

## **“I’M NOT RACIST; I’M NICE”: WHITE DEFENSIVENESS, SILENCING, AND REFUSAL TO LISTEN IN A POST-ELECTION U. S.**

---

Author:

Ashley Van Riper

Faculty Sponsor:

John Landreau,

*Department of Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies*

---

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the ways in which conversations that seek to address race and racism are re-routed, silenced, or not heard. I use Sara Ahmed’s theories of happy objects and the cultural politics of emotion to analyze the ways in which both individuals who did and did not vote for Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. election attempt to normalize, rationalize, and defend his rhetoric and win in the immediate aftermath of the election. I claim that these responses and defenses are reflective of a larger pattern of white fragility in the United States that functions to silence, ignore and divert conversations about race and racism through the use of coded rhetoric and blind allegiance to “happy objects.”

### **INTRODUCTION**

Within the context of a shifting political atmosphere, one in which facts are seemingly unimportant, explicitly hateful speech has been normalized and dismissed, and voters have become polarized in ways that they have arguably not been in past years, difficult conversations are both inevitable and necessary. While race has arguably always been at the center of U.S. politics, though codified in various ways, it seemed to be more visible in this election – and in a way that it has not been in the past. Race this year, unlike previous ones, included whiteness. Nell Irvin Painter in the New York Times article “What Whiteness Means in the Trump Era”, points out that, “the election of 2016 marked a turning point in white identity. Thanks to the success of ‘Make America Great Again’ as a call for a return to the times when white people ruled, and thanks to the widespread analysis of voters’ preferences in racial terms, white identity became marked *as a racial identity*. From being individuals expressing individual preferences in life and politics, the Trump era stamps white Americans with race: white race” (Painter). Painter is sure to be clear that they are not implying that whiteness suddenly became a racial category – as it has been used as a man-made tool for categorization since the first federal census of 1790 – but rather that an important shift has occurred in which white has moved from being the unmarked default to a racial marker. Unmarked whiteness and racially unmarked domination and assumed power are now gone in a sense, as the individuality that has been a fundamental dimension of white American identity is replaced with white nationalism. Painter goes on, “In the Trump administration, white men will be in charge (virtually his entire transition team, and practically every name offered for a potential cabinet post, is a white man). You could say that’s nothing new, that white men have been in charge forever. This is true, but now with a gigantic difference. This time the white men in charge will not simply *happen* to be white; they will be governing *as* white, as taking America back, back to before multiculturalism” (Painter). With whiteness now existing more visibly than it has in the past in many ways, and Trump’s proud commitment to blatant language in regards to race, one would think that the racism that underscores so much of American politics would suddenly become easier to point to – to have proof of and therefore expose and dismantle.

Instead, however, what seems like a majority refuses to address this fact. What I mean here is this: a candidate with little to no political experience who is backed officially by the Klu Klux Klan just became our President-elect and people are claiming that they voted for him because of his economic policies. I mean that white power graffiti and swastikas have been spotted in multiple locations, Latino students have been targeted by white students in middle schools as the subjects of racial slurs and threats

of deportation, Mosques have been vandalized and threatened with violence, and the Southern Poverty Law Center has recorded a total of 844 pro-Trump hate crimes between November 8, 2016 and November 29, 2016 (Miller). Yet, many who support the president-elect, or who did not support him yet have begun to rationalize and normalize his win, reject the label of ‘racist’ or ‘hateful’ – claiming that they simply think he is a good businessman, like the idea of an ‘outsider’ in the White House, or hold various other stances that actively erase the existence of the racism that Trump’s campaign was founded upon and has repeatedly incited – all in the name of *being a nice person*. In other words, the nation as a whole has proof of the role that whiteness has played in this election, yet is still somehow prohibited from pointing to it when facing those who have become invested in not noticing its existence. As whiteness becomes paradoxically more visible and more guarded simultaneously, those who claim it is not the center of this election invoke various tools for denying its powerful role.

