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Karen Gaffney  
*Raritan Valley Community College*

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# Whiteness as Cursed Property: An Interdisciplinary Intervention with Joyce Carol Oates's *Bellefleur* and Cheryl Harris's "Whiteness as Property"



Karen Gaffney

*Raritan Valley Community College*

Many white Americans deny the existence of systemic racism and think that the worst type of racism that currently exists is reverse racism. They may also think that Officer Darren Wilson was justified when he shot Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014 and sympathize with Officer Wilson when he described Michael Brown as a "demon" in his testimony to the grand jury. After all, the media constantly perpetuates the idea that men of color should be feared. The disconnect between the experiences of white lives and black lives is becoming such a gaping abyss that it is hard to imagine how to bridge it. Recent studies show that whites have few friends of color, which limits their exposure to multiple viewpoints and tends to reinforce a belief that systemic racism no longer exists and that any problems people of color experience are their own doing that can be overcome with hard work. Furthermore, such a belief makes it challenging to discuss openly the concept of white privilege, which many whites do not understand because they do not feel privileged. They do not see any outward signs of this privilege, no "whites only" sign above their workplace. They are offended by any reference to white privilege because they think it means they are racist and that they did not work hard for what they have. These types of beliefs are significant obstacles to racial justice.

However, one way of breaking down these obstacles and helping whites, as well as people of color, understand the way whiteness works is through explicit analysis of the social construction of whiteness. The power of whiteness lies in its invisibility, and that fuels the perpetuation of systemic racism. We need to make whiteness visible by analyzing how it has been socially constructed. Making whiteness visible and understanding how it has been wielded as a weapon will in turn allow us to see how destructive it is for everyone, whites included. If we can see this ideology for what it is, then we are one step closer to dismantling it, which is necessary for us to achieve justice.

How do we go about making whiteness visible? While there are many answers to that question, I am proposing here an interdisciplinary intervention that brings together two writers who have explored this question in very different ways and from different disciplines, which usually prevents them from being considered in the same conversation. One of these writers is legal scholar Cheryl Harris, who published her influential article “Whiteness as Property” in 1993 in the *Harvard Law Review*. The other writer is Joyce Carol Oates, who published her novel *Bellefleur* in 1980. As I will elaborate on later, one reason I want to bring these two writers together is because while Harris is explicitly identified as a writer who discusses whiteness, Oates is not. Instead, Oates’s position as a white writer writing about white characters keeps whiteness invisible, and that is important for us to question. However, before I put these two authors’ works side by side, I want to focus first on introducing Harris and her field of critical race theory, then on explaining why the disciplinary division between critical race theory and literary studies needs to be dismantled, and finally on explaining in more detail my choice of Oates.

### **Why Cheryl Harris and “Whiteness as Property”?**

Legal scholar and critical race theorist Cheryl Harris was one of the first scholars to spell out the power dynamic at work in the social construction of whiteness and how its very invisibility and presumed normative status reinforced its power.<sup>1</sup> Harris’s article “Whiteness as Property” was reprinted in the first anthology of critical race theory, published in 1995, *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*. The Introduction to this seminal anthology identifies two fundamental principles of the burgeoning field of critical race theory. One is “to understand how a regime of white supremacy and its

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<sup>1</sup> Many scholarly publications have since then have built on this work, including: Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic’s *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*, Ian Haney López’s *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race*, Matthew Frye Jacobson’s *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*, and Nell Irvin Painter’s *The History of White People*.

subordination of people of color have been created and maintained in America, and in particular, to examine the relationship between that social structure and professed ideals such as ‘the rule of law’ and ‘equal protection’” (Crenshaw, et al. xiii). The words “created and maintained” illustrate how race (including whiteness) is a fiction, a narrative supported by laws and court decisions to maintain power and preserve the dominant ideology. Their second goal is “not merely to understand the vexed bond between law and racial power but to *change* it” (Crenshaw, et al. xiii). This belief in social action reflects the need for critical race theory to make a difference, to bridge the gap between scholarship and activism so that the problems raised in the analysis can actually be addressed rather than merely studied. One way this emphasis on social action emerges is through the form of writing that critical race theorists often use. The Introduction explains that these theorists seek to resist the notion that “scholarship should be or could be ‘neutral’ and ‘objective’” (Crenshaw, et al. xiii). Instead, these writings emerge as “new, oppositionist accounts of race” (Crenshaw, et al. xiii). These “oppositionist accounts,” also referred to as counter-narratives, resist both the form and the content of traditional legal analysis. Critical race theorists require an oppositionist form because they are questioning the status quo and because they refuse to follow traditional legal scholarship that, as the Introduction explains, represents “the exercise of racial power as rare and aberrational rather than as systemic and ingrained” (Crenshaw, et al. xiv).

Harris’s article “Whiteness as Property” carries out all of these fundamental tenets of critical race theory, both in relation to the content of her article and in relation to her writing style or form. First, Harris’s analysis of “whiteness as property” elicits both figurative and literal meanings, establishing “property” as a very powerful way to interrogate whiteness. Like property, whiteness has tangible and intangible value and comes with, as Harris notes, a “right to exclude” (Harris 1714). People can own property. People can become property that in turn can be owned. People can decide who gets to own property. Throughout American history, the property value inherent in whiteness has evolved and has been constantly redefined in order to maintain the status quo, reflecting the socially constructed nature of whiteness. Harris argues that the law has been a crucial tool in upholding and protecting the wealth of privileges associated with whiteness in the United States: “Whites have come to expect and rely on these benefits, and over time these expectations have been affirmed, legitimated, and protected by the law” (Harris 1713). What makes analysis of whiteness so complex is the extent to which it is embedded in our society. It is taken for granted so often that it has become invisible; in other words, it has become normalized. One of the ways in which white privilege has embedded itself in our society is through our tendency to ignore the racialization of whiteness. This pattern reflects the long-held tendency to believe that race is

something that white people do not have, and power resides in this unmarked status.

Second, Harris's article also experiments with form, serving as an oppositionist account or a counter-narrative at the heart of the critical race theory approach. Rather than begin with supposedly-objective analysis, Harris begins with a poem, a poem she wrote about her own grandmother. We have three layers of opposition right there, from the beginning. We have a poem, which likely is not often the starting point of a law review article. Then, we see that Harris wrote it herself, resisting the traditional view that Harris is not supposed to be a poet because she is a legal scholar. Finally, the focus of the poem is Harris's own personal history, again something that is traditionally not part of legal scholarship. However, as the Introduction to the first critical race theory anthology makes clear, legal scholarship that actually makes a difference *must* acknowledge the personal: "legal scholarship about race in America can never be written from a distance of detachment or with an attitude of objectivity" (Crenshaw, et al. xiii). Harris's article is therefore a model of critical race theory in its analysis of whiteness and in its style; it embraces the notion that radical content demands radical form, an idea I will return to shortly.

### **Critical race theory and literary studies**

As an English graduate student in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I was thrilled to discover critical race theory. I was already studying how contemporary American women writers were experimenting with form in order to resist ideologies of race and gender, and I thought that critical race theorists were doing something very similar. I was surprised that critical race theory had not gotten more attention in literary studies. As I worked on my dissertation, which paired critical race theorists and contemporary women novelists, I presented my research at various literary and humanities conferences from the regional Modern Language Association to the American Women Writers of Color Conference, but there was a lack of engagement with critical race theory. This culminated in an interdisciplinary humanities conference, where I presented a paper called "Critical Race Theorists as Storytellers: Why Aren't We Listening," and alas very few people attended my presentation, and so my question echoed around a near-empty room.

