Understanding White Women's Ambivalence towards Affirmative Action: Theorizing Political Accountability in Coalitions

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I once attended a media-training workshop on affirmative action designed to enhance communications skills necessary to discuss affirmative action in the post-Proposition 209 climate. The consultants presented focus group data the most and least effective ways of swaying people to support affirmative action. Workshop attendees were instructed that people are more likely to support affirmative action if it is portrayed as a remedy benefiting "women" rather than "people of color, particularly African Americans." The consultants also seemed to be saying that affirmative action supporters should target their message to white women as a group, appealing to the group's self-interest in maintaining the programs.

Similar survey data were generated relating to the Washington ballot initiative to end affirmative action in that state. For example, a 1998 Seattle Times poll of likely voters showed that upon being informed that the initiative would ban affirmative action for both people of color and women in state and local government, women who had supported the measure before being told of its overall effect were less likely to favor the measure, support dropping from 59 percent in favor to 46 percent.1 "Women" in this position, which pollsters call "second guessing a first impression," became the most significant group of potential supporters.2 Of course, in the state of Washington, where whites are the overwhelming majority, "women" can be assumed to be understood to mean "white women".3

Armed with this information, affirmative action activists and women's organizations crafted strategies to defeat Washington's I-200. While some organizations focused on the misleading nature of the measure, which posed as a "civil rights initiative," it soon became apparent that the strategies relying on exposure of the "deception" would fall short of victory in the context of Washington's battleground. The strategy of exposing the deceptive labeling of the initiative, designed primarily to educate voters about the actual intent of the  

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2 Id.

3 Id. at A1 (noting that "in a state [Washington] in which minorities make up at most 10 percent of the electorate, it is white voters who will determine whether this becomes the second state in the country, after California, to reverse course on affirmative action."); see also Tom Brune, Poll Indiciates I-200 Passage Was Call for Reform, SEATTLE TIMES, Nov. 4, 1998, at A1 (depicting the state of Washington's population as 84 percent white and its pool of frequent voters as 91 percent white).
measure was derived from the lessons of a 1997 Houston, Texas campaign to end affirmative action programs in the state. Political analysts credited the mayor of Houston with successfully defeating an anti-affirmative action proposition by adding language to clarify that the city’s “civil rights” initiative would eliminate affirmative action. But such a “truth in labeling” intervention only worked because Houston had a majority of people of color with whites making up only 10 percent of the city population. There, whites supported the proposed ban on affirmative action by a 2-1 margin, with 72 percent of white men in favor and 54 percent of white women in favor. Thus, it was the overwhelming opposition in the African American community that voted against the measure by a 9-1 margin that saved affirmative action in Houston.

Given the state of Washington’s racial demographics, where 86% of the population is white (and the proportion of white voters even higher), the Houston strategy designed to counteract the misleading nature of an anti-affirmative action proposition could not be expected to make the difference. Thus, white women became the primary target audience on which were spent the precious resources of the pro-affirmative action coalition. But that strategy too failed. To the surprise of many experts, I-200 passed by a comfortable margin garnering 58 percent of the vote. More surprisingly, approximately 51% of white women in Washington voted to end affirmative action. This support was in keeping with the Houston case where 54% of white women voted against affirmative action, with the percentage even higher in California—58 percent of white women in favor of Prop 209.

So what happened? Why didn’t at least a simple majority of white women support affirmative action in any of these cases? Opponents of Washington’s anti-affirmative action measure learned from mistakes in the California’s Prop 209 campaign, and seemingly did everything right, running a strong campaign. The “No on I-200” campaign avoided the divisions that plagued the No on Prop.