Sarah Ahmed’s theory of happy objects can be used as a template for understanding the ways in which whiteness and racism in the 2016 election remain invisible – guarded against and denied in the face of national promises of unity, loyalty and patriotism. To apply Ahmed’s work and demonstrate its relevancy for analyzing the role of whiteness and white fragility in the aftermath of Trump’s win, Facebook, Twitter, and personal text messages and emails in which there was no explicit racism, sexism, Islamophobia, xenophobia or homophobia were explored. Completing a comprehensive overview of all of these responses is obviously far beyond the scope of this paper, so while upwards of 50 examples were gathered and examined, one specific example was chosen to be explored in greater depth as exemplary of both the trends seen in other responses, as well as their implications for an understanding of white fragility as a larger pattern in American discourse.

#### **SHATTERING STORIES: A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING THE INVISIBILITY OF WHITENESS**

Sara Ahmed provides a useful framework for analyzing the complex dynamics at play when thinking about the paradox of whiteness present in U.S. politics this past year, in her 2015 keynote speech at the National Women’s Studies Association. Ahmed explores the concept of fragility – of breakage, of who or what is breaking, and of putting pieces back together again. The speech begins with two stories about shattering. In one story, from *Adam Bede*, a young girl is carrying multiple cans and a jug of ale to her mother, and when hastening her step in response to her mother’s impatience, trips on her apron and drops all that she was holding – shattering everything. The mother reacts by blaming the child for breaking the objects – for willfully allowing the jug to break, deviating from the path the girl should have taken and therefore being the cause of the breakage. The child in this case has prevented the desired destination from being reached, has shattered the possibility of obtaining the intended end. Ahmed shifts the narrative of the event by pointing out that “for the child to become the cause of the breakage we would not ask what caused the child to fall” (“Feminism”). By doing so, she exposes the ways in which the surface against which the items have broken, the reason that the child has hastened her step, and the force involved in assisting this moment of breakage have completely been erased. Ahmed encourages the audience to think about how the walls against which we crash are often invisible in stories about breakage. By erasing the existence of ‘walls’ and their ability to shatter, or block, their reality becomes invisible and intangible, and we focus only on how to pick up the pieces of the broken jug and not on what has assisted in its shattering.

The transference of focus from what is shattered to what shattered it can be applied in multiple ways to explore the complex dynamics of racism, sexism, and other joy-killing ‘-isms’ – as well as how those who point out these phenomena are seen as the cause of breakage; breakage of happy feelings and of comfort. Ahmed explains in her keynote the importance of the wall as a metaphor. She points out, “It is not that there ‘really’ is a wall; it is not an actual wall. That the wall is not an actual wall makes the wall even harder. The wall is a wall that it might as well be there, because the effects of what is there are *just like* the effects of a wall. And yet not: if an actual wall was there, we would all be able to see the wall, or to touch it. The wall would provide evidence” (“Feminism”). Because the wall is not *really* a wall, the opportunity arises for those who are not shattering against the wall to become invested in not noticing its existence. The wall can continue to exist because of the ways in which it is not revealed. When the wall remains invisible, guarded against its own exposure, those who crash into, and shatter against, it are not

seen as being shattered against a wall, but rather as being shattered by their own willfulness to be shattered – understood to be shattering themselves, fully responsible for such breakage.

In applying this metaphor to the 2016 election, whiteness can be understood as the wall. It is the hardened force against which so many were and are crashing up against – increased hate speech and hate crimes, normalized racism and xenophobia, violent ignorance. Yet, as has historically been the case, in the face of documented racist incidents and an explicit invoking of white nationalist discourse, the wall somehow becomes intangible when those who experience its effects point it out to those who do not. There has been no shortage of those who experience racism speaking out about it and working collectively for radical and necessary change, which is nothing new. Yet somehow, perhaps unsurprisingly, these conversations are repeatedly halted and silenced as those who benefit from the invisibility of the wall seemingly do everything in their power to deny its very existence – and therefore create a space for its continued effects, whether intentional or not. Sarah Ahmed's work, on happy objects and the cultural politics of emotion, will therefore be explored as a tool for understanding the subtle ways in which rhetoric reflective of larger patterns of white fragility functions to actively erase and hide the existence of whiteness as a wall--in circumstances in which it is both clearly present and exposed by those crashing against it.