Several years later, I am still trying to break down this boundary because I believe strongly that removing this boundary can reveal so much about, in this case, the social construction of whiteness, but more broadly the way that systemic racism continues to permeate our society. Now more than ever, in the aftermath of Ferguson and in a time when many believe our society to be post-racial, we need to bring together all of the scholars and activists who care about racial justice, regardless of discipline, and build interdisciplinary tools for fighting racism.

While it might be easy to dismiss the lack of dialogue between critical race theory and literary studies as merely a result of disciplinary boundaries, I think there is more going on. When the novelist is white and the characters are white, there is still in literary studies, even now, very little emphasis on the study of whiteness even though race is a significant focus of attention when the novelist and characters are people of color. Whiteness is still invisible, and that is part of the problem I have been describing. This is just a microcosm of our larger society; whiteness as a socially constructed race is still invisible, and therein lies its power.

Black feminist literary critic Ann duCille addressed this problem within the context of feminist literary criticism: “Unless the object of study happens to be the Other, race is placed under erasure as something outside immediate consideration, at once extratextual and extraterrestrial. Despite decades of painful debate, denial, defensiveness, and color-consciousness-raising, ‘as a woman’ in mainstream feminist discourse all too often continues to mean ‘as a white woman’” (duCille 35). Even though this statement was published in 1994, I believe it is still quite relevant, though there have since been some important contributions in literary studies that focus on whiteness.<sup>2</sup> However, the publication of a handful of books does not mean the discipline has fundamentally changed, and that is what we still need to work on. Systemic racism can only be addressed with systemic change.

The very normalization of whiteness that paved the way for Officer Darren Wilson not to be indicted in the murder of Michael Brown is the same normalization of whiteness that prompted critical race theory to develop in the first place, because there was concern about the way traditional legal studies avoided analysis of systemic racism. This is also the same normalization of whiteness in literary studies that has prevented much analysis of the whiteness of white literary characters. We do not look at the way white characters in literature are racialized, especially when the author is white, in the same way that we do not look at the way white characters in television and film are racialized, in the same way that we do not look at how actual white people in real life are racialized. We need an interdisciplinary intervention to pull back the curtain on whiteness, see how it operates, recognize its danger, and dismantle it.

### **Why Joyce Carol Oates and *Bellefleur*?**

If we recognize the need to examine whiteness within literature about white characters by white writers, then one place to begin is with Joyce Carol Oates. To be clear, her work is one of many places to begin, and this process

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Jay Watson’s *Faulkner and Whiteness*, Renée R. Curry’s *White Women Writing White: H.D., Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath, and Whiteness*, and Valerie Babb’s *Whiteness Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness in American Literature and Culture*.

cannot begin and end with her. Oates is a writer who has received significant attention, which allows us to see more clearly the absence of attention on whiteness. Out of all the books and articles (both scholarly and popular) that have been published about Oates's work over the past several decades, there appears to be only one scholar (Lotta Kähkönen) who uses the lens of whiteness to study Oates's work, including her novel *Blonde* about Marilyn Monroe. Furthermore, I propose beginning with a writer who literary critics do find to be exploring power relations, though again not whiteness explicitly. Finally, as I will discuss, I have chosen Oates because she experiments with both form and content, as critical race theorists do, especially in her 1980 novel *Bellefleur*, which reveals significant parallels with Harris's article "Whiteness as Property." I want to reveal those parallels, which encompass making whiteness visible and understanding its power, because they allow us to see how destructive whiteness is for everyone, including whites. In turn, this understanding takes us one step closer to dismantling the social construction of whiteness and achieving racial justice.

Joyce Carol Oates has received significant literary acclaim and has been the focus of many books and articles analyzing the importance of her contribution to American literature. For example, literary critic John Gardner, in a *New York Times Book Review*, said of Oates: "she is one of the greatest writers of our time" (Gardner 99). Furthermore, in his recent book of literary criticism about Oates, Gavin Cologne-Brookes states: "she is the nearest America could currently have to a national novelist" (Cologne-Brookes 2).

In addition, Oates is known for critiquing power relations and the dominant ideology.<sup>3</sup> For example, literary critic Brenda Daly writes, "Often, for example, she deliberately transgresses generic conventions in order to challenge implicit hierarchies of gender, race, and class" (Daly x). Cologne-Brookes also writes: "Over more than forty years, but most convincingly since *Bellefleur*, she has climbed the precipices of the American psyche, crossed its plains and valleys, delved into its crevices, and dredged its waters, all with energy, skill, and thoroughness, and in several genres" (Cologne-Brookes 2). However, despite the impressive body of writing Oates has contributed and despite the significant critical attention she has received, she is a perfect example of a white American writer whose writing is not viewed through the lens of the social construction of whiteness. In fact, when I did my undergraduate senior thesis on Oates in 1993, a project that focused solely on several of her novels, including *Bellefleur*, I never once thought explicitly about whiteness in the context of her work. That was

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<sup>3</sup> *Bellefleur* is certainly not the only work where Oates explores power relations in the context of race, class, and gender. In fact, much of her work explores these issues in various ways, including the entire quintet of novels of which *Bellefleur* is the first. The fifth and final novel in that series, *The Accursed*, just published in 2013, highlights these issues particularly well.

before I knew anything about critical race theory or whiteness studies, and I did not make the connection at all, not until I read Harris a few years later for my dissertation.

Oates's novel *Bellefleur* is one place to begin this analysis because it has received significant acclaim, though, again, no analysis of whiteness. Literary critic Joanne Creighton states that "Bellefleur should be recognized for what it undoubtedly is: one of our great American novels" (Creighton 43). Oates's biographer, Greg Johnson, describes the novel's popularity with readers: "Despite the complexity and difficulty of *Bellefleur*, it became Joyce's first book to make the *New York Times* best-sellers list; it also appeared on other newspaper lists and reached the top-ten ranking for all the major bookstore chains" (Johnson 288).

Literary critics have already described many ways in which the novel explores power relations. For example, Brenda Daly describes the novel's main characters as "the wealthy Bellefleur family whose violent history is quintessentially American" (Daly 141). Literary critics have also connected Oates's exploration of power to her experimental writing style. Johnson writes that when Oates wrote *Bellefleur*, "After many years of writing psychological realism, she felt a euphoric sense of liberation from the traditional constraints of narrative chronology and mimetic characterization" (Johnson 288). Eileen Teper Bender writes, "she has attempted a new experiment in narrative form to match her own revisionary sense of human history" (Bender 118). Literary critic Perry Nodelman writes:

This opposition between the world in flux and a family's attempts to impose authority upon it obviously relates to the masculinity of conventional ideas about self-assertion; in thematic terms, and as an ironic retelling of that typical American story about men getting rich by triumphing over a wild landscape, *Bellefleur* represents a devastating attack on conventional ideas about what it means to be civilized. (Nodelman 255)

I hope it is evident that the stage is set for the interdisciplinary intervention I am recommending, since there has already been discussion about power relations in Oates's work and about the connections between Oates's resistant form and her content. We are now ready to focus on whiteness, and this is where Harris comes in.

