Birds of a Feather: The Whiteness of Birding

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Abstract
The objective of this paper is to understand how Whiteness and White privilege play a part in the exclusion of non-White people from the activity of birdwatching, an activity in which over 90% of participants are White. Through an autoethnography, I chronicle ten site visits I made to Western New York bird walks, unpack my own Whiteness, and consider why the demographics of birdwatchers are so racially skewed. I utilize Ogbu's Cultural Ecological Model, calling attention to systemic forms of racism, highlighting the way society and its institutions treat and have treated minorities, and to community forces, which bring light how non-White communities interpret and respond to such treatment. I also utilize Whiteness Studies to identify White privilege and to challenge how Whites think about race. I postulate that low rate of participation among non-Whites may be attributed to limited access to socioeconomic resources, which are a consequence of the history and patterns of racial discrimination in America, especially forms of institutional racism. Instrumental segregation, such as access to education and to jobs, and relational discrimination, such as segregated neighbourhoods and racial covenants, may negatively affect non-white income levels, reducing their disposable income that could be used for the sometimes expensive recreational expenditures of birdwatching. I end by addressing the invisibility of Whiteness, particularly my own, to disrupt its insidious power.

Key Words: Whiteness, privilege, Cultural Ecological Model, birding.

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1. Introduction
I am not a morning person, yet I chose teaching as a profession and birdwatching as a hobby. Both my parents were birdwatchers, so birdwatching was part of my growing up. Much of my early birdwatching experiences took place within our suburban living room in Western New York, looking through the large windows with binoculars at bird feeders. Our backyard extended over one-hundred feet and was covered partially with a denseness of trees and shrubs. It was not uncommon to see deer, foxes and rabbits. My parents also had a summer cottage on a small lake in Western Massachusetts. Amid a forest of white pines, this country home provided easy access to see birds from our porch by day, and hear owls and goatsuckers by night. With seemingly little effort, birdwatching became
for me a lifelong hobby, fuelled by my appreciation for nature and the familial elements to it.

My father was not a birdwatcher as a child, but he was always interested in nature. He went to camp every summer where he was surrounded by the sights, smells and sounds of the forest. Nature walks were a regular activity. A counsellor there collected insects and my father spent one summer netting and pinning butterflies. In college, he took a course in ornithology, not for career purposes (he was pre-med), but to fulfil his growing love of birds. He got caught up with the birders at the university and in the local birdwatching group. There were a number of doctors involved. They attended special talks and organizing field trips. My mother too was always interested in nature. She grew up in a Westchester commuter town. They never had birdfeeders, but she distinctly remembers the birds there. She spent her summers at the lake house, playing on the shore and in the woods. Her mother would send her out to pick wildflowers, and her grandmother took a keen interest in teaching her about nature.

For the generation that preceded my parents, birds were slaughtered for their plumes or for sport. Killing birds was the accepted manner for naturalists to collect and study specimens. Birdwatching did not become a leisure activity until Roger Tory Peterson published a pocket field guide to birds in the 1930s and binoculars became more available after World War II. By 1970, about 4% of Americans considered themselves birdwatchers. By the 1980s, the percentage had grown to about 25%.¹ A 2005 National Survey on Recreation and the Environment (NSRE) conducted by the federal government found that the number of people participating in birdwatching activities increased by 155% between 1983 and 1995.²