### **SARA AHMED'S CULTURAL POLITICS OF EMOTIONS AND HAPPY OBJECTS**

Sara Ahmed in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* explores the relationships between emotions, language and bodies. She looks at the ways in which emotions 'stick', or do not stick, to certain bodies individually and collectively. Emotions are reframed by Ahmed as something that "should not be regarded as a psychological state, but as social and cultural practice" – emotions are not something that one feels individually and sends into the world, nor are they something that originates socially, such as anger amongst a crowd, and is transferred to or taken in by an individual (*Cultural*, 9). Rather, "emotions are not 'in' either the individual or the social, but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects" (10). In other words, emotions circulate and in doing so create the very surfaces and boundaries that allow all kinds of objects to be delineated. Emotions 'stick' to certain objects, saturating them with affect, "as sites of personal and social tension" (11). When this happens, emotions not only move through objects, but attach to objects – what moves us and makes us feel also holds us in place according to Ahmed. By attempting to account for how we become invested in social norms, Ahmed seeks to use an analysis of the cultural politics of emotion – how emotions stick, attach, and circulate through objects – as a way of answering the question of why relations of power are "so intractable and enduring, even in the face of collective forms of resistance" (12). A key part to beginning to dissect this process of investment, it is pointed out, is to understand that repetition matters: a repetition of norms makes worlds materialize and allows norms to become a form of life by concealing them through such repetition. Emotions matter here, as a tool for politics and world making. As emotions show us how "power shapes the very surface of bodies as well as worlds," it is clear that we really do *feel our way* (12).

An examination of happiness within a cultural context is an important starting point for beginning to understand the ways in which emotions circulate to produce and re-produce power dynamics, and what this means when analyzing whiteness as a wall. In Sara Ahmed's "Multiculturalism and the Promise of Happiness," happiness is explored as a method for creating and maintaining social order. Beyond being just a psychological feeling of goodness, happiness is redefined throughout Ahmed's work as a "promise, which directs us towards certain objects, which then circulates social goods" ("Multiculturalism", 519). By understanding happiness in these terms, it can be exposed for its truer role in society as another tool for the maintenance of the status quo. Ahmed questions the ways in which the 'promise of happiness' is created – as a desirable end goal for the individual, family, community, and nation – and how this promise is used to correct or silence those who deviate from the social normalcy associated with happiness. Identifying as a 'feminist killjoy' herself, Ahmed argues for the space to be unhappy as a sign of freedom and justice – a space where painful histories and unjust present realities can be discussed and exposed, rather than silenced in the name of the moral imperative of happiness.

Ahmed begins by dismantling everyday understandings of happiness as an inner feeling, and questioning the ways in which happiness is associated with different objects and, often, bodies. It is explained that certain objects are associated with pleasure, with feeling good and creating points of conversion of this good. The normative family is used as an example of an object in society that is framed as happy “not because it causes happiness, but because of a shared orientation towards the family as being good” (“Multiculturalism,” 522). Proximity to objects such as the family, then, is expected to make one happy. When one feels pleasure from obtaining and being part of a family, one is aligned and accepted as being right; whereas when one does not experience pleasure from such a ‘good’ object, one becomes alienated and out of line with wider society – what Ahmed terms an “affect alien”. Because happiness is framed as a promise, rather than an autonomous affect, or emotion, it is seen as an end rather than a means, which is to say that as the ultimate end point, all other things become a means to achieving this ends. The disruption of happiness is then viewed as shattering the promise of happiness for all society – in turn validating the silencing of any attempts to challenge the norms that it creates. Ahmed also uses the stereotypes of the ‘feminist killjoy’ and the ‘angry black woman’ to further demonstrate this point, explaining that: “the feminist after all might kill joy precisely because she refuses to share an orientation towards certain things as being good, because she does not find the objects that promise happiness to be quite so promising; and “when women of color speak out of the anger that laces so many of our contacts with white women, we are often told that we are ‘creating a mood of helplessness’” (523). In both examples, bodies are politicized and labeled as objects of unhappiness. By voicing injustice and challenging the status quo, certain bodies are framed as a disruption and threat to the promise of happiness and the social order that it seeks to maintain – those who point out the unhappiness of “happy objects” are then deemed the cause of unhappiness, and become the unhappy object themselves. The conversion point that happens in these moments matters. It matters because it functions as a tool for shifting the focus of a conversation from what it is originally about – systematic racism, sexism, or other problematic moments – to the unhappiness that is caused by whoever dared to speak out against a happy object. When this ‘switch’ happens, and the one who seeks to problematize happy objects becomes the unhappy object herself, injustice remains happily veiled by coded rhetoric – no longer the focus of the conversation.