I want to be clear that my interdisciplinary intervention is not about applying Harris to Oates. That might be the assumption if we focus on the simplistic view of Harris as the theory and Oates as the thing to be analyzed, but I am recommending so much more than that. Both writers help us see more in the other and then in turn help us understand, together, even more fully the sheer power of whiteness and white privilege and how justice ultimately depends on dismantling such systems.



Through fragmented stories that are not in chronological order, the novel *Bellefleur* explores the rise and fall of the Bellefleur family in upstate New York over seven generations, beginning in the late 1700s. The family is white, and their ability to gain power and their obsession with that power, I would argue, provide insight into the way whiteness is socially constructed. In addition, the destruction at the end of the novel of the family mansion and the family members most obsessed with the family's power also provides insight into the way that whiteness damages whites. The novel refers to a "curse" on the Bellefleur family, and I would like to suggest that this leads us, when we bring Oates and Harris together, to an understanding that whiteness itself is a curse.<sup>4</sup>

After all, whiteness confers privilege on someone for something that is not real, that is not about that individual at all, but ultimately about a system of power and oppression that divides and conquers, that maintains the status of the elite. We witness Bellefleurs in pain; the more they are obsessed with family wealth and prosperity, emblems of their whiteness, the more miserable they are. The family speaks of a family curse, and it manifests itself in supernatural occurrences, significant fluctuations in mood, and more. For example, the novel's narrator tells us:

It was generally thought that the Bellefleur "blood" brought with it a certain capricious melancholy, a propensity for energy and passion that might be countered at any time by a terrifying bleakness, a queer emptiness of vision: so great-uncle Hiram once tried to describe the phenomenon by speaking of the exuberance of water gushing from a pipe . . . and then draining away, swirling down a drain . . . sucked by gravity back into the earth. First you are one, he said; and then, suddenly, you are the other. You feel

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<sup>4</sup> Oates is not the only contemporary American novelist to describe this curse. Toni Morrison does so as well, through different imagery, in her novel *Beloved*:

Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood. . . . But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them every one. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared they were of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own. (Morrison 234)

For Morrison's analysis of how canonical literature reveals systemic racism, see *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*.

yourself being sucked away . . . your exuberance sucked away . . .  
and there is nothing, nothing, you can do about it. (Oates 6)

We might pause to imagine how this quote explains the way whiteness operates, with a little help from Cheryl Harris. Harris writes:

Whiteness is not simply and solely a legally recognized property interest. It is simultaneously an aspect of self-identity and of personhood, and its relation to the law of property is complex. Whiteness has functioned as self-identity in the domain of the intrinsic, personal, and psychological; as reputation in the interstices between internal and external identity; and, as property in the extrinsic, public, and legal realms. (Harris 1725)

Here, I am especially interested in Harris's link between whiteness and "self-identity."

If we go back to the novel's description of the Bellefleur curse, it seems to focus entirely on self-identity and the emotions associated with such identity. If whiteness on the one hand bestows great power and privilege, one can imagine an "exuberance" that would result, but that is on the surface. Underneath it is the realization that this power, the creation of whiteness, depends on a lie, a fiction. Whiteness is not actually real; there is no such thing as biological race. It is merely a social construction in order to divide and control people. Being white by itself does not really mean anything; it only works in opposition to blackness. Being white means not being black. As Hiram Bellefleur says, "first you are one" "and then, suddenly, you are the other." If being white means not being black then white identity is entirely wrapped up in a lack of black identity. Whiteness is an absence, an "emptiness of vision," a "draining away." And the Bellefleurs have no control, "nothing, you can do about it." However, for the power of whiteness to be maintained, there must be silence about this dynamic. As the narrator of Bellefleur tells us: "But then perhaps the curse had something to do with silence. For the Bellefleurs, Leah's mother Della often said, would not speak of things that demanded utterance" (Oates 31).

The Bellefleurs who are happy are the ones who repudiate the family name, who move out of the mansion, who avoid the destruction at the end of the novel. Together, Oates and Harris show us that whiteness damages whites even if they do not know it. Whiteness prompts a cycle of white fear that "other" people

will take away something that whites did not earn in the first place. We need to recognize this and dismantle it in order for social justice to exist.<sup>5</sup>

An important part of the way we see whiteness as a curse in *Bellefleur* is through the main characters' obsession with never having enough, to the point of paranoia. The elder Bellefleur who builds the family mansion, Raphael, is unable to be satisfied with this massive structure. The mansion has sixty-four rooms, with lavish accessories, ornamentation, and art. However, when it was completed, "He regretted not having planned for a larger entrance hall," and he thought "Sixty-four rooms, perhaps, would not be enough" (Oates 4-5). Here we see the cycle of over-consumption; the need is never satisfied. The mansion is never good enough for Raphael, just like, as we will later see, whiteness is never something that can be fully achieved. It is always in limbo, and there is always the fear of not being white enough.

While Raphael shows us the horror of the mansion never being enough, we get a different view of this horror through the eyes of a family member, Jean-Pierre II, who returns to the mansion after being imprisoned for many years: "Bellefleur Manor was a horrific place—it was so inhumanly *large*—he hadn't remembered how large it was: ah, what a terror to contemplate! What sort of mind, driven by an unspeakable lust, had imagined it into being?" (Oates 359). Likewise, at the end of the novel, as Gideon Bellefleur flies his airplane over the mansion before purposefully crashing into it to ensure its destruction, he thinks, "How oddly it had been constructed, Bellefleur Manor, with its innumerable walls and towers and turrets and minarets, like a castle composed in a feverish sleep, when the imagination leapt over itself, mad to outdo itself, growing ever more frantic and greedy" (Oates 552). In the extravagance of the mansion and of whiteness, we see greed, terror, and madness.

In order to elaborate on these ideas, I am focusing on five specific aspects of whiteness that we see when we engage Oates and Harris together. They are: a racial ideology based on a racial hierarchy, white fear of "others" trespassing onto whiteness, the use of the law in upholding whiteness, the way whiteness intersects with class, gender, and sexuality to maintain control, and the erasure of history in current beliefs about "colorblindness."

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<sup>5</sup> As Lotta Kähkönen makes clear, in the context of Oates's novel *Blonde*:

the narration links the creation of the film star's exaggerated white look to death and consequently to the idea of whiteness as non-existence. . . . the knowledge of race as a discursive construction threatens to collapse the idea of unified self. . . . In the end her obsession, a strong wish to be desired and loved by everyone, which requires her submission to the gendered and racialized ideal of American white woman, becomes, indeed, a terror to herself. (Kähkönen 299-300)

### **The racial ideology at the heart of whiteness as property**

Bringing Oates and Harris together reveals not only the racial ideology embedded in whiteness but also the racial hierarchy within that ideology. Identifying that ideology and understanding how it operates can ultimately lead us to see how the creation and perpetuation of whiteness is damaging to everyone, a “curse.”