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5 Id.
6 Id.
7 Id.
8 Id.
10 Danny Westneat et al., Parties Vie for Women’s Vote, But Feminism Isn’t the Key, SEATTLE TIMES, Nov. 1, 1998, at A1 (noting that the women’s vote has become so central to the I-200 campaign that “the two sides are talking about little else in the waning days of the campaign”).
11 Brune, supra note 3, at A1 (noting that the margin of victory for I-200 was “so wide it surprised nearly everyone”); see also id. (reporting that I-200 picked up votes from some “surprising sources: about half women, 41 percent Democrats and 43 percent of those who voted for the re-election of [Democrat Patty Murray]”).
209 campaign and presented a unified front.\textsuperscript{14} It also had four times more funding than I-200’s supporters, with key corporate support from Microsoft, Boeing, Starbucks, Cosco, Weyerhaeuser, and the Seattle Times.\textsuperscript{15} Additionally, key Democratic leaders in the state, such as Governor Gary Locke and U.S. Senate candidate Patti Murray and even Al Gore spoke against I-200.\textsuperscript{16} The media and educational materials were professional and conveyed their intended message to white women.\textsuperscript{17}

It is instructive to compare the Asian Pacific American (APA) response to Proposition 209. Ward Connerly and his forces used APAs as the poster children for affirmative action victimization, in part, to head off charges of racism by putting a face of color on the movement.\textsuperscript{18} Indeed, contrary to the data showing white women were the primary beneficiaries of Washington’s affirmative action program, the stakes for APAs in California’s affirmative action programs were much more equivocal.\textsuperscript{19} In addition, intense media coverage sensationalized so-called APA victims of affirmative action and played to the myth of APAs as a “model minority” whose interests diverged from other groups of color.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{14} Sam Gideon Anson, \textit{A House Divided: In-Fighting to the End for Prop 209 Foes}, LA WEEKLY, Nov. 8, 1996 (covering the “recrimination among divided camps opposing Proposition 209”); Harold Meyerson, \textit{Take the Initiative—Please! When It Comes to Ballot Measures, California Progressives Play to Lose}, LA WEEKLY, Oct. 25, 1996 (reporting on how the campaign to oppose Proposition 209 in California split into two separate camps).

\textsuperscript{15} Tom Brune et al., \textit{Initiative 200: What Would It Do? Still Confused About I-200? Straightforward Questions, Answers}, SEATTLE TIMES, Oct. 25, 1998, at A1 (reporting that the I-200 proponents have raised $240,000 to persuade voters to approve the measure, while I-200 opponents have raise approximately $1 million to convince voters to reject the measure; also listing major corporations opposing the initiative). \textit{See also} Tom Brune, \textit{I-200 Supporters Optimistic Despite Fund-Raising Gap}, SEATTLE TIMES, June 12, 1998; Heath Foster, \textit{Affirmative Action Rules Tossed Out by State Voters}, SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER, Nov. 4, 1998, at A1 (reporting support from Northwest’s “corporate powerhouses” and comparing $1.6 million raised by “No on I-200” campaign vs. $484,670 raised by proponents).

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{See} Brune et al., \textit{supra} note 15 (stating that Locke and Murray are opposing the measure); \textit{see also} Dionne Searcey & Barbara A. Serrano, \textit{Gore Urges Initiative 200 Defeat}, SEATTLE TIMES, June 13, 1998 (reporting that Gore’s comments “are the first anyone in the White House has made on what many view as a politically sensitive issue”); \textit{see also} Sam Gideon Anson, \textit{supra} note 14 (quoting a No on 209 staffer as saying, “There wasn’t a white guy in the White House who would get anywhere near us. We were radioactive.”).

\textsuperscript{17} Westneat et al., \textit{supra} note 10, at A1 (stating that women have become so vital to the I-200 campaign “that the two sides are talking about little else . . . .”).


\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Id.} In a careful study by Kidder, he calculated that after controlling for APA representation as a proportion of the total number of 1\textsuperscript{st} year seats available, APAs comprised 18.5% of University of California law school classes (Boalt, Davis, Hastings, and UCLA) of the 1997-99 classes (following the passage of Prop. 209), compared to 17.7% in 1994-96(immediately preceding the implementation of Prop 209). Thus, there is a very negligible benefit for APA enrollments in UC law schools after the abolition of affirmative action.