### HAPPY OBJECTS AND THE NORMALIZATION OF TRUMP: AN ANALYSIS

In this way, happiness can be understood “as a process of concealment that hides inequalities and justifies the oppression of ‘others’ under the ‘good life’” (Downes, 232). A neo-liberal trick is played by happiness, as it functions as a tool for placing blame on the individual for not achieving happiness, rather than examining the reality of the emotions we associate with certain objects. In keeping with the metaphor of the wall as introduced earlier, happiness can be understood as one of the ways in which the wall of whiteness remains invisible – guarded by the idea that to point out that a wall exists would be to make it exist and to shatter the happiness and the comfort of the belief that it does not. While unhappiness is not the end goal for feminist, anti-racist and queer politics, killing joy can be an effective method for remaking the world and understanding the role of emotion in reproducing oppressive power structures. By identifying the subtle moments in which objects become stuck with emotion – specifically happiness or unhappiness – a foundation can be established for analyzing the ways in which many in the era of Trump rhetorically manipulate codified language to saturate any opposition to the normalization of Trump’s win with negative emotion – and therefore validate their dismissal of such voices of dissent. By invoking moments of conversion as explored by Ahmed, whiteness can remain invisible so long as those who do expose it are framed as merely shattering against themselves – the willful and unhappy object attempting to point out something that is not even there. The following example applies Ahmed’s theory to demonstrate this point:

This example was taken from a personal encounter with my own father on November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016. This excerpt was chosen for its ability to both demonstrate Ahmed’s theory explicitly well and shed light upon the specific political context that allowed it to happen. It is meant to be intentionally exemplary, with the idea in mind that “the purpose of the testimony... is not to reveal ‘individual characteristics’ but to ‘amplify the political context that make(s) these events possible and... provide the ground from which a

collective conversation may begin about current social, political and intellectual life” (Berg). Within the context of the 2016 election, my father’s position is one that Trump supporters commonly fit to some extent – he is white, male, heterosexual, upper-middle class, owns his own small school bus company in my hometown, and has always strongly identified as a Republican. This context matters for its ability to be reflective of trends that may also exist among others who hold a similar outlook, yet should obviously not be analyzed as the only perspective at play within the election, or as a stagnant and unmoving viewpoint. The morning of November 9<sup>th</sup>, I woke up to an initial text from my dad stating that he was sure I was upset about the election results, but that this was not such a bad thing: “at least I have some hope now. Lower taxes and less regulation...I might be able to make some money without Obama or Hillary stealing it. I can now pay for your tuition and maybe save enough to retire one day!” Upon receiving my response, in which I attempted to explain how problematic this way of thinking was, and how deeply this election has affected the lives of a lot of people on a very personal level, my father responded:

I love you. Let’s never discuss politics ever. But I assure you one thing, one day you will see it differently. I hope that I don’t have to die to have you hear from people about all the good I’ve done. I am quiet, but silently proud of how many people I have supported in time of need...You wrongfully view me as a fat rich white man. Because you carry white guilt as you have not yet been able to help others. I don’t brag, I give freely and without fanfare. I assure you the day will come when others will tell you how lucky you are to have a dad who put into practice the generous intentions you inherited from me in your DNA. You don’t ever owe me an apology. I understand you better than you understand yourself, you see, I once said those exact words you said to my dad. I regret it...I have a clear conscience, and one day hope you will learn enough about my “having done the right thing” to the point where you respect me. All my love always, dad. PS Lunch Sunday?