In order to understand the way *Bellefleur* reveals the racial ideology embedded in whiteness, it is helpful to start with how whiteness first developed in the seventeenth century. Harris explores how race was initially not a primary division between Africans and Europeans. However, when it served the interests of the elite, race was created to divide laborers. Harris writes:

Although the early colonists were cognizant of race, racial lines were neither consistently nor sharply delineated among or within all social groups. . . . The construction of white identity and the ideology of racial hierarchy also were intimately tied to the evolution and expansion of the system of chattel slavery. The further entrenchment of plantation slavery was in part an answer to a social crisis produced by the eroding capacity of the landed class to control the white labor population. (Harris 1716-1717)

In other words, race was created to divide and conquer laborers and pit them against each other so as not to disrupt the power of the white wealthy landowners. European laborers became white and free, and African laborers became black and slave. As Harris explains, “‘Black’ racial identity marked who was subject to enslavement; ‘white’ racial identity marked who was ‘free’ or, at minimum, not a slave. The ideological and rhetorical move from ‘slave’ and ‘free’ to ‘Black’ and ‘white’ as polar constructs marked an important step in the social construction of race” (Harris 1718).

As part of this growing association between “white” and “free,” American colonists initially tended to focus on their European national identity but then shifted to a white American identity. With the American Revolution and the creation of a new, independent country, national identity shifted away from Europe to something distinctly American, what Harris describes as an “amalgamation of various European strains into an American identity” (Harris 1742). Furthermore, this “amalgamation,” as Harris explains, was “facilitated by an oppositional definition of Black as ‘other’” (Harris 1742).

*Bellefleur* reveals this history and the racial ideology embedded in the burgeoning category of whiteness through the first *Bellefleur* in America, Jean-Pierre, who moves from France around the time of the American Revolution. He attributes his privileged status to his French aristocratic heritage, rather than whiteness per se. Jean-Pierre, for example, becomes involved in La Compagnie de New York, “a shareholding organization for founding a New France in the

mountains for titled French families dispossessed of their property by the Revolution” (Oates 50). He seeks to create his own sovereign nation, justifying his role based on his French aristocratic, and therefore inherently superior, heritage. However, with his grandson Raphael, we see a clear shift to a white American identity and the privilege associated with that identity. Raphael is not interested in preserving any ties to France, referring to Europe as a “rotting graveyard” (Oates 4). Instead, he insists to his family, “We are all Americans now” (Oates 4). This shift from European heritage to American identity parallels the shift Harris describes.

The newly unified white American identity did not distinguish itself entirely from Europe, but rather, as Harris argues, was “shaped around Anglo-American norms” (Harris 1743). We can see this shift not only in Raphael’s repudiation of French aristocratic power but also in his dismissal of French culture and embrace of English heritage in an American context. Raphael “scorned the French, and professed not to understand a word of his grandfather’s tongue” (Oates 85). For example, his horses must be English thoroughbreds, and he “sailed to England to acquire an anemic pigeon-breasted English girl” (Oates 85). His horses and his wife must both be English purebreds, a theory of Anglo-American white privilege at the core of Raphael’s rise to power.

In the nineteenth century, Raphael Bellefleur depends on a racial ideology that is no longer merely burgeoning but dominant. This ideology that positioned whites at the top of a racial hierarchy and blacks at the bottom depended on a pseudo-scientific belief that races are biologically distinct and hierarchical, a mainstream belief that was considered objective. Harris explains, “The legal definition of race was the ‘objective’ test propounded by racial theorists of the day who described race to be immutable, scientific, biologically determined—an unsullied fact of the blood rather than a volatile and violently imposed regime of racial hierarchy” (Harris 1739). That this “violently imposed regime” was in fact not based on something “objective” but instead based on imposed power relations had to be kept quiet. Otherwise, it would not have achieved such power and dominance.

Raphael Bellefleur was consumed with building his family’s empire, an empire that was dependent on his vigilant obsession with a strict racial hierarchy. Raphael believed “that the Negroes were sons of Ham, and accursed; they didn’t feel pain or exhaustion or despair like the white race, not even like Raphael’s Irish laborers, and they certainly did not possess ‘souls’—though it was clear they were more highly developed than horses and dogs” (Oates 196-197). Raphael’s hierarchical racial ideology, rooted in pseudo-science, is explicit, and is also representative of mainstream American thought during this time period.

Furthermore, the novel’s narrator also shares with us Raphael’s views on slavery: “Politically Raphael Bellefleur opposed slavery because he opposed the

Democrats; privately he knew the system to be an enviable one—it answered the only important moral requirement that might reasonably be asked of an economic strategy: it worked” (Oates 197). When Raphael’s abolitionist brother Arthur visits the mansion, Raphael reinforces his view of a racial hierarchy: “And wasn’t it the case, he asked Arthur, on the very night of Arthur’s arrival, that some stocks of men are clearly bred for labor in the fields, and others for *thinking*; wasn’t it the case—ah, so obviously!—that some creatures are born to be slaves, and others to rule?” (Oates 197). The words “bred” and “born” point directly to a belief that race is inherent and biological. Harris, too, describes this popular view of race as innate, biologically based, and scientifically proven, all essential to reinforcing a strict racial ideology based on hierarchy: “This legal assumption of race as blood-borne was predicated on the pseudo-sciences of eugenics and craniology that saw their major development during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (Harris 1739). Harris later continues, “The inherent contradiction between the bondage of Blacks and republican rhetoric that championed the freedom of all men was resolved by positing that Blacks were different. The laws did not mandate that Blacks be accorded equality under the law because nature—not man, not power, not violence—had determined their degraded status” (Harris 1745). The law, therefore, did not have to be responsible for justifying racial differences if science already had. The law could take advantage of scientific racism and continue to present itself as objective. Because Oates reveals the perception of race that Raphael and Samuel share, she makes explicit the racial ideology and hierarchy upon which whiteness was based in the mid-nineteenth century.

Returning to the notion of whiteness as a “curse,” we can see the underbelly of the supposed “objectivity” of racial classification. It is all a disguise; it is not real. This takes us back to the novel’s description of the Bellefleur family curse as “terrifying bleakness”; the objectivity, the rationality, and the science just do not exist to support a racial hierarchy. It is all built on a lie, and if we start to look at whiteness in this way, we can see what a burden it is to have a fundamental social structure built on a lie. We can also see the damage of hypocrisy: creating a nation supposedly on the principles of freedom and democracy but actually on a false racial ideology is so tenuous that it becomes a curse. The constant attempts to prove that a racial hierarchy is a result of biology and not a dehumanizing ideology will never fully succeed because such attempts are built on a lie, which requires vigilant persistence to maintain, producing what Harris calls a “highly volatile and unstable form of property” (Harris 1720).

Furthermore, this racial ideology focuses on what Harris calls the “hypervaluation of whiteness” (Harris 1743). The prefix “hyper” is associated with excess, and the idea of excess is exactly at the heart of the category of whiteness, and the Bellefleurs clearly embody this notion of excess. Whiteness is given a value when it does not inherently have any meaning, much less any value.

It is an empty category. However, as I have made clear through references to the history of the creation of race in colonial America, whiteness was established as a category with value. Then, not only was it valued, as Harris explains, but it was also “hypervalued,” associated with an excess of value. The more powerful it became and the more value was associated with it, the harder it was to question. Even though it still did not really mean anything, how could it be questioned if it was associated with so much value? This is where we come back to the idea of a curse. The Bellefleur family curse, as I have shown, is associated with an “exuberance” and a “draining away.” That seems to describe the idea of “hypervaluation of whiteness,” where there is an over-inflating value and then a realization that such value is based on nothing real; it is all a fabrication, thus the notion of whiteness as a curse. Whites are valued more than non-whites, but this value is unearned and therefore meaningless. Whiteness means nothing and everything at the same time. Being identified as white is a matter of life and death and affects who is treated as a human being and who is not, whether it is 1814, 1914, or 2014. The only way we can move toward racial justice still depends, and has depended for centuries, on recognizing this dynamic and dismantling it.

