasingly coming into question in both political and cultural fields.

Fifty Shades of White (Supremacy): *Fifty* as Racial Document

Richard Dyer (1997), in his groundbreaking book *White*, takes on the matter of whiteness from the eighteenth century Victorian era to 1990's Hollywood cinema, and underscores the centrality—in fact, inescapability—of whiteness to western representations. Dyer (1997: 207) points out that, 'White people have a colour but it is a colour that also signifies the absence of colour, itself a characteristic of life and presence'. Whiteness, Dyer (1997, 207) continues, reproduces itself as whiteness 'in all texts at all times', and not just when set against the racialised other or exclusively in texts that are about racial difference or domination.

For instance, in a provocative exploration of American archival photography, Shawn Michelle Smith (1999) argues that the self-defining mechanism of American photography has been its power to maintain middle-class white supremacy even as both whiteness and class appear invisible. This is because whiteness, according to Smith (1999), secures its cultural power by seeming to do/be nothing at all, by being invisible. Historical photographs of early America are nonetheless racial documents that reinstate power even as they deny it. Exploring a text notable for the absence of people of colour allows a focus on racial whiteness, which is not dependent on an othered identity to define itself, and reveals the powerful ways white raciality is enlisted as a mechanism of power and beauty (Bernardi 2007; Bernstein 2014; Smith 1999).

In *Fifty Shades of Grey*, a film where almost every character we meet is white, to recognise the power of whiteness *qua* whiteness becomes difficult since there is an almost total absence of people of colour, which bespeaks a dominant epistemology: that whiteness is only recognised by its invert - a colour. But, whiteness, as a key demonstrative site of power in *Fifty Shades*, scripts a repertoire of behaviours on sexual, gender, racial, and class lines. The specificity

of whiteness in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, even though the film seems to not notice its own embodiment of it, suggests that cultural registers of power continue to rely on the invisibility of whiteness through particular aspects of the bodies of white people in representation: the white muscular yet vulnerable body, the white beauty project, the aestheticised technologies of whiteness and white melancholy.

Like the titillating promotional image with which I opened, the film, *Fifty Shades* speaks to a feminine/ised audience, but with a lexicon wrought through white superiority. The untethered success of *Fifty Shades* offers us a way of thinking about how dominant fe/male subject(s) employ whiteness as a crucial practice of producing social subordination. A close reading of this film underscores the private and public pleasures of white subjectivity, and the inherent stability of white affluent subjectivity, despite of and even in spite of its excesses—a position disallowed to queer and coloured subjects. At first glance, it does appear that the film certainly plays on a light-hearted pathologisation of Grey's sexual desire and in fact, the music of the film, from Beyoncé's 'Crazy in Love' to Laura Welsh's 'Undiscovered', has the effect of enhancing the potentially dark underbelly of *Fifty Shades*. Yet Christian Grey—tall, handsome and wealthy—is nonetheless secured by distinctive individuality most closely associated with white bodies and the privileges of the white body politic.

As the audience gets to know Christian Grey, we learn a few things: he had a violent/neglectful childhood due to a 'crack mom' (with cigarette burn scars on his chest), he was seduced at the tender age of 15 into a coercive D/s relationship with a much older woman; and that he, as an adult, inverted his adolescent sexual awakening into a more desirable position in which he plays the 'D'. We also come to see his 'red room of pain', ornately constructed with whips, handcuff, tables, benches, etc. It becomes clear simultaneously to both young and sexually naïve Anastasia Steele and her enamored audience that she will have to subject herself to these whips and toys in order to satiate her new lover.