Today, over 69 million American adults birdwatch.³ In every county in the United States today there is at least one designated place for birdwatching. Every yard, every farm, every part of the sky, every park and sidewalk provide opportunities to observe birds. But this seemingly easy access to birds does not mean just anyone watches birds. The demographics of birders do not match the demographics of the United States. Scott and Thigpen determined that attendees at Texas' Hummer/Bird Celebration in 1995 were disproportionately female (74%), over 46 years old (66%), married (75%), graduates of college (57%) and came from middle to upper income households.⁴ Their survey neglected to inquire about race. A 2003 NSRE survey found that a disproportionate percentage of birdwatchers (94%) identified themselves as White⁵. Most people who have been birdwatching for over twenty years meet fewer than three African American birdwatchers in their lifetime. Furthermore, 34% of birdwatchers have never encountered an African American birdwatcher, and 67% of African Americans surveyed have never met a birdwatcher.⁶ African Americans are interested in the outdoors and in environmental issues, but are not participating in birdwatching.
Over the past decade there have been some public conversations around the Whiteness of birdwatching. The Forest Service of the United States Department of Agriculture, among others, is interested in the issue because birdwatching can be a gateway into conservation. When surveying White birdwatchers, Robinson found that some were indifferent to the White question, while others attributed the underrepresentation to “social and economic pressures or the lack of a role model.” Robinson attributes the absence of African American birders to what he calls the don't loop: ‘If you don't meet others who are engaged in a particular activity, the odds are you will not take interest.’ Many people (my White self included) become birdwatchers because they are introduced to the activity by friends or family members.

The objective of this chapter is to understand how Whiteness and White privilege play a part in the exclusion of non-Whites from birdwatching. The assumption that birdwatching matters, I must admit, may itself be privileged. One could certainly ask instead why do White people participate in such folly? Non-Whites have leisure time and fill it with other worthy activities. Birdwatching most certainly is not the most important way to spend one’s free time, and I must make it clear that because one does not attend birdwatching hikes, partake in birdwatching, or have an interest in bird behaviour or ecology does not at all mean a person is culturally deprived or socially disadvantaged. Still, for this paper I am assuming that birdwatching is a worthwhile activity. Wild birds are accessible and they are everywhere. Their life cycles and life systems are observable, making them useful subject matter for environmental education and ecological awareness. Birds are involved in our myths and folktales. By going on birdwalks, I immerse myself in a natural environment, witness local ecosystems, observe wildlife in its natural settings and become in tune with local environmental issues.

Few studies have examined the disproportionate racial/ethnic make-up of birdwatching communities. This chapter analyzes the Whiteness in birdwatching communities and activities in Western New York State. To gather data, I attended ten birdwalks organized by area two area birdwatching groups. Locations ranged between 10 and 70 miles from my home. On my walks I looked specifically for elements of privilege. I observed with eyes and ears, and initiated some conversations to further my insights into privilege. I took brief notes in my notebook during each birdwalk, pretending to write down bird observations.

To help answer these questions and inform the discussion about the Whiteness of birdwatching the use of Ogbu's Cultural Ecological Model (CEM) brings particular insight. At the root of CEM is the positioning of the system and community forces. The system is made up of policies, curriculum, salary systems and other forms of institutional discrimination that oppress minorities, and are part of “the historical and contemporary treatment of minorities by social institutions.” These structural barriers that widen racial gaps include segregation, student tracking, and restrictive covenants. However, discrimination is not the only force at
work. Also influencing racial gaps are community forces: the ‘dominant patterns of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours’ within a minority community, or as Mickelson describes it: ‘the ways [minorities] perceive, interpret, and respond to [institutions and groups] as a result of their history in American society.’ From the duality of the system and community forces, groups form cultural frames of reference that shape their behaviour. Ogbu and Simon break the barriers down to three different collective problems: instrumental discrimination (e.g., in employment and wages), relational discrimination (e.g. social and residential segregation), and symbolic discrimination (e.g., denigration of the minority culture and language). To better understand how the system plays its part in widening racial gaps, a study of the white treatment of minorities and its impact is in order. The impact may be seen in the collective solutions to the collective problems.

This study also uses the framework of Whiteness studies. Avoiding an alleged neutral position (colour-blind) on the experiences of minority groups, Whiteness studies “reverses the traditional focus of research on race relations by concentrating attention on the socially constructed nature of white identity and the impact of whiteness on intergroup relations.” Whiteness is constructed contingently on socio-historic and political contexts and must be marked as an ‘organizing principle in social and cultural relations.’ Understanding race as a construct, Whiteness studies investigates Whiteness as an oppressive ideology that ‘promotes and maintains social inequalities’ which cause ‘great material and psychological harm to both people of colour and whites.’ Because of its privileged position, Whiteness serves as an invisible norm to other racial forms, a norm against which all other racial forms are judged. By deconstructing Whiteness and by making Whiteness visible to Whites, Whiteness studies attempts to dismantle White privilege and fosters forms of White identity that are anti-racist. To make Whiteness visible to Whites, McIntosh suggests that we unpack the ‘invisible knapsack of white privilege.’ Once Whiteness is visible, then Whites can work toward confronting and eliminating White privilege. This chapter is an exercise, then, in unpacking the knapsack.