Oates creatively shows the tension within the idea of whiteness as a curse by showing both how the family attempts to assert a racial ideology of white superiority and also how that ideology is resisted. Raphael Bellefleur mocks his abolitionist brother Arthur by allowing a group of runaway slaves to stay in the most opulent room in the mansion. After the group leaves, the family perceives the room as contaminated and even calls it the “Room of Contamination”: “the room was not simply haunted, it was contaminated. To breathe its air was to risk madness and death” (Oates 192). The family perceives the room is contaminated with blackness: “it was aired, and scrubbed, and polished, and a number of its furnishings removed” (Oates 198). The Bellefleurs refuse to keep the once opulent furnishings, now “stained” with blackness. They consider themselves to be too superior for these contaminated objects. Harris explains that the way whiteness was created reinforces this same ideology “in which Black blood is a contaminant and white racial identity is pure. Recognizing or identifying oneself as white is thus a claim of racial purity, an assertion that one is free of any taint of Black blood. The law has played a critical role in legitimating this claim” (Harris 1737). The family desperately attempts to uphold its belief in the superiority of whiteness.

Not only does Oates reveal how the family perceives blackness itself to be contaminating, on another level, she also reveals how the process of racialization, the creation of whiteness as property, is itself contaminating. The family cannot maintain control, which just reinforces whiteness as a curse because it is impossible to have full control over an empty category built on a fiction. When

Samuel is in the Room of Contamination, he looks in the grand mirror and does not see his reflection:

Now when he turned he saw in the mirror a mist-shrouded group of people, all of them black: and detaching itself from the group, with a peculiar airy grace—peculiar because it was so solid—was the figure of a woman. . . . A black woman—a Negress—but not a slave—evidently not a slave . . . . A Negress—an African—with what defiantly, hideously African features! Samuel stared and stared, for he had never seen a black woman before, never at such close range. (Oates 201)

The black people in the mirror defy the laws of physics and haunt and resist the family's racial ideology. As Harris writes, "Whiteness as property has carried and produced a heavy legacy. It is a ghost that has haunted the political and legal domains in which claims for justice have been inadequately addressed for far too long" (Harris 1791). Samuel permanently disappears in this room, and Raphael loses his beloved son, another aspect of the curse. First, the mirror, whose opulence symbolizes the family's wealth and social status, is taken over by forces outside of Bellefleur control, representing the family's loss of racial and class status. Second, the reflection itself is significant. Samuel looks into the mirror and sees a group of black people rather than his own image. This episode reveals what is supposed to be kept silent, that white identity is dependent on not being black. Samuel looks in the mirror and sees not a white man but a group of black people, exposing the way his racial identity operates and revealing whiteness to be a fiction.

### **Trespassing onto whiteness as property**

With the "hypervaluation of whiteness" that I described in the previous section, which is part of the curse of whiteness, it is no surprise that great effort goes into protecting something valued so highly as whiteness. Harris helps us understand this when she builds on her metaphor of whiteness as property by incorporating the idea of trespassing. Harris writes, in describing her grandmother's passing as white while she worked as a sales clerk, "she could thus enter the white world, albeit on a false passport, not merely passing, but *trespassing*" (Harris 1711). Harris's grandmother permeated the border built around white privilege, a border meant to exclude anyone of color from gaining access. Furthermore, Harris writes:

It was a given to my grandmother that being white automatically ensured higher economic returns in the short term, as well as greater economic, political, and social security in the long run. Becoming white meant gaining access to a whole set of public and private privileges that materially and permanently guaranteed basic



subsistence needs and, therefore, survival. Becoming white increased the possibility of controlling critical aspects of one's life rather than being the object of others' domination. My grandmother's story illustrates the valorization of whiteness as treasured property in a society structured on racial caste. (Harris 1713)

This extended symbolism of trespassing onto whiteness as property echoes throughout *Bellefleur*. First, to build on my earlier analysis of Samuel's experience in the "Room of Contamination," the appearance of a group of black people in the mirror carries multiple meanings, particularly in representing acts of trespassing. The people in the mirror trespass not only the family's actual property but also its very whiteness by appearing in the mirror in this room, without being in the room itself, without being reflected. The appearance of this group of blacks reveals an act of trespassing onto Bellefleur property. As soon as Samuel sees this image in the mirror, he says, "But you have no right to be here" (Oates 201). This group has trespassed, though not by climbing over the estate's walls or breaking through a window, methods of trespassing that could be foreseen and prevented. Instead, this act of trespassing could not have been anticipated or prevented, and now that it is happening, it cannot be stopped. As Harris says, whiteness comes with a "right to exclude," and even though Samuel says, "But you have no right to be here," it does not stop the trespassing. The Bellefleurs cannot exert their "right to exclude" in this situation, which reveals the tenuousness of the category of whiteness.

Moreover, the group in the mirror is not just trespassing onto Bellefleur land or even into the mansion's foyer; instead, the group is trespassing into the family's interior private space, into their most opulent and prized room, even into the Bellefleurs' identity. The Bellefleurs have no power here. The people in the mirror are defying laws of physics in their ability to appear in a mirror, rendering the Bellefleurs powerless. The group's appearance in the mirror represents yet another act of trespassing because the black woman in the mirror is not a slave. Her status as a free woman defies Samuel's racial ideology, in which blacks are defined as slaves. The woman in the mirror, a free black woman, is thereby trespassing the boundaries of racial ideology.

Not only is the black woman in the mirror trespassing this hierarchy because she is free, but she is also trespassing it because Samuel appears to be having a sexual relationship with her, although the logistics remain ambiguous. The narrator explains, "The tragedy of Samuel Bellefleur's 'love match' was well known despite the Bellefleurs' attempts to keep it secret, and to this day a worried adult might wonder aloud whether, when a child was behaving badly, he or she might also *go over to the other side*. (The crude expression *take up with Negroes* was sometimes used as well)" (Oates 276).

The fear that a Bellefleur may “go over to the other side” appears throughout the novel, and the traditional Bellefleur family members who are especially obsessed with the family’s investment in whiteness as property attempt to patrol the boundaries of the family’s whiteness in order to prevent such trespassing. For example, Raphael and the Bellefleur men around him are particularly vigilant about this effort, reflecting Raphael’s strict racial ideology. Harris writes, “White identity conferred tangible and economically valuable benefits and was jealously guarded as a valued possession, allowed only to those who met a strict standard of proof” (Harris 1726). It is no surprise, then, that the Bellefleurs who sought to maintain and grow family power would patrol decisions about marriages in order to prevent trespassing and “jealously guard” the family’s white borders.

In one telling episode, the family looks at one daughter’s suitor with great suspicion when he appears too racialized to be Swedish: “Veronica Bellefleur strolled in secret with that Swedish nobleman who called himself Ragnar Norst and who explained away his dusky complexion and his dark liquid thick-lashed eyes by alluding merrily to some ‘Persian’ blood on his mother’s side of the family” (Oates 148-149). Aaron Bellefleur (Veronica’s brother) “began to interrogate Norst almost rudely about his . . . *Persian* blood” (Oates 365) and identifies Norst as an “impostor” (Oates 366) and tries to get him deported.