But in *Fifty Shades*, Grey's Hyde-esqe sexual quality is softened in a number ways. Certainly Grey

plays out the fantasy of the 'great white man': he is handsome, wealthy, powerful, well-spoken, appears to be self-made (although his adopted family also appears wealthy), but he is also the perfect neoliberal contemporary of this archetype—feminised by varying practices, such as music, conflicting emotions, and a history that narrates his need for (sexual) control through male victimhood. Grey's socially sanctioned power to control Ana with both money and sex as a way to manage his own sexual anxieties is framed less as pathology, and more as emotional vulnerability, as the audience comes to see Grey plunged into and living a life of emotional conflict. In one moment, he spanks her (hard) as foreplay and moves on to 'hard fucking'; in the next moment, we see him contemplatively and melancholically playing Bach on the piano. Grey, here, is presented as vulnerable, even tender, a subtle play on the racial logic of white vulnerability. This sympathetic framing of Grey is categorically parallel to cultural and political framings of white subjectivity, where pathology, excess and melancholy are individualised, if and when they cannot be deposited onto othered bodies/subjects.

Think, for example, of the 2003 Abu Ghraib tortures, where the brutal abuse and sexual humiliation of Iraqi detainees by white U.S. soldiers led to an international scandal. Specifically, torture included mimicking sex acts closely associated with 'deviant' sexuality and sexual excess such as sodomy and oral sex, as well as S/M practices of bondage, leashing, and hooding. Prisoners (including women and children—although these photographs were not among the released) were raped, stripped, sexually assaulted and humiliated; forced to stir vats of feces until they passed out and to witness the torture of others: women were forced to watch men being abused and men were forced to watch women being abused (McClintock 2009). According to McClintock (2009), over 16,000 photographs were taken, of which only a handful entered public circulation. Of that handful, only two have achieved iconic status: one of an Iraqi prisoner standing on a box with electric wires attached to his genitals, toes and fingers, and one of prison guard Lynndie England holding a wounded Iraqi prisoner on a leash.

We can only look at a more recent example

of the 2014 December-released Senate Intelligence Report on the CIA's Use of Torture. According to *New York Times* writer Jeremy Ashkenas (2014), the report gives a macabre accounting of some of the grisliest techniques that the C.I.A. used to torture terrorism suspects, including 'rectal feeding' or 'rectal hydration'—a technique that the C.I.A.'s chief of interrogations described as a way to exert 'total control over the detainee'. The portion of the report that was released—the 480-page executive summary—'paints a haunting picture of brutality that shocks the conscience, and demolishes the myth that torture was effective, limited in scope and only perpetrated by a few rogue actors. Instead, the report reveals the brutal, systematic and sanctioned nature of the program' (Carasik 2014). *New York Times* writer Mark Mazetti (2014) reported, for example, 'Mr. Obama welcomed the release of the report, but in a written statement made sure to praise the C.I.A. employees as "patriots" to whom "we owe a profound debt of gratitude" for trying to protect the country'. In both cases—Abu Ghraib and CIA report's release—the subsequent political discourse categorically shifted from U.S. soldiers who tortured innocent brown Muslim men to American patriots following (unfortunate) orders to feminise terrorists (McClintock 2009; Puar 2007; Sjoberg and Gentry 2010). In fact, even as I write this, seven months after the Senate Intelligence Committee released its exhaustive and gruesome report, not one person involved is paying any sort of consequences—not the former torturers or their superiors, or even the CIA officials who improperly searched the computers that Senate investigators used to construct the study (Watkins 2015).

The documented realities of the report (alongside the widely circulated photographs of Abu Ghraib) reveal an inexplicable but evident infatuation with the brown body and violence, where brown bodies are the perfected repositories of political violence, whose humanity is incomprehensible because it is choreographed by a discourse of white fear. In conjunction with this white fear, even the U.S. soldier's excessive violence productively constitutes him/her as more vulnerable than the racialised *other* on which s/he enacts violence. The displacement of violence onto brown bodies does not escape the

violence enacted, but it secures the white subject and body as always and already moral (if melancholic) agent. The white U.S. soldiers emerge, individually and collectivity, as heroes—the merger of white and American produces the patriot par excellence, even in the face of brutally violent political revelations.