The first line, “I love you,” can be understood as a tool for silencing. I love you, so you should not be mean to me, and you must say this back because to not would be to deny me the love that I am unconditionally granting you despite your ‘attack’ on me and to reject the offering of multiple happy objects (love, family, the father-daughter relationship). The second sentence is a much more direct form of silencing – we disagree, so do not ever bring this up again. An object of happiness was offered as a reason for not being upset about Trump’s win because now we, as a family, will have more money (which will point us towards the ultimate end goal of making us happier). When this object was exposed as not being quite so happy in my response, it was me that became the problem, not what my dad had said in the first place. At this point, I am securely labeled as the unhappy object, and it is clear that my perception of my dad as being a problematic figure is just that, a perception. My dad is a happy object here: he is both a peacekeeper and someone who is pointed in the right direction by offering and protecting happy objects – love, family, getting along, not engaging with critique, being comfortable. He then goes on to center himself more directly within the conversation by talking about his personal character, his perceptions and defenses of it – despite the fact that the conversation was about his role in a larger system as a raced white man who benefits from a system that actively oppresses others on multiple levels as a way of ensuring his continued benefits; and about the problem of him being able to look past racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia and Islamophobia, and think about money instead, because those things do not affect his personal life directly. He “assures” me that I “one day will see it differently,” when I am older and wiser and able to think as rationally and objectively as he obviously is, and am capable of focusing on things that matter – happy objects like money. All of the “good” my father has done is stated as a blanket statement intended to reclaim the goodness of his character in the face of this unfounded attack on his being. To emphasize how good he is, he positions this declaration directly after the phrase “I hope that I don’t have to die to have you hear...” as a way of dramatizing the topic being discussed and limiting the ways in which I can seem moral from my position of critique: if he is going to have to die in order to prove his goodness, that too is my fault, for not seeing it when I had the chance – an intentional production of guilt within me. This goodness is also something that “people” know about,

and will brag about on behalf of my father after his death to his unloving and unappreciative children. The idea that *people* know this frames the act of “knowing” as an objective opinion that others hold. Goodness here becomes more than just a subjective self-assertion – a reminder for me that my father is not limited by a subjective point of view, unlike me – and morphs into a fact that cannot be disputed, as it belongs to distant, all-knowing others. Objective is a happy object here, for it is factual, wise and correct, while subjective is unhappy, as it is subject to the distortions and uncertainty of one’s own opinion, specifically that of a female bodied person in this case. Continuing with the creation of this narrative, my father states “I am quiet, but silently proud of how many people I have supported in time of need”. Quiet, but silently proud is equal to creating a narrative which cannot be critiqued because it is a humble one and a genuine one. “How many people” means that this is a lifetime of helping people who “need” his help. He positions himself as a figure who people would be in need without – it is up to him to be giving and generous while remaining quiet. This echoes colonial discourse and the position of the white man in post-coloniality as the figure who gives with an open heart, but never questions or attempts to destabilize the violent histories that put him in the position to give in the first place – it is his rightful position, just the ‘natural’ order of things. The figure of the “fat rich white man” is then called into play as an unhappy object that is invoked to prove the father’s innocence from inhabiting this space – as if I had called him this and the fact that he ‘helps’ others means that he cannot be this thing. There is also a negative connotation associated most strongly with the word “fat” here, invoking ableist and fat-shaming ideology, and expecting me to share an orientation towards fat as an unhappy object that is a source of shame and repulsion. “Wrongfully” is used to reinforce my critique as a perception of my own once more, an opinion that is now no longer valid, for its subjective suggestions have been disproven by the objective rejection of this stereotype. A sense of patronization is then invoked as my dad makes the claim that I must be guilty about my inability to do as much good as him – my inability to exist above him on a newly created hierarchy because I am pointing in the wrong direction: away from money and therefore away from my own happiness and my ability to make others happy by ‘helping’ them. I am not only an unhappy and irrationally angry object now, but one who is also morally inferior to my father and framed as projecting my obvious guilt onto a morally immune and happy figure. Echoing his assertions of quietness and humbleness, my dad goes on to state once more that he “does not brag” but rather gives “freely and without fanfare” – a statement that further saturates his humble character with happy affect and simultaneously positions himself as above others and overly generous and rejecting of fanfare. The future is then invoked as a happy object when I am “assured” that “the day will come” when others tell me about how lucky I am “to have a dad who put into practice the generous intentions [I] inherited from [him] in [my] DNA”. The day that has yet to come promises happiness for both of us, as the future is an object of happiness since it will reveal the truth to me about this whole matter. The term others makes an appearance again to ensure objectivity in his continued claims, intentions are a happy object as they are generous and put into practice as an unquestionable force for good in the world, and I am positioned as an object which is inheriting *from* him – there is a power dynamic that exists here in which my dad possesses qualities which I am in debt to him for giving to me through this inheritance. The possessor is a happy object and the inheritor is a dependent and unhappy object. A tone of patronization continues as I am told I don’t ever owe him an apology – a statement that implies that I do owe him an apology for the debt I am in from not finding happiness in the repeatedly offered happy objects that I have rejected, and positions him as a neutral and unnecessarily kind figure who continues to ‘try’ despite my inability to reciprocate such understanding and kindness. An all-knowing figure, my father goes on to explain that he knows me better than I know myself, dismissing my opinions and claiming to understand my feelings because of his own experience in the same position – one that he regrets, and I will therefore someday regret as well, preemptively saddling me with guilt and shame. His conscience is clear, with clarity and conscience both being happy objects – a statement that implies that mine should not be, if for no other reason than the fact that I felt entitled to questioning the clarity of his conscience. One last time, the future is invoked as a happy object with the statement that he “one day hope[s] [I] will learn enough about [his] ‘having done the right thing to the point where [I] respect [him]”. When I am old enough to see clearly and finally become capable learning about the goodness of his moral character, I will be able to see the promise in the happy objects that are my father, the relationship he offers me, family loyalty, and