2. Vignette

6 a.m., Saturday. Coffee, bird book, binoculars. To the car. I need to stop on my way to get breakfast. There is a McDonald's drive-thru close by. Egg McMuffin and coffee. I am waited on by a Latino and African American people. This is what they get up early on a Saturday morning to do. Quite different than what I get to do. Birdwatching takes a lot of leisure time. Robinson found that the biggest reason by far that keeps African Americans from participating in birdwatching is not having enough time. Most birdwatchers also have disposable income to spend on leisure activities. In this way, birdwatching is a privilege. Forty-seven percent of respondents at a Texas bird festival reported annual
household incomes of $50,000 or more; twelve percent had incomes greater than $130,000. For things like transportation, fees, tours, lodging, equipment, magazines and books, active recreational birdwatchers spends about $3,300 a year on this hobby.\textsuperscript{1920}

I scarf the food down, then drive 12 miles to the day’s meeting spot. There are fifteen cars parked there; all but mine are dent free and new. Cars are necessary to get to a bird walk, but also useful for the walks that involve multiple sites that are long distances apart. Spotting groups of parked cars is also a useful way to locate the birdwalks. Going on birdwalks in locations that are new to me, I sometimes get lost. Seeing a dozen cars in a rural parking lot is sometimes the landmark I need – although sometimes I also need a little good fortune. Last week, I arrived at a meeting location described in an online announcement, a town hall parking lot. That evening’s walk was organized particularly to witness the courtship display of the American Woodcock. There were a few parked cars scattered around the lot, and no people. It was cold out and snowing a little. Could it have been cancelled? Just as I was about to give up, a car drove into the lot. A White man in his sixties got out and approached us. He introduced himself. He told me that his wife went ahead to the site to check it out, and that he came to see who showed up here. He produced an iPod with little speakers to play for me the sounds of the male American Woodcock as it goes through different stages of its display. I then followed his car a few miles to a quiet road way off the beaten path. I weren’t White, might this have not run so smoothly? If I had been a lone African American man, would Robert have approached me in the parking lot? It was getting dark out. Would he have shown me his iPod? Would he have escorted me to a remote forest and walked with me deep into the woods with his wife? There is a lot of trust that goes on between people on birdwalks. Would Blackness betray that trust? Being White privileged me the benefit of the doubt.

This morning there are nineteen people on the bird walk, all White. This is my first time with this group. Larry, the walk organizer, knows most of the people in attendance, but is as welcoming and open to me as he is the regular crowd. He asks if this is anyone's first bird walk at Bardal Park. I am the only one to say yes. I appear also to be the only one who came alone and the only one who doesn't already know someone there, but I still feel welcomed. I still feel comfortable and confident. But I'm White. They're all White. Would a non-White person feel the same comfort level and confidence? African Americans are apprehensive about entering all-White neighbourhoods. The apprehension is understandable considering the waves of hate crimes nationally and the intimidation and violence initiated by Whites to actualize their sundown towns.\textsuperscript{21,22} Massey provides evidence that African Americans of all income levels remain in segregated communities and that ‘the vast majority of black Americans express strong support for the idea of integration.’\textsuperscript{23} The preponderance of disproportionately White communities today is the result of racist attitudes, private
behaviors and institutional practices. Dudley Edmondson, an African American bird photographer, describes the obstacles he faces outdoors as a Black man:

Personal safety is a big issue. Racial violence has a long history this weighs heavily on the minds of African-Americans when they think of outdoor activities. You're not sure who lives where you might go. There's concern about finding yourself in the wrong place at the wrong time. It's amazing that we still factor this into our recreational activities or travel plans, but we do.24