Similarly, like the cover image of the film, every moment we see Christian Grey (clean, suited, worldly) harnesses a patriotic performance to a single racialised bloodline—white American. In fact, in all the filmic moments, even when he is half-clothed, the imagined stability of the white male body comes to its audience. *Fifty Shades'* focus on a white male affluent character—presented as unruly, powerful, potentially threatening, and wildly libidinal—speaks to a process of masculinisation written into the filmic text. But the image of both excess wealth and excess sexual power also performs a racial function, in much the same way that photographs of brown and black men come to signify terror in a culture permeated by violent Islamophobia and racism. Both processes (endowed by both state and cultural apparatuses) position racialised bodies as always and already excessive. This is implicit in popular news images, such as the October 2008 *Newsweek*, naming Pakistan as 'the most dangerous place on earth'[2]; or the September 2012 *Newsweek*, following the US embassy bombings in Libya titled 'Muslim Rage'[3]. In both moments, Newsweek depicted a mass of angry, brown men in protest, visually representing brown male corporeality as aggressive, dirty, barbaric and ultimately dangerous to US/Western democracy. We can also turn to popular Hollywood films, such as *Zero Dark Thirty* and *American Sniper*, where both films position brown Muslim bodies as commodities to perform, what Saidiya Hartman calls economies of 'pleasure and terror' (1997: 39). Hartman (1997) argues that formations of terror and enjoyment are produced simultaneously when it comes to racialised subjects and their colonial/neocolonial subordination. This complicated nexus of terror and enjoyment allows for the presentation of brown masculinity as engendering a state of emergency to/for the U.S. in such a way that produces the unstable racialised subject as both state document and social entertainment. This is the sublimated backdrop in which *Fifty*

Shades of Grey becomes both palatable and desirable. Indeed, I would say, that *Fifty* is a public rehearsal of the stability of the white (sexual) subject.

The Mastery (Or Melancholy) of White Masculinity: A Close-Up Of Christian Grey

Inversely, it is important to note that neither Christian Grey nor Anastasia Steele invoke an economy of white power despite the fact that the film, from beginning to end, is rife with all forms of whiteness —wealth, beauty, superiority, the ability to humiliate the other, and the choice to walk away from one's humiliation. In *Fifty Shades*, Christian Grey has complete mastery over the (feminine/racialised) *other*; over Anastasia Steele. Dyer (1997) argues that that only a hard, visibly contoured body can resist being submerged into femininity. We certainly see this in the abuses/images of Abu Ghraib and the CIA report, where the racialised torture of Muslim men occurred and worked through a tactical feminisation of the brown body. Vulnerable and queer brownness is penetrated by white militarised toughness, regardless of the gender of the soldier. In image after image, the white body is clearly distinguished from the terrorist *other*: hard not slack, clothed not naked, muscular not flaccid, fit not fat, postured not curved over. The spectre of the homosexual looms at a close distance as brown men are feminised in the service of white empire. In Christian Grey's case, this tactic is less blatant and more insidious.

We learn that from ages 15 to 21 Grey was the practicing (but unwilling, or at least young and confused) submissive to an older woman (referenced through the clear cultural/cinematic reference of Mrs. Robinson). For all the rhetoric of Grey's masculinity, ranging from phallic helicopters to ties and whips, his own submersion as a feminine bottom positions him into the horror that is both femininity and non-whiteness. Embattled in and against this psycho-pathologised childhood, Grey's body (and self) is an achieved body: worked at, planned and suffered for. His pain room, too, is a symbol of this achieved body. I am suggesting here that Grey's idealised white masculinity is a model in which anxieties about the integrity and survival of the white self are expressed through fantasmic fears of total passivity

and invasion of women, the masses, and the racial inferiors. Achievement, then, in the corporeal, sexual and capitalist domains, position Grey as perfect hegemonic subject.

But both Grey's visible chest scars on his chiseled body and his intrinsic desire to sexually/ violently dominate women hint at a hidden darkness in Grey's otherwise very hegemonic subjectivity. We learn, for example, that Grey's white body has suffered. The spectacle of white male suffering is certainly part of the American collective consciousness (from Christ to Rocky and Rambo and onto the more recent Jason Bourne phenomenon or the Liam Neeson *Taken* franchise) but in all figures, the remediably corporeal state of white pain transcends into a space of dignity and control (Dyer 1997; McClintock 1995/2009). White association with transcendence takes on material form in *Fifty Shades*—Grey is both a violent sexual subject and a subject who has been exposed to sexual violence.