unquestioned familial love, and share the proper orientation towards all of these objects, instead of questioning the integrity of their promises so unnecessarily. My lack of explicit respect here makes me a sticky object for negative affects to accumulate upon, until I become established as an unhappy object in and of myself.

This conversation is about happiness and unhappiness – and not about the ways in which my father perpetuates a system of oppression for others by remaining blind to racial power dynamics in the election – and my attempt at pointing this out is framed as the reason this conversation exists in the first place. I am shattering against something that is nonexistent because of my own willfulness to do so – my decision to be disrespectful and not see the unwavering moral character of my father. He signs off with “All my love always, dad” to reinforce the sincerity of his offer of the happy object of love, its morally rooted surplus, “all,” and its correctly oriented, future-facing promise of always. “P.S. Lunch Sunday?” serves as a final silencing tool as it places me in a position where if I am to reject the offer I am once more securing my position as the unhappy object – saying no to yet another happy object: a father-daughter lunch in which politics will not be brought up and comfort for everyone will ensue.

### IMPLICATIONS OF RHETORIC ON A NATIONAL LEVEL

Although subtle and heavily coded, the conversion points that Ahmed tries to grasp and provide a language for are apparent throughout this interaction, most likely in more ways than explored in the above analysis. Within the context of a political atmosphere in which calls for unity, choosing love over hate, and staying strong seem to be the narrative from both Trump supporters and many who voted against him, coded language matters greatly because of its ability to keep ‘walls’ hidden. For just as daughter is to father in the above conversation, citizens are to the United States, and its President-Elect, in the political sphere. Nation, much like father, is a happy object – saturated with an entitlement to respect, love, loyalty, comfort, getting along, not being challenged. It is a source of goodness, of unwavering morals that anyone who questions must not be able to see, of being able to give that which it so happens to have – none of which is stolen or distributed unevenly and unfairly. It, the father figure or the nation and its leader, is objective, older, wiser, and the keeper of facts, not its own subjective opinions. The father’s, and the nation’s, race does not exist – the suggestion that my dad is part of system that benefits him due to skin tone and class is excluded from our conversation because he is an individual, and a “good” one at that. To question these objects and the emotions they have been saturated with on various levels creates discomfort. To resolve this discomfort, there must be a re-balancing of the oppositional binary of good and bad, happiness and unhappiness. The conversion points as examined by Ahmed happen here, as I, and anyone who criticizes the happy object of the nation and its President-elect, become the unhappy object itself – and must not understand the unwavering value inherently existent in nation, unity, love and understanding.