Despite all of this, a *Los Angeles Times* poll found that 61% of APAs voted against the anti-affirmative action measure. In a poll undertaken by the Asian Pacific American Legal Center in conjunction with University of California at Los Angeles social scientists (which was more extensive than the *LA Times* by interviewing more southern California APAs including non-English-speaking ones), APAs were found to have voted in the same proportion as Latinos against Prop 209 at 76 percent. African American voters rejected the initiative at 74 percent. Despite conservatives' deployment of affirmative action as a "wedge issue" vis-à-vis the APA community, and despite the fact that APAs do not benefit from many affirmative action programs, APAs “rejected a narrow conception of self-interest and chose instead a broader vision of social justice” as UCLA Professor Jerry Kang observed. So why didn’t even a simple majority of white women choose a broader vision of social justice, especially in light of the clear economic interests white women had in maintaining such programs?

II. EXPLAINING WHITE WOMEN’S AMBIVALENCE: APPLYING SYMBIOSIS TO THE ANTI-AFFIRMATIVE ACTION BALLOT INITIATIVES

Perhaps Nancy Ehrenreich’s theory of symbiosis and subordination holds promise for explaining the behavior of white women voters. Professor Ehrenreich argues that, structures of subordination interact in mutually reinforcing ways. She maintains that identity theory (particularly intersectionality theory) tends to promote zero-sum understandings and interactions among subordinated groups that do not reflect the complexity of the mutually reinforcing structures of subordination. Using the O.J. Simpson trial and Clarence Thomas nomination as illustrations, she explains how such cases were framed as “race v. gender” by competing [patriarchal] civil rights and [white] women’s interest groups. Hence, Ehrenreich argues, identity theorists and activists of various sorts unwillingly may play into “divide-and-conquer” dynamics engineered by and benefiting the political right.

Of particular relevance to the affirmative action issue and this discussion are Professor Ehrenreich’s ideas about “compensatory subordination,” a concept she uses to explain why the more privileged members of a marginalized group may subordinate less privileged members of their own group or members of another marginalized group. Compensatory subordination operates as a pressure valve of
sorts. It refers to the tendency of semi-subordinated individuals (or “singly burdened individuals” presenting the “hybrid intersectionality” case), such as white women, who possess identities that are privileged (white) and subordinated (women) to use their privileged identity to assert power over an individual or group with a less privileged identity. In so doing, they “let off steam” accumulated from their own experiences of oppression. Professor Ehrenreich draws from Professor Derrick Bell’s example of poor whites in the post-Reconstruction South who demanded segregation in order to retain their sense of superiority over African Americans. Rather than seeking common cause with their fellow working class peers across race lines, poor whites chose instead to identify with “the master” so to speak. Professors Bell and Ehrenreich point out that such compensation clearly subordinates people of color under a strengthened racial hierarchy, but it also undermines the economic interests of the white worker by preserving class hierarchy. Presumably, we might be able to explain white women’s support of measures like I-200 as a case of compensatory subordination, one that simultaneously entrenches racist hierarchies and patriarchal family relations.

Professor Ehrenreich has contributed significantly to what is now being referred to as the “post-intersectionality” literature. Her theory is refreshing for its energy, spirit of coalition, and optimism. She has provided critical theorists with new language and helpful concepts to address complex social phenomena. However, it is not clear that her critique of identity theory and her conceptualization of compensatory subordination help us to analyze cases such as the one involving white women’s opposition to affirmative action. I do not find Professor Ehrenreich’s reasoning to be off so much as incomplete. Given the space limitations, I will focus primarily on my areas of disagreement.