He also describes how he's been challenged or threatened in the woods:

It happened while I was camping in eastern Pennsylvania. It happened in Ohio. In Minnesota it's more a look than actually saying or doing something. It's a look that says “I'm ready for whatever that black man is going to do.”25

A study looking at Lincoln Park in Chicago, Illinois found that 10% of African Americans experienced discrimination there in the form of verbal harassment, physical gestures, assaults, nonverbal cues and harassment from law enforcement officers.26 In St. Louis, Missouri, a high percentage of African Americans chose not to go camping because it made them feel vulnerable to racial intimidation.27 In Phoenix, Arizona Hispanics avoided local National Park sites because of discrimination.28

As I listen in on the conversations, many of the people on today’s walk have travelled to different States and countries to go birdwatching. Some conversations involve big purchase items: new hiking boots and kayaks. Some conversations involve bird trips to Alaska, England and Central America. Birdwatchers spend a lot of money on birdwatching and have a substantial economic impact on the communities near birdwatching hot spots. In 1993, for example, about one-hundred thousand birders visited Cape May, New Jersey and spent over $10 million. American eco-tourists spend $400 million a year birdwatching in Costa Rica.29 There are over 200 birdwatching festivals each year in the United States.

This walk entails a long loop, about three miles in total, that winds through some woods and around some ponds. The trail is popular for joggers and dog walkers (all of which are White). I have noticed on other birdwalks that all joggers, cross country skiers and other pedestrians were always White. A woman, Nan, strikes up a conversation with me. She is a brand new birder. Her friend Oscar, who is also on this walk, got her interested in it. Oscar has a nice camera, and has been showing people some of the magnificent photos he's taken of birds over the past week. Nan tells me of her early birdwatching experiences. Her
experience is similar to mine in that we both had access to wooded backyards. What is compelling to my childhood backyard is that it was (and remains) part of an all-White neighbourhood. This was not by accident, but by design. The homes in our neighbourhood originally had restrictive covenants. My parents bought our house after the covenants were made illegal, but the legacy of Whiteness remained. American suburbs and towns today are not excessively White because of happenstance or because African Americans did not want to or could not afford to integrate.

Whiteness gains its power through its oppression of non-Whiteness. This dichotomy manifests itself through the construction of space: designating where people may live, may work, may play baseball, may go to school, etc. The institutions of Slavery and Jim Crow made the delineations clear. Post Civil Rights, the delineations are constructed through less obvious means, but nonetheless the lines are drawn. ‘Blatant violence has in most cases,’ as explained by Hargrove ‘been replaced by ideological (and symbolic) violence, which reinforces racialized inequities and justifies the interests of the ruling class.’\textsuperscript{30} Systematic programs exist that limit African American entry into White neighbourhoods, thereby reaffirming White supremacy and continuing the disenfranchisement of non-White communities.\textsuperscript{31} Segregation of residential areas strengthen segregation in other spaces help reinforce stereotypes and bigotry,\textsuperscript{32} and “inscribes racist assumptions on the landscape.”\textsuperscript{33} Covert barriers come in the form of “discriminatory real estate practices, zoning ordinances, and mortgage structures.”\textsuperscript{34} while others come in the form of niceness (‘keeping things clean, orderly, homogeneous, and controlled...a way of maintaining whiteness’),\textsuperscript{35} city planning agendas (freeways, arenas, convention centres), historic preservation or non-preservation,\textsuperscript{36} and racial covenants.\textsuperscript{37} Some barriers are not so covert. Sundown towns actively drove/drive African Americans out of local communities. Real estate agents, through racial steering, refused/refuse to ‘show or rent homes in white neighbourhoods to blacks.’\textsuperscript{38}

If my own and Nan's backyards helped spawn our birdwatching, then lack of access to a backyard may be a barrier to birdwatching. Robinson's notion of the don't loop implies that many people become birdwatchers because they are introduced to the activity by friends, family members, teachers or scoutmasters. Exposure to backyard bird feeders and easy access to field guides and binoculars also help to foster the developing bird watcher. The introduction is then furthered along through summer camps, birdwatching clubs, visits to parks and trips to eco-tourist destinations. In each of these locations, the developing birdwatching usually finds particular expert bird watchers from which to learn.