What gets erased in the face of these abstract happy objects is the uncomfortable reality of the systems of power that are at play in both my interactions with my father and many individual’s, and groups’, interactions with the nation – not so happy injustices that exist regardless of whether people admit they are there or not. “Unity”, “love”, “patriotism,” “All my love always, Lunch Sunday?” work to actively silence the fact that there are different types of anger in this world, and the anger that laces people’s reactions to systematic oppression is not the same type of anger of those who perpetrate violence against them in the name of power; that a political candidate whose entire campaign was founded on fear-mongering and divisive tactics does not get to call for unity in the face of denying large portions of the country the right to exist as fully human; and that those who are unaffected and unthreatened by a Trump presidency do not have the entitlement to dismiss as “weak” the powerfully negative emotions of grief and anger as a form of resistance from those who will feel its effects. To suggest that we fight hate with love and all come together is realistically to frame those who feel as if they are shattering as merely shattering against their own selves – it is in essence, to “not ask what caused the child to fall” (“Feminism”). It is to suggest that we pick up the broken pieces of a jug without ever thinking about the wall that left it in shards in the first place – about what made the girl hasten her step, about the countless forces involved in breakage. It is to distract from the need for radical change with a politics of coded language that pathologizes all forms of rage and emotion without looking at context. Love is nice but

erasure is violent, and when objects become so saturated with goodness, so deeply rooted in our understanding of their ability to point us towards our supposedly desired and untainted end goal of happiness, we allow violent histories to repeat themselves in the name of getting along and not questioning that which has been placed before us. Sara Ahmed makes the point that:

What concerns me is how much this affirmative turn actually depends on the very distinction between good and bad feelings that presumes that bad feelings are backward and conservative and good feelings are forward and progressive. Bad feelings are seen as orientated toward the past, as a kind of stubbornness that ‘stops’ the subject from embracing the future. Good feelings are associated here with moving up and getting out. I would argue that it is this very assumption that good feelings are open and bad feelings are closed that allows historical forms of injustice to disappear. The demand that we be affirmative makes those histories disappear by reading them as a form of melancholia (as if you hold onto something that is already gone). These histories have not gone: we would be letting go of that which persists in the present. To let go would be to keep those histories present. (“Happy,” 50)

The idea that “negative” emotions are just that, negative – backwards, conservative, melancholic – creates a space in which any attempt at talking about difficult issues is immediately shut down in the name of happiness, comfort, and various other affirmative emotions that are understood to point us in the “right” direction. These emotions are understood to be mutually exclusive in the sense that if someone expresses a negative emotion, such as anger, it is assumed that there is no space for any positive emotions to coexist with this expression, or that anger does not have the ability to give way to affirmative emotions and circumstances – i.e., anger creating positive change. This hierarchical and binary oppositional understanding of emotions then becomes a socially acceptable tactic for silencing, defending and not hearing important voices that are merely seeking to expose the walls that impact people’s livelihoods.

### **WHITE FRAGILITY**

When hundreds of years of man-made history deem whiteness a happy object, at least in the eyes of most people who identify as white and the power structures of society as a whole, the patterns identified in my conversation with my father begin to have much larger implications for the discourse of race relations in the U.S. The concept of white fragility as defined by Robin DiAngelo in her article “White Fragility” is called into play here. DiAngelo defines white fragility as “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation,” all of which function to reinstate white racial equilibrium (DiAngelo, 54). DiAngelo explains that because white people in North America live “in a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress,” white expectations for racial comfort are built and an ability to tolerate racial stress is lowered by insulated environments of racial protection (55). When the only exposure that many white people have to discussions about race are a singular course requirement or ‘diversity training’ at the workplace—that usually includes extremely codified and cushioned language and often fails to address whiteness and its violent history and privileged present – it does make sense that white people have a difficult time coming to terms with racial realities. When it becomes the norm for whiteness to not be questioned and critically examined as a race, any attempts at starting a conversation about race are met by the defensive motives described by DiAngelo. White fragility in this way becomes a mechanism for guarding the wall of whiteness as established earlier in the paper – a method for rendering it continually invisible. If one’s entire identity rests on its ability to remain unnamed and unmarked, then protecting the invisibility of whiteness through fragile, though usually unintentional and unconscious, responses is necessary. White fragility is present in the conversion moments in which a conversation about race and the election becomes a conversation about my father’s personal character, and the goodness of it, in the same way it is present in



the backlash against those who express anger, fear and sadness in the immediate aftermath of the 2016 election.