Furthermore, a crucial element to the way in which Bellefleur men patrol their racial and patriarchal hierarchy includes a perception of racialized others as animal-like. For the young Hepatica Bellefleur, the closer she gets to marrying a man her family perceives as racialized and working-class, the more animal-like he appears. At first he seems like a “creature,” “wild,” and “undomesticated” (Oates 277). After their marriage, he makes the final transformation from animal-like to animal, as a “black bear” that the Bellefleur men finally kill in order to protect the family’s pure racial bloodline (Oates 281). Through Oates’s portrayal of Hepatica’s husband as an actual animal, she reveals and makes explicit the process of racialization at the heart of the Bellefleur racial ideology and their obsessive fear of trespassers. For generations, the Bellefleurs use Hepatica’s story as a warning to young Bellefleur girls about the dangers of getting involved with men of low racial and class status: “Hepatica lived a very long time ago, but her example was often raised when Bellefleur girls behaved in a headstrong manner. You know what happened to Hepatica—! their mothers said. And even the boldest of the girls grew sober” (Oates 276). Hepatica’s story indoctrinates the Bellefleur girls into becoming obedient and valuing racial purity.

Not only does the family attempt to prevent non-whites from trespassing into the family blood line, but they also encourage the sanctioned couples to reproduce: “The family insisted upon children, of course. They adored children, or at least the idea, the sentiment, of children. Increase and multiply: go forth and

populate the earth: for the earth is there to be populated, by Bellefleurs” (Oates 36). This pressure to “increase and multiply” relates to a deep fear that the family line will not continue: “And yet, miraculously, it had not died out . . . though there was the constant fear that it would, and all the land and fortune, or whatever remained of it, would fall to strangers” (Oates 37). This fear at the heart of the curse of whiteness, that it is not real, that it is vulnerable, reveals how racial ideology is based on a fiction and maintaining the lie is always tenuous.<sup>6</sup>

Raphael’s vigilant patrolling of his racial and patriarchal hierarchy allows the family to gain significant wealth and status, with substantial acts of trespassing kept to a minimum. Upon his death, however, the family’s vigilance diminishes, and these acts of trespassing, in both literal and figurative ways, become more and more common. Not only is there a literal deterioration of the estate’s borders, but there is also a figurative deterioration of power with the family’s financial and political decline. On a literal level, the physical construction of the family mansion fails so that what is supposed to remain outside, like animals, plants, and rain, comes inside. The once opulent mansion is no longer sealed, and the boundaries become overrun. For example, “The slate roof leaked in a dozen places” and “there were termites, mice, even rats, even squirrels and skunks and raccoons and snakes in the house” (Oates 5). Symbols of Bellefleur status and privilege, like servants and wine, can no longer be afforded: “All but a very few of the staff of thirty-five servants had been dismissed over the decades, and a number of the rooms were closed off, and the wine cellar was badly depleted” (Oates 5). The Bellefleur manor once symbolized great power and prestige, but its deterioration represents the family’s decline in power.

The loss of power also manifests itself in the family’s loss of control over the boundaries around whiteness. Categories become more and more difficult to maintain, revealed symbolically through the change in the artwork in the house: “marble busts—of Adonis, Athena, Persephone, Cupid—had been accumulating masks of grime for decades, and now rather resembled mulattoes of indeterminate sex” (Oates 10). These busts, once symbols of the family’s wealth and power, including the power to create and control whiteness as property, now reveal the family’s inability to control boundaries of race and sex. As I have stated earlier, patrolling the borders around whiteness as property is never going to be successful because this property is so “volatile and unstable,” and the vicious cycle of attempting to maintain control of whiteness as property becomes a curse.

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<sup>6</sup> One could relate the family’s attempt to encourage reproduction within “pure” Bellefleur couples and prevent reproduction between any “impure” couples to positive and negative eugenics, respectively. The eugenics movement sought white racial purity by controlling reproduction (via involuntarily sterilization and marriage laws), as well as immigration. See, for example, Edwin Black’s *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America’s Campaign to Create a Master Race*.

### **Using the law to create and maintain whiteness as property**

In the eighteenth century, Jean-Pierre Bellefleur lays the groundwork for building an empire rooted in whiteness as property. Jean-Pierre arrives in the American colonies with no money and no connections. He manages to amass a considerable fortune, though, by taking advantage of two crucial aspects of his whiteness: his freedom and his right to own property. By his arrival around the time of the American Revolution, racial lines were already established that clearly divided enslaved blacks from free whites. If Jean-Pierre had entered the colonies as a black man, it would have most likely been by force as a slave, but his white skin provides him with freedom.

Furthermore, white skin also grants Jean-Pierre the right to own property. Harris explains how control over the definition of property pertained not only to slavery but also to property rights. Slaves, categorized as property themselves, could not own property, but in addition, Harris describes how laws defined property rights by limiting Native American land rights and privileging white colonists' land rights: "only white possession and occupation of land was validated and therefore privileged as a basis for property rights" (Harris 1716). In order for the European colonists to gain power, they had to de-legitimize Native Americans' right to own land. Harris explains the ideology that allowed for colonial powers and later the American government to seize Native American land:

Although the Indians were the first occupants and possessors of the land of the New World, their racial and cultural otherness allowed this fact to be reinterpreted and ultimately erased as a basis for asserting rights in land. Because the land had been left in its natural state, untilled and unmarked by human hands, it was "waste" and, therefore, the appropriate object of settlement and appropriation. Thus, the possession maintained by the Indians was not "true" possession and could safely be ignored. This interpretation of the rule of first possession effectively rendered the rights of first possessors contingent on the race of the possessor. Only particular forms of possession—those that were characteristic of white settlement—would be recognized and legitimated. Indian forms of possession were perceived to be too ambiguous and unclear. (Harris 1721-1722)

White colonists validated their own form of land settlement, particularly their emphasis on individual ownership of parcels of land, and de-legitimated Native American patterns of communal land ownership.

Similarly, Oates reveals how Jean-Pierre benefits from the validity granted to white property rights in two important ways. First, his white skin grants him the

authority to own real estate. Second, Jean-Pierre buys much of his land in upstate New York for a low price from the government, which in turn took the land from Native Americans by forcing them to cede it. Oates makes these two factors explicit in her novel by describing the land in the growing Bellefleur empire: “the treaties of 1787 had banished all Indians from the mountains and the fertile farmland along the river, and a few thousand of them lived in a single reservation” (Oates 32). She repeats this information in describing the land Jean-Pierre buys as “townships formed after the destitute Oneida Indians were forced to cede their land to the state” (Oates 532). There is no doubt that Jean-Pierre’s status as a white male settler grants him the privilege of owning land. Furthermore, as the government strips most non-whites of the right to own land, Jean-Pierre benefits by purchasing their land cheaply, leading eventually to his accrual of “some 2,889,500 acres of wilderness” (Oates 116). Jean-Pierre’s gendered position as male also grants him considerable privilege in his ability to purchase and own property, fortifying the border around his whiteness. He is able to access significant amounts of money by taking advantage of his status as a white male and marrying into a wealthy white family.