In Grey's case, this mastery, or even the desire for this mastery, is not presented as problematic but rather as indicative of Grey's melancholic position. Christian Grey is, undeniably, often presented as melancholic. Heterosexual gender identity formation, Freud purports, is itself a melancholic process. In Freud (1997), the melancholic's 'exotic cathexis of his object...undergoes a twofold fate: a part of it regresses to identification, but the other part...is reduced to the stage of sadism' (Freud 1997: 173). Freud and the machinery of psychoanalysis is ultimately supportive of Grey's fetishistic mastery of heterosexuality-masculine identity formation which emerges from the threat of castration; and the ability, despite this, to literally be phallic at all times in all ways, and to consistently bear desire in masculine mode through a variety of artificial phalluses. But alongside this perfected identification, the melancholic receives gratification from a sadism directed toward the other-within. We know from Freud that desire is what remains unsatisfied when need is met, thus melancholy bears precisely on Greys' heterosexual identity in much that same way that violent desire both sexually titillates and emotionally tears up our male protagonist (Thwaites 2007).

Anne Cheng (2001) suggests the melancholics'

relationship to the object is not just love or nostalgia, but also resentment. The melancholic is melancholic not just because s/he experienced a loss, but because s/he has introjected that which s/he now reviles—here the feminine, the queer, the raced *other*. This dimension of heterosexual melancholy may explain the intensity with which the contemporary hetero-sexual visual archive, here *Fifty Shades*, inherently re-lies on either the repelling or the compelling nature of (sexual) excess. Grey's masculine subject formation is furnished, in large part, through heterosexuality, where erotic darkness affirms true masculinity, while his ability to control it or strategically enact it (under very elaborately constructed and controlled circum-stances) affirms his exemplary whiteness. But Grey's melancholy is both a function of his heterosexual formation and his whiteness. In *Fifty Shades*, mel-ancholy functions as a psychologising social glue to explain Grey's desire for violent sex and his desire to wholly possess Ana. Melancholy, as an affective and libidinal effect of the film, keeps intact the unthreat-ening assumption of whiteness.

Fifty Shades draws from nineteenth century racialist thought that repeatedly intertwines aesthet-ics and morality. Dark desires are certainly part of the story of whiteness, but as what whiteness has to struggle against and rise above. This is certainly the narrative impulse of the film; Grey rising above the trenches of his pleasure-seeking world (embodied in the red room of pain) no matter how sumptuous and opulent he has made it, or Ana walking away from Grey's inability to unhinge pleasure from pain. Both possibilities come to be shaped by a racial and class logic. The racialised repository of dark desires is, thus, incited and successfully redirected.

In *Fifty Shades*, white excess (e.g. wealth, beauty, power, and sex) is disarticulated even as it is instrumentalised through a whole repertoire of prac-tices. But, again, like the white muscular male body that is in fact vulnerable, the thrill of white excess (from phallic helicopters and windjammers to whips and handcuffs) is also assuaged. We see this in the example of post-coital Christian Grey playing Bach at the piano, his expression sad and deep. This moment perfectly performs both race and class. Classical mu-sic is key trope that co-opts aesthetics into race,

'reflecting the numinous, collective spirit of white western moderns' (Dyer 1999: 49). As a hegemonic index of high taste, Grey's post-sex piano playing suggestively moderates the violence of his heterosex-uality and wraps him in a perfected white masculin-ity. In the film, Ana distantly watches Grey playing the piano and, somewhat rhetorically, queries, 'You play the piano?'. She quickly answers her own ques-tion, 'Of course, you play the piano'. Yes, she may be dumb enough to ask if he plays the piano when he clearly is playing the piano. But the awkward naivety in Ana's voice can also be read as indicative of Chris-tian Grey's predictability as elite white male, even as we also witness that she is duly impressed. The cultural value of whiteness in this scene—feminine naivety and awe alongside masculine assurance and capital —is subtle yet promises a libidinal investment in white subjectivity. Thus racial fantasy thematises *Fifty Shades*. It operates as a double disguise; it seems to be obsessively outside of the filmic narrative, when in fact it is generative of the story itself. The story never claims to be about whiteness, but without whiteness or white subjects, could we have this story of eroticized violent heterosexuality? And would it be characterized by the same mainstream popularity and excitement?