## CONCLUSION

Within the context of a racial identity that has not been regarded as such historically by those who invented race as a means of validating unequal power structures, the white that Donald Trump has offered to so many who feel like they are losing something is extremely important and simultaneously complex. It creates a paradox in which a definition is provided in a sense, yet that very definition actively erases the ways in which whiteness actually functions within society – i.e. white nationalist identity emerging as a protection of a way of existing that is being “taken” by “others”. This paradox both requires more conversations about race to occur and makes them more difficult. No one likes to be uncomfortable, but when discomfort is the only way to address complex and violent histories that we are bound to continue to benefit from and repeat if we refuse to learn them, discomfort is necessary as a tool for shifting the focus from the shattered pieces to the wall.

While feminist theory, and the work of Ahmed specifically, may not solve the complex issues facing the U.S. both presently and historically, they provide an important framework for beginning to understand the subtle ways in which walls remain invisible. With the idea being that walls can only continue to exist at full capacity so long as they remain hidden, or normalized, using theory as a starting point for obtaining the language to expose them is crucial. It is no secret that these walls will continue to exist regardless of attempts to deny their existence – while there can be multiple truths for multiple people, a history of institutionalized racism exists in the U.S. as a heavy and active truth regardless of those who ‘don’t see color’ and claim it does not. With this as a truth, the obvious and known job of everyone is to expose it – and when doing so becomes nearly impossible as a result of those who wield coded rhetoric of happy objects to defend it and re-route conversations, dismantling these moments and being able to expose their conversion points is an important place to begin. In the face of happy objects saturated and bound with multiple meanings in our society, using joy killing and the power of negative emotions to expose and deconstruct objects that are in fact not so promising is a powerful tool for imagining and making new worlds. As we continue to crash up against hardened histories and walls of whiteness, it is important that we note these shattering feelings, use pain as evidence, anger as resistance, and put into practice all of the tools available to us to chip away at, and ultimately fully expose, all of the fragile walls that stand in opposition to everyone’s right to be fully human.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Routledge, 2004.
- . “Feminism and Fragility.” *Feministkilljoys*, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2016/01/26/feminism-and-fragility/>. 2 November 2016.
- . “Happy Objects.” *The Affect Theory Reader*. Ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, Duke University Press, 2010, 29-51.
- . “Multiculturalism and the Promise of Happiness.” *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*. Third Edition. Ed. Carole R. McCann and Seung-kyung Kim. New York: Routledge, 2013. 517-531. Print.
- Berg, Maggie and Barbara K. Seeber. *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*. University of Toronto Press, 2016.
- Dhanao, Feroze. “Acts of Hatred, Racism Come in Immediate Aftermath of Donald Trump’s Election.” *Across America Patch*, 18 December 2016.
- DiAngelo, Robin. “White Fragility.” *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, 3.3 2011: 54-70.
- Downes, Julia. “Sarah Ahmed. 2010. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham and London: Duke University Press: Duke University Press. 328 pp. Paperback.” Rev. of *The Promise of Happiness*, auth. Sara Ahmed. *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, 9.2 July 2012: 231-234. Print.
- Gregg, Melissa and Gregory J. Seigworth, editors. *The Affect Theory Reader*. Duke University Press, 2010.
- Massumi, Brian. “The Autonomy of Affect”. *Cultural Critique*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1995, 83-109.

Miller, Cassie and Alexa Werner-Winslow. "Ten Days After: Harassment and Intimidation in the Aftermath of the Election." *The Southern Poverty Law Center*, 29 November 2016.

Painter, Nell Irvin. "What Whiteness Means in the Trump Era." *The New York Times*, 12 November 2016. Online.

Shaviro, Steven. "Pulses of Emotion: Whitehead's 'Critique of Pure Feeling.'" *The Pinocchio Theory*, 2007.