In this essay, I forward three responses to why the symbiosis approach falls short when applied to the I-200 case. Her largely psychologically-informed symbiosis analysis (especially the concept of compensatory subordination) lacks a needed material and political moment. First, it underappreciates the economic dimensions of whiteness. The missing elements result in a glossing over of significant material determinants, especially ones that which I will refer to collectively as “material whiteness.” Second, symbiosis analysis suggests an unrealistic “all-or-nothing” approach to politics. Symbiosis analysis does not, as they say in tort law, “take the victim as you find her.” As such, symbiosis theory risks forwarding an elite “let them eat theory” approach. Third, symbiosis analysis fails to address the issue of political agency and accountability, which are critical to the success of effective coalitions. The resulting over-psychologized and under-materialized analysis gives singly burdened, “hybrid” intersectional individuals (such as white women) a “pass” when it comes to exacting political accountability, and renders those who demand accountability -

28 Id. at 276.
29 I find the term “post-intersectionality” unfortunate, for it suggests greater differences with intersectionality theory than I believe actually exist, and represents a rather Oedipal tendency among critical theorists to “slay the father,” or mother in this case.
typically less privileged, “multiply-burdened” individuals (such as white women) - as appearing theoretically unsophisticated, or worse, as politically regressive coalition-busters.

A. Symbiosis Theory Underappreciates Material Whiteness

1. DuBois’ “Psychological Wage” and “Compensatory Subordination”: Only a Partial Explanation of I-200

The post-Reconstruction era that Professor Ehrenreich refers to in her review of the perplexing history of white working class capitulation to racism against its greater economic interests is certainly a fascinating historical chapter. In his classic work on Reconstruction, W.E.B. DuBois brilliantly conceives of the “psychological wage” that white workers received from segregationist policies and practices to compensate for the low wages they received at work.30 Or, in the words of whiteness historian and theorist David Roediger, “status and privileges conferred by race could be used to make up for alienating and exploitative class relationships.”31 Both DuBois and Roediger’s work on the psychological wages of whiteness would seem to lay the foundation for Professor Ehrenreich’s “compensatory subordination” analysis.

Does the “psychological wage” (or “compensatory subordination”) analysis adequately explain white women’s surprising support for I-200? That white women were the biggest beneficiaries of Washington’s “Plus Three” affirmative action program is well documented. Women comprised sixty percent of those with standing under Washington’s affirmative action hiring plan, followed by 22 percent people of color and 18 percent white men.32 At 24 percent of the total, white women were the largest group of hired employees through the Plus Three program between 1993-1997.33 Interestingly, white men were the second largest group of beneficiaries at 22 percent, given their disproportionately high representation among veterans and the disabled, two other groups covered by the program.34 However, there was no need for a “psychological wage” to explain why white men rejected the affirmative action policy since benefits to veterans and the disabled were left untouched by I-200’s framers.35 White men lost

33 Brune et al., supra note 15, at A1; see also Brune, supra note 32, at A1 (reporting that “[o]f those with standing under affirmative action [for state hiring], 60 percent are white women, 22 percent are people of color—and 18 percent are white men.”). County commissioner, Larry Gossett, stated that in 1996, of 950 affirmative action hires in King County, 600 were of white women and 100 were of white men. V. Dion Haynes, Washington State to Vote on Ending Affirmative Action, CHI. TRIB., Aug. 30, 1998, at 5H.
34 Of those groups, white men comprise seventy percent of veterans and approximately half of the state’s disabled population. Brune et al., supra note 15, at A1.
35 Id. I-200 stated that it would “prohibit preferential treatment based on race, sex, and national origin in state and local government employment, contracting, and education.” Brune, supra note 3.
nothing by voting for I-200 and thus required no compensation. But white women did lose economically by voting for the measure.