Racial Innocence: Deconstructing White Beauty In
Fifty Shades
Whiteness, Richard Dyer (1997) tells us, is an aspira-tional structure, requiring ideals of humanity. Thus, the tale of *Fifty Shades* allows Grey to play out not only the white male position, but also more crucially that identification with the passive woman, now with a neoliberal twist. We certainly see this in Ana. Her beauty (project) shifts from a young, cardigan-wear-ing clumsy college girl who makes self-deprecating comments, like 'There's really not much to know about me—I mean, look at me', to flirtatiously ne-gotiating the submissive contract, only to eventually walk away from it as a wholly confident and beau-tifully-dressed attractive woman. The snowy white demeanour of Ana binds her to beauty even when she articulates varyingly familiar middle-class fem-inine insecurities and what is generally perceived as fashion incompetence.

Laura Mulvey (1989) tells us that while it is said analysing pleasure or beauty destroys it, that is the intent of feminist media studies. We know that in part, Ana's achievement of beauty comes from Grey's constant gifting of clothes and cars and his insistence that she maintain a particular body type. Nonetheless, I would argue, that beauty promises a totalisation of identity, constituting Ana's identity formation from ugly duckling to beautiful swan. Anne Cheng points out, 'beauty promises an identity of wholeness and commensurability' (2001: 55), even as it is a project that both announces itself and denies its operations. But this logic is undergirded by racial ideals, where Ana performs the protocols of beauty, literally rising from the abyss of anti-aesthetics into the threshold of white beauty and heterosexual desirability. Ana's femininity operates as both heterosexual symbolic norm and a generative imaginative matrix, in that she can come to aestheticised femininity in a celebrated and agentic fashion. Thus, there is joy and cheekiness in Ana's performance precisely because hers is a transmutable body that can be made ideal and empowered, the perfect movement from abject female into celebrated materiality. Her beauty most visibly plays out in her red-lipsticked visage (this, of course, appears non-deliberate), which also marks Ana's empowerment as a woman learning to (sexually) relish herself. As audience, we relish her relishing herself, with and through Grey. But it seems theoretically facile to dismiss that pleasure as purely sexual or as a side effect of the erotic tale. There is a compelling sense of enjoyment and plenitude in the sex scenes that make it hard to read that pleasure as anything other than solely sexual. But the movie medium, the dynamics of spectatorship and Grey's irreducible and extradiagetic white presence (even though that whiteness is coded with wealth) demand further thinking about how *Fifty Shades* is fundamentally about the pleasures (and promises) of whiteness.

Anastasia, described in the novel and displayed in the film as beautiful, innocent and wanting, exemplifies the twenty-first century woman who functions as object of display for the envious and admiring gaze of an entire community. However, in the film, she can be met one-on-one, looked at face-to-

face and erotically touched only by those of the very elite classes. Here, the erotic novel-turned-film also obviously plays on the longstanding fascination with white female virginity. Ana's sexual untouchedness is derivative of and generative from her whiteness. Part of longstanding western traditions, the virgin is an important role in public and popular culture, a recognized identity of a particular kind of (white) woman (Brumberg 1997; Bordo 1993; Rowland 2004). However, within the contemporary patriarchal economy, Ana's virginity is seen as exceptional and unusual but its desirability remains intact. Literally, in the film, Christian Grey fucks the virgin out of Ana, before subjecting her to his more exclusive erotic tastes (and of course, lest we forget it, the virgin Ana achieves an orgasm the first time she has intercourse). In this way, Ana and Christian's relationship is set against such a fetishised and almost clichéd materialistic context, which includes obsessive emotionality, excess materiality and perfected heterosexuality. She is both fictive subject in an upper-class sexual scenario in which Grey is the author and Ana is agent of her own (sexual) life, where she trespasses the bounds of her (white) womanhood into the contradictions and pleasures of modern liberal feminist life.