#### **No trespassers allowed: patrolling the borders of whiteness, gender, sexuality, and class**

Both Oates and Harris make it clear that in order for whiteness as property to be protected against trespassers, borders not only of race but also gender, sexuality, and class must be patrolled. We see that very clearly in *Bellefleur*. Jean-Pierre Bellefleur is engaged to and marries Hilda Osborne, a New York City woman of wealth and status whose dowry provides Jean-Pierre with considerable assets. At the same time, he has a relationship with Lucy Varrell, referred to as “Brown Lucy” who lives in the upstate New York wilderness that he is trying to buy with Hilda’s money. Even though both Hilda and Lucy are white, Hilda is the only one who is able to maintain that whiteness due to her upper class status. Jean-Pierre perceives Hilda, like her wealthy Manhattan neighborhood, as clean, civilized, and brimming with status symbols, while constructing Lucy as dirty (physically, morally, and sexually), uncivilized, and closer to nature. Jean-Pierre’s ability to position them in opposition to each other reinforces his use of white privilege as a way to create and control definitions: he “alternated his attentions between this woman in the country and his lawful wife Hilda in Manhattan . . . the two women—so different in quality, in temperament, in beauty, in worth!” (Oates 275). This emphasis on worth reveals that the value of whiteness as property is dependent on class, gender, and sexuality. Lucy not only lives in untamed wilderness, but she also embodies untamed wilderness, and Jean-Pierre wants to control both Lucy and the land. He sexualizes his passion for Lucy, “a woman of such promiscuous morals” (Oates 275) and the wilderness, wanting to “snatch

from this domain all it might yield greedy as men who have gone for days without eating suddenly ushered into a banquet hall & left to their own devices” (Oates 534). He associates Lucy’s class status and rural upbringing with an animal-like sexuality that he believes is his to own, just like the land. Her sexuality is so wild that it cannot be tamed, symbolized by her “large, flimsily-corseted breasts” (Oates 533). Her poverty, rural home, and sexualization all contribute to a contamination of her whiteness, so that she becomes “brown.” Jean-Pierre perceives her sexuality as overwhelming and uncontrollable, the complete opposite of his “washboard-plain” wife (Oates 533).

To ensure that Jean-Pierre’s claim to whiteness as property will continue over the years, he needs lawful and legitimate Bellefleur heirs. His wife, Hilda, therefore, must be the woman to produce such heirs because she provides, in Jean-Pierre’s view, the racial and class purity he deems necessary to the family’s future. Lucy’s status as poor, rural, sexual, and racialized extends to her children, compounding their illegitimate status, making them unacceptable heirs that would contaminate the family line. Jean-Pierre, therefore, acknowledges his children with Hilda as his rightful heirs and ignores the children he fathers with Lucy. His ability to manipulate intersecting categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality allows him to control and strengthen the boundaries that surround his whiteness, thereby solidifying his investment in whiteness as property.

After building on this investment for many years, Jean-Pierre and most of his “legitimate” family are murdered, likely by his own descendants in the Varrell family. The Bellefleur family power is almost destroyed through a literal act of trespassing by the Varrells into the Bellefleur home and also by a figurative trespassing when the line that Jean-Pierre sought to establish between Hilda and Lucy is overrun at the trial. The only Bellefleur survivor of this murder, Germaine Bellefleur, Jean-Pierre’s daughter-in-law, is not perceived as a reliable witness. In fact, the visitors to the courtroom cannot tell her apart from the Varrells, which would horrify Jean-Pierre if he lived to see it:

everyone, Mrs. Bellefleur as well as the accused murderers, and their neighbors, struck outside observers as belonging to one large dull-witted family, with the intellectual skills and manners of brain-damaged sheep. How graceless they all were!) Backcountry people. Hill people. “Poor whites.” (Despite the fact of the Bellefleurs’ vast property holdings, and Jean-Pierre’s numerous investments.) (Oates 498)

Perhaps he was so obsessed with maintaining a distinction between between Hilda and Lucy (and their descendants) because there was no distinction; he fathered

both families.<sup>7</sup> Germaine, who had been married to the murdered Louis Bellefleur, marries again, this time to Jean-Pierre's only living son, Jedediah. Their children include Raphael, who becomes obsessed with reclaiming family power and transforming it into an empire of whiteness as property where the curse becomes more powerful.

### **Whiteness as ahistorical property**

Finally, while both Harris and Oates explore the way whiteness was created as property in the past, they also reveal its contemporary manifestation in two important ways: a presumption of white privilege and a lack of historical context, which together help provide an understanding of whiteness as cursed property today. Leah Bellefleur, Raphael's great-granddaughter, serves as the family leader in the present; she desperately attempts to rebuild the family empire, wealth, and land. Leah clearly believes that the Bellefleurs deserve to own again the land her ancestors once owned, regardless of who was cheated when the Bellefleurs originally gained that land and regardless of who must be exploited now to reclaim that land. She believes, "We should regain all that land—why, if you look at one of Raphael's old maps, it's enough to make you burst into tears, what we've been cheated of! They want to take everything from us" (Oates 143). Leah's division between "they" and "we," her horror that the family has been "cheated," and her belief that others have "taken" what is not theirs all reinforce her conviction that the Bellefleurs inherently deserve all the property and white privilege they once possessed.

Harris describes the twentieth century as a period in which the notion of whiteness had to be re-adapted to fit a post-slavery and later a post-desegregation period:

Following the period of slavery and conquest, white identity became the basis of racialized privilege that was ratified and legitimated in law as a type of status property. After legalized segregation was overturned, whiteness as property evolved into a more modern form through the law's ratification of the settled expectations of relative white privilege as a legitimate and natural baseline. (Harris 1714)

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<sup>7</sup> Another contemporary American novelist, Dorothy Allison, also explores these issues and can provide additional insight for us. In her essay "A Question of Class," she writes: "Most of all, I have tried to understand the politics of *they*, why human beings fear and stigmatize the different while secretly dreading that they might be one of the different themselves. Class, race, sexuality, gender—and all the other categories by which we categorize and dismiss each other—need to be excavated from the inside" (Allison 35).

The emphasis on the “expectation” of white privilege becomes key; white privilege becomes implicit and assumed, rather than dependent on an explicit racial hierarchy. The hierarchy remains, but it becomes embedded in the foundation of society.

An important element to Leah’s belief in the expectation of white privilege involves her conviction that such an expectation is “natural.” If undeserving others have this property and privilege instead, such a situation is entirely, as she calls it, “unnatural.” This word choice reinforces how Leah sees her family as inherently superior, reflecting the kind of ideology set forth by Raphael in his racial hierarchy. Leah’s perception of the former Bellefleur property reiterates this notion of inherent worth:

all that they had owned at one time, and what was taken from them, piece by piece, parcel by parcel, the very best land in some cases, along the river, and mineral-rich holdings in the Mount Kittery area . . . how the original holdings, those two million acres, were broken down into jigsaw-puzzle parts, that could be unified again. “. . . you can see how easily all this could be brought together again, the way it really should be. The land is all one, it belongs in one section, there’s something unnatural and insulting about the way it’s broken up.” (Oates 143-144)

Leah’s view of this land as “original,” “unified,” and “together,” reveals her expectation that whatever the Bellefleurs owned in the past, even if they gained it through exploitation, is deserved. Anything contrary to the reunification of this land is “unnatural,” “insulting,” and “broken up” because it violates Leah’s investment in whiteness as property. After all, the best family deserves the best land, the richest land, and the land that will produce the most wealth. Leah’s perception that all of the separate tracts of land, now owned by various people, should be returned to the complete jigsaw puzzle they once were reveals how she conceptualizes this land as a unified Bellefleur empire. For Leah, the land all belongs together because the Bellefleurs are naturally superior in race and class status and therefore deserve their former empire. It is irrelevant that this land once belonged to local poor whites exploited by the Bellefleurs and before that, to a large Native American population. Instead, Leah’s naturalization of white privilege mandates that her family deserves to regain this property and prosperity. Leah’s belief system reinforces Harris’s description of current whiteness as property as a “settled expectation.”