Applied to this case, Professor Ehrenreich’s analysis of “singly-burdened individuals” (a.k.a. “hybrid intersectionality”) and compensatory subordination might begin to explain the surprising vote, apparently against self-interest, by white women. But compensation is different from that discussed by DuBois or Roediger, a point I will return to later. In the I-200 case, status and privileges conferred by race could be used to make up for alienating and exploitative gender relations. By voting to end affirmative action, white women are paid the psychological wage of whiteness (and thereby limited acceptance by white men) to compensate for the lower wages (literally and figuratively speaking) they earned because they are women. Indeed, pollsters found that voters, including women, generally did know that affirming the measure would eliminate affirmative action on the basis of race and gender. But despite understanding the inclusion of both race and gender in I-200, white women somehow perceived the issue to be mostly about race. White women favoring passage were, then, voting as whites, and in Professor Ehrenreich’s words, may have been “accept[ing] their oppressed position along one axis in exchange for the privilege they experience along another.”

Professor Ehrenreich’s analysis of mutually supporting systems of subordination is most helpful in explaining why white women might engage in such compensatory behavior. She acknowledges that on the one hand, singly-burdened individuals such as white women may be more able to resist oppression due to their access to privilege in one sphere. On the other hand, she perceptively argues that privilege may also deter resistance by making one afraid of losing what little privilege one has. White women, according to Ehrenreich, may also be more vulnerable to subordination than others by pressures to assimilate to the dominant group norm. With one foot in each of the privileged and unprivileged worlds, white women observe the treatment of less privileged groups and see how contingent their privilege is upon compliance with dominant normativity. This pressure to assimilate to the dominant [white] norm is made possible by the interaction of multiple systems of subordination that coerce singly burdened individuals into conformity.

36 Brune, supra note 3 (stating that voters confused about the initiative were evenly split between supporters and opponents). See also Brune & Varner, supra note 4 (reporting that most voters understood what their votes on I-200 meant). Some opponents of I-200 tried to attribute their defeat to the “deception” analysis—i.e., white women did not really know that they were voting to end affirmative action given the deceptive use of language in the initiative. Heath Foster, Affirmative Action Rules Tossed Out by State Voters, SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER, Nov. 4, 1998, at A1 (reporting how initiative opponents “blamed deceptive language for the measure’s passage.”).

37 Oscar Eason, Jr., Retrospective on Campaign for Initiative 200, SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER, Nov. 12, 1998, at A15 (reporting that “[d]espite efforts by opponents to make the referendum a woman’s issue . . . voters continued to see the initiative in terms of minority preferences.”). See also Brune, supra note 3, at A1 (analyzing post-I-200 interviews recording that the measure’s supporters “felt that some affirmative-action policies actually discriminate for minorities against whites, white men in particular”).

38 Ehrenreich, supra note 25, at 291.
Anecdotal evidence from the I-200 campaign is consistent with the existence of such assimilationist pressure. Political consultant and vice-president of the National Women’s Political Caucus, Cathy Allen worked on defeating I-200. She found one common reaction to the initiative was that “women initially support [it] because they don’t want men to think women’s career successes are based on gender alone.” Similarly, one female voter, identified as Carmel Angevine, a “31-year old Olympia mother” juggling two part time jobs, elaborated that she wanted to be hired “because I’m the best person for the job, not because I’m a woman.” Angevine further shared that she objects to affirmative action because it “encourages people to look at skin color, not qualifications.” White women’s fear of being touched by the brush of affirmative action’s “stigma” may lead them to reject the beneficial policy so that they may be more acceptable to men on traditional terms. In this sense, they are coerced into conformity with white male norms [“merit”-based hiring, no “special treatment”]. This coercion is made even more clear in the context of Angevine’s comments reflecting her awareness of how affirmative action benefiting people of color is viewed among whites—as promoting people based on “skin color” and not “qualifications.” There, but for the grace of God, goes she. Thus, she rejects affirmative action for women and people of color so as not to be categorized [by white men] as an unworthy hire.

As stated previously, I find Professor Ehrenreich’s analysis of white women as “singly-burdened” individuals vulnerable to compensatory subordination and assimilation provides a possible partial explanation for the I-200 vote. Anecdotal evidence, while inconclusive, is available to support this thesis. However, as I will elaborate below, the symbiosis approach is incomplete because it misses important material racialized economic and political factors. In addition