It is important to note here that much of the feminist criticism around *Fifty* has centered on Ana as the quintessential anti-feminist figure; she is submissive, naïve, romanticises violence, is easily seduced by masculine power and capitalist wealth, and (hetero)sexually captivated by Grey. As narrating subject in the twenty-first century, feminist readers, writers and viewers demand more from Ana. Thus, we are disappointed. But Ana as anti-feminist figure also needs to be situated with the discourses of postfeminism—where feminism, rather than being denied or dismissed (in the Faludian anti-feminist backlash sort of way) is being instrumentalised to install a whole new repertoire of meanings and subjectivities (McRobbie 2008). Postfeminism emerges at the nexus of the liberalisation of women's choices (e.g. female individualism), consumer driven femininity (e.g. meritocratic capitalism), and the rise of neoconservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life (e.g. the rise of chastity programs throughout the US). The postfeminist subject, in part, emerges

within this knotted array of entanglements and assemblages. Ana, is, in effect, the perfect postfeminist figure. She is intelligent and ambitious even in her awkwardness, interested in graduate studies although conventionally self-doubting, and appears to have a social consciousness, although this is airbrushed out of existence. Educated in irony, schooled in middle-class feminine self-deprecation and visually appealing, Ana has the vantage point of race, class and sexuality. Part of the new regime of gender, Ana can 'choose' to enter and exit her D/s relationship, negotiate the terms of her pain, and regulate the conditions of Grey's violent desires. Moreover, Ana (as characteristic of all postfeminist subjects) is surveilled only by herself and by those whom she desires. But postfeminism hereto also relies on racial fantasy, as in *Fifty Shades*, we learn that (only) whites have a constant zone of privacy around them no prying eyes can violate.

In the wider representation of whiteness, the very struggle of whiteness (against dark desire) is often symbolised by a variety of tropes, such as white clothing, settings, and lighting (Cheng 2001; Dyer 1999; Landua and Kaspin 2002). In *Fifty Shades*, we see this through four specific fetishes, which recur almost ritualistically throughout the film: Grey himself, white clothing, white nudity, and translucent mirrors. After their first sexual encounter, we see Ana in a starched white shirt (which we are to presume is Grey's) preparing breakfast. Grey surfaces in the scene, shirtless, pinkish, sleepy and tender, somewhat grudgingly agreeing to Ana's laboriously prepared breakfast. The camera cuts to a close up of his chest, drawing us into his vulnerability specifically through white flesh—the camera closes in and moves out—drawing our attention to and away from Grey's tiny scars. All romantic tropes in order, the scene invites the audience into idealised human emotionality, where everything but Ana's dark hair fetishistically promises the white American Dream.

In a later bath scene—the setting feeds off of what Dyer refers to as an 'epistemology of light' (1997: 108)—white tiled bathroom, white marbled wall, white ceramic tub, a burning white candle, white towels, and Ana slowly disrobing from Grey's borrowed white shirt as it slips off her glowing white

body. Her body is flawless, slender, slight curved, silky. Ana is black-haired but has the whitest of white faces and limbs, and even when her breasts are bared and her naked body is revealed, she is surrounded by white lighting, white tubs, white sheets, shirts, towels, etc.

In another scene, Ana walks out partially wrapped in a sheet to find Grey playing the piano. Here, she is the angelically glowing white woman, a perfected Hollywood image that fixes her beauty and sensuality in the translucent whiteness of her body, colored only by tender blushes, light brown nipples, her disheveled brown hair, and a hint of unshaven pubic hair. While Grey may provide lustful fantasies for women, the whiteness of Ana is the true sight of erotica as her paleness is embedded in all aspects of the sexualised visual and cinematographic tropes. Glow is a key quality in idealised representations of white women (Dyer 1997; McClintock 1995). The film demands that the viewer rests his/her gaze on the naked female body, confirming that the project of dominance is always about desire, and that desire is always about sex, and that sex is always about racial and gender power and that both are contingent upon particular representations of women's bodies. *Fifty* rehearses the proverbial story that white women are the objects of the (white) male gaze and white women are also (or can be) assiduously protected from it.