Furthermore, Harris analyzes a series of affirmative action court cases in order to elaborate on this notion of expectation as the new manifestation of white privilege, illuminating Leah’s outlook even more. As has been well documented, one of the most common responses to affirmative action is that it condones “reverse discrimination.” While whites agree that slavery and segregation did



oppress blacks, as Harris explains this view, “it is unfair to allocate the burden to innocent whites who were not involved in the acts of discrimination” (Harris 1767). This word “innocent” is particularly important because it highlights neutrality about the “settled expectations of whites.” White privilege is perceived as neutral, as expected, so any policy that threatens it, like affirmative action, is seen as discriminatory.

Leah assumes her family deserves to regain the land and wealth they lost in the same way that, in current debates about affirmative action or immigration, we often hear the complaint, “They are taking our jobs.” The notion that existing jobs are “our” jobs implies an expectation that these jobs belong to whites. Leah feels the same way about the land and wealth; it belongs to her family. In the past, when Jean-Pierre or Raphael lived, these assumptions were made explicit through legislation about who could and who could not own property or take certain jobs. In Leah’s time, though, many such explicit legal limitations have been removed, though implicit limitations continue, masked under a veneer of racial neutrality. In a new guise of expectation, white privilege persists, and Leah acts upon this expectation by creating a plan to regain the family’s former empire.

Harris also explains how the idea of colorblindness is used to deny a history of racism. While colorblindness may at first appear to eradicate racism, Harris explains, “colorblindness is a form of race subordination in that it denies the historical context of white domination and Black subordination. This idea of race recasts privileges attendant to whiteness as legitimate race identity under ‘neutral’ colorblind principles” (Harris 1768). Colorblindness, therefore, upholds white privilege because it refuses to acknowledge a history of racism.

Oates takes this idea to a new level by not having historical references or historical context in the world of Leah Bellefleur. For the older Bellefleurs, they were rooted in history. There was a date next to their name in the family tree. For Leah and her generation, though, there are no dates, and when there are random historical references (like the model of a certain car), they anachronistically contradict each other so that historical context is absent. Oates defies the laws of physics when she removes time from Leah’s narrative. This supernatural development shows us the sheer power of the erasure of history. Because Oates explicitly experiments with time and disrupts the laws of physics, she forces us to question what is taken for granted. We can then connect this back to the idea that whiteness itself is a fiction, though we are taught to take it for granted. Furthermore, we can then see that the law is also a fiction, a constructed narrative.

Further evidence of the connection between Harris’s analysis of the twentieth century’s colorblind policy as erasing history and Oates’s erasure of time in the twentieth century stems from the common period in which both Oates and Harris are writing. Published in 1980, *Bellefleur* appeared well after the civil rights and women’s rights movements began, a time when obvious and explicit

signs of racism had been removed. At the same time, though, hidden and implicit layers of racism remained embedded in many institutions and structures of society, from the criminal justice system to education. Both Harris and Oates seek to render these implicit layers of racism and other forms of oppression explicit. Harris reveals the supposedly neutral policy of colorblindness as denying a history of racism. Similarly, Oates depicts a family who attempts to regain lost racial and economic power by denying a history of racism (represented in the family's literal lack of historical context). Both Oates's and Harris's approaches resist the growing conservative backlash that Oates saw on the rise in the late 1970s, that Harris saw escalating in the early 1990s, and that we continue to see today.

Leah, for a short time at least, succeeds in regaining much of the land the family once owned, through her various acts of exploitation. However, in the same way that those disenfranchised by the Bellefleurs committed acts of trespassing against the family, particularly Jean-Pierre and Raphael, Leah's reign also comes to an end. The difference here, though, is that the destruction of the reincarnated Bellefleur empire comes at the hands of another Bellefleur, her husband Gideon. Gideon certainly benefits from his considerable privilege as a white male Bellefleur and takes this privilege for granted as natural. He perceives his privilege as natural not only because it just feels right, the way it is supposed to be, but also because of the continued emphasis on privilege as inherent, innate, and biological.

Gideon, though, comes to repudiate his status when Leah manipulates everyone, not only local landowners but also her own children, in order to regain the land the family once owned. The final straw, for Gideon, comes when Leah cancels her daughter's fourth birthday party and holds instead an emergency meeting of family members and lawyers invested in the plan to reclaim the family empire. This particular meeting evolves because Leah had convinced her older daughter to marry into a local wealthy family, but the daughter runs away with another man, leaving behind a considerable inheritance that Leah demands but cannot claim herself. The only people inside the Bellefleur mansion on the day of the meeting are invested, literally or figuratively, in the family's plan to regain wealth, privilege, and status. Any other family members, particularly the children, have since run away. Gideon decides that the family's exploitative and ever-increasing demand for power must end, so he takes his four-year-old daughter, Germaine, to Matilde Bellefleur's house, fills his airplane with dynamite, and flies it into the Bellefleur mansion during the family meeting, killing all the participants and destroying the mansion. Gideon, realizing the curse of whiteness as property, seeks to destroy it.

## Conclusion

Oates shows us that whiteness is not monolithic, that it is not natural; if it were natural, there would not need to be constant negotiations about its borders. Whiteness was invented; it is a fiction. White skin by itself does not mean anything. It was imbued with meaning through systems perceived as neutral but actually hierarchical. There is nothing inherent, natural, or biological about whiteness. If we created it, we can un-create it. We need to make whiteness visible by making the systems, the laws and its power structures, visible. Oates and Harris lead the way by drawing attention to form, preventing structure from remaining invisible. They tell us the story of America that does not often get told, the narrative that says the story of America is the story of whiteness. This is what we can take away from interdisciplinary dialogue between Harris and Oates, a dialogue we need to encourage by breaking down boundaries, a dialogue we need to listen to because the time has come. How many more people of color must die at the hands of police officers before we acknowledge the violence of systemic racism? If Officer Darren Wilson had not been taught to protect whiteness as property at all costs, perhaps Michael Brown would still be alive today. Police officers, just like everyone else in the US, are taught to believe a racial ideology, through explicit and implicit messages from education, the media, the legal system, the family, and more. We cannot afford to wait any longer to engage in interdisciplinary interventions that make whiteness visible, so we can dismantle it and work toward justice.

In the novel's Afterword, Oates writes: "Our past may weigh heavily upon us but it cannot contain us, let alone shape our future. America is a tale still being told—in many voices—and nowhere near its conclusion" (Oates 562). We inherited a system of whiteness, of racial ideology, of race, and we get to decide what we want to do with it. Once we acknowledge and examine its destructive nature, how it damages all of us, we can dismantle it and imagine and create a future where our society is not rooted in systemic racism.

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