3. Discussion

The low rate of participation among non-Whites may be attributed to limited access to socioeconomic resources, which are a consequence of the history
and patterns of racial discrimination in America, especially forms of institutional racism. Instrumental segregation, such as access to education and to jobs, and relational discrimination, such as segregated neighbourhoods and racial covenants, may negatively affect non-White income levels, reducing their disposable income that could be used for the sometimes expensive recreational expenditures of birdwatching. The long history of institutional racism in America (slavery, Jim Crow, the GI Bill, restrictive covenants, the prison system, etc.) has prevented non-Whites from full participation in the job sector. The low rate may be attributed to differing community forces at play in different racial/ethnic communities. Independent of socioeconomic factors, different racial and ethnic groups may have different norms, value systems and socialization practices. Meeker found that Whites considered parks to be places of refuge and escape from urban stress, whereas African Americans and Native Americans held parks and the wilderness in disdain because they were reminders of their violent oppression.\textsuperscript{39} White culture stems from Western European traditions, including the tradition of rationalism, mastery over nature, the Enlightenment, and colonialism, constructing whites as being ‘the most rational, and, therefore, the most superior of all beings.’\textsuperscript{40} Birdwatching might be reproducing Enlightenment, colonialist hegemony. A Marxist analysis of parks and recreational areas might posit that their development was a bourgeois solution to anxieties incited by the industrial revolution and urbanization. The anxieties could be alleviated by escaping into a pastoral setting.\textsuperscript{41}

To get at his own Whiteness, Tim Wise reveals his biography, which is laden with examples of how being white gave him an endless stream of advantages. McIntosh, too, provides an example of White self-reflexivity. To make herself more accountable, she put herself to the task of identifying examples of how Whiteness provides her privileges that she did not earn, but receive merely because of the colour of her skin. My knapsack reveals some pertinent information. I was born in a White suburb that had racial covenants in its origin story. My parents were wealthy enough to have leisure time and spend money on leisure time. My father developed a love of nature attending summer camp, where all the campers and counsellors were White and the only non-White people worked in the kitchen. My mother developed her love of nature in part at her family's summer cottage. Each generation of my Massachusetts ancestors going back centuries owned their own land, lived in their own homes, and worked their own farms. Because my father was a doctor, my parents could afford to take me out of a public school situation where I was troubled and put me into a private day school. His family could afford to send him to college and medical school in the 1960s when the field of medicine was nearly all White. My parents were also able to send me to college, where I made friends who helped me get my first job, which launched me into my first career. Because of my education and my job, I have leisure time. My Saturday mornings can be spent spotting birds, and not making breakfast for other
people. I am approachable by strangers and welcomed by strangers. The process of unpacking tells of my untold advantages in America.

To address the lack of non-White birders, concerted efforts of outreach are taking place. In September 2009, John Robinson, Dudley Edmondson and others organized a Conference on Increasing Diversity in Outdoor Recreation for the Toledo, Ohio birdwatching community. But we must also, in the spirit of Nader study up. Nader's call for reinventing anthropology was also a call to arms. If a citizenry is to function in a democracy, then ‘citizens need to know something about the major institutions, government or otherwise, that affect their lives.’ White privilege and all the factors that support it, from institutional racism to microaggressions, must be unveiled and then dismantled and transformed.

Notes
4 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., 47.
17 Robinson, Birding for Everyone.
18 Scott and Thigpen, ‘Understanding the Birder as a Tourist’.
25 Ibid.
29 Scott and Thigpen, ‘Understanding the Birder as a Tourist’.
31 Ibid.
32 Loewen, Sundown Towns.
34 Ibid., 80.
35 Ibid., 87.
36 Hargrove, ‘Mapping the Social Field of Whiteness’.
37 David Kushner, Levittown: Two Families, One Tycoon and the Fight for Civil Rights in America's Legendary Suburb

38 Ibid., 49.


Bibliography