Ana is the fetish object par excellence, because she can be both fetishised on one moment and just as quickly gain subjectification in another. She eases the erotic tension of the film's visual and romance narrative, even as she gives rise to it. Even from a critical vantage point, viewers are caught within this frame. It is a story of a powerful subject looking upon a sexual object, and consuming and controlling it, one in which sex is about power and other desires are merely deflections or projections, or both. All these narrative and filmic forms reflect, reveal and even play on the straight, socially established interpretation of contemporary desires and economies of white success, which then control the audiences' ways of looking and enjoying. Popular culture that toys with the transmutability of white beauty into white power lends a veneer of harmlessness, or racial innocence, but never quite suppresses the menace.

The Promise of Whiteness

In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant proposes that the 'object of desire really is about something that is not "quite" an object, maybe not an object at all, but rather "a cluster of promises' (2011: 24). Thus, when we talk about an object of desire we are, in actuality, talking about a cluster of promises, something(s) or someone made possible to us, for us. Consequently, to look at the popularity and cult-status possibility of *Fifty Shades* is to dis-align with the objects of desire in the film—sex, eroticism, wealth and romance—and rather, to recognise that the objects of desire are, in fact, not objects at all, but a cluster of promises around white power and continuity.

When, at the end of film, Ana challenges Grey to show her his boundaries (of pain), we have in front of us a profoundly melancholic but important scene. We are finally taken into Grey's private desires and fantasies, where he can draw the line between violence and sex. Grey demonstrates to Ana what he means by pain and the limits of pain. She, having initiated the conversation, agrees to being lashed six times, naked, spread-eagled and face down on the table in the red room of pain. Grey, fully clothed, proceeds to whip her, both of them counting out loud with each lash, which has the effect of keeping Grey from looking like a total monster. He will, we know, stop at six. We wait. We watch. We anticipate. Ana cries after the second lash. Christian appears completely turned on and tortured with each lash. She is subjected to his controlled physical violence but he is the true victim, titillated and tortured by his twisted desires, or as Grey articulates, his 'fifty shades of fucked up'. The scene certainly speaks to Grey's sexual power and Ana's assertive curiosity, but both affective positions are situated as tragic. Nevertheless, the voyeuristic spectacle of Grey lashing Ana's face-down, spread-eagled naked body begs an analysis of the cult of white elite heterosexuality and the limitless nature of this position.

Grey's pleasure in lashing Ana is inescapably ensnared with both masculine agency and victimhood, which allows white bodies, Ana's and Christian's, to be redressed; anguished yet regained, humiliated yet restored. Stories about white humiliation have circulated widely through popular lore and familiar images. They often play out, as I've argued, through Hollywood film stereotype of the war veteran (think here of Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper*), whose wounded body and psyche represent the nation's honour. Our libidinal attachment to the US as un/humiliatable versus the other as always and already humiliated certainly directs today's racial logic in the global war, but also starkly captures the popular curiosity around this scene in *Fifty Shades*. Indeed, I would say, to analyse both alongside one another, is to be in the dreadful company of white racial paranoia and gleeful misogyny.

In her interrogation of sex on silver screen, Linda Williams states: 'sex in movies is especially volatile: it can arouse, fascinate, disgust, bore, instruct and incite. Yet it can also distance us from the immediate, proximate experience of touching and feeling within our own bodies' (2008: 1). As a basis of white affect, humiliation exacerbates collective feelings of vulnerability or powerlessness in the citizenry. But in *Fifty*, Ana's humiliation reifies the idea of a sexual submissive and functions as a pathway to heterosexual protection and emotional harmony with Grey. In the heterosexual pop-psychologised palate, sexually naïve Ana being whipped by powerful Christian Grey functions unsurprisingly as erotica; titillating even if it is a touch uncomfortable. At the very least, women in theatres across the globe, are put in the odd position of witnessing (and perhaps escaping or enjoying) the systemic sexual humiliation of another woman. However, despite the violence and the spectacle of that violence, neither Ana (who allows herself to be whipped) nor Grey (who enjoys whipping Ana) appears excessive, even though he leaves her bleeding and bruised. The presence of limitations (only six lashes) and prohibitions (she can tell him to stop although she 'chooses' not to) sets the stage for the use of the white female body as pleasurable but punished and the white male body as powerful yet proper. The significance of Grey's emotional torment, Ana's romantic attachment to Grey, and the familiarity of white heterosexual domestic love render this (attempted) violent domination both palatable and melancholic.

Even as Ana subjects herself to being lashed, hence humiliated, this does not negate her role as

agent. She negotiates her desire and violation, and Grey expects this empowered stance from her. The scene, in all its narrative and visual devices, underscores the privileged class status that sanctions social intimacy with white bodies. It seems that Grey understands the intimate gaze upon the white (innocent) woman's body to be an explicit class privilege. In James's romance, however, Grey's sexual transgression and emotional destructive masculinity must be replaced by the transformative femininity of white middle-class claims to social and emotional ascendance. Masculine penetration and domination must be transfigured into masculine reverence for and protection of a peculiarly feminine middle class essence. Grey's refusal to discipline his sexual excess positions Anastasia is the quintessential middle class woman with a choice; here, the prerogative to walk away from the powerful Christian Grey.

Contrary to the cinematic moment that positions Ana's naked, white body as vulnerable and docile, the entire scene is underwritten with the superior logic that informs whiteness, not just in the film, but in all cultural, political and economic fields—whiteness as beneficence, morally intact, and ultimately (unlike the racialized other) impenetrable. In the film, Ana gets off the table and walks away from Grey, eventually leaving him within hours. White suffering is decidedly different from black/brown suffering, possessing the power to alter its own conditions. To excite and placate the audience, Ana and Christian as lovers and antagonists could only be white. The sudden excitement found in a powerful white man beating an empowered white woman for sexual pleasure establishes an inextricable link between racial formation and sexual subjectification

It is important to note that white self-definition emerges, in large part, at the level of representation, which then infiltrates the unconscious of both the racialised *other* and the white person (Wilderson 2010). These structures of repression and representation are ontological, thus, they are neither easily resolved in practice nor easily dismissed as undesirable. They are, instead, readily familiar, decidedly palatable and deeply seductive. This seduction is central to the very constitution and imagination of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. This climactic scene is securitised as seductive, rather than grotesque, by the presence of white flesh and fantasy, fortifying whiteness as never truly miserable or dirty. The crisis of (Grey's) violence is subverted by the seductiveness of the filmic narrative and by the ideological impetus to see whiteness as always and already nonviolent. This is the ultimate duplicity of *Fifty Shades of Grey*: it seduces the viewers through a promise of explicit sex and wealth, even though the films' true offering is much more simple—the promise of whiteness.

Notes
[1] The iconographic image of Christian Grey is available for viewing at: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2322441.
[2] The cover of this *Newsweek* issue (29 October 2008) is available to view online at: http://www.sajaforum.org/2007/10/pakistan-newswe.html.
[3] The cover of this *Newsweek* issue (12 September 2012) is available to view online at: http://businessinsider.com/newsweek-muslim-rage-2012-9.

Moon Charania currently teaches in the Sociology/Anthropology department at Spelman College. Her current and previous scholarship cuts across disciplines and includes sociology, cultural studies, women's studies, and transnational studies. She has given talks and conference presentations on her research across the U.S. and has presented internationally in Lahore, London, and Lisbon. Professor Charania is a recipient of the prestigious Jacqueline Boles Excellence in Teaching Fellowship (2011), the Ethel Woodruff Draper Research Fellowship (2000) and most recently named the Beyer Resident in Queer Studies at St. Lawrence University (2015). Her current interest centers on transnational feminist and queer politics and visual culture. She recently published her first book, *Will the Real Pakistani Woman Please Stand Up: Empire, Visual Culture, and the Brown Female Body* (McFarland press), which examines the visual intersections of nation, race, and empire, particularly as they map onto female political subjectivities in post 9/11 Pakistan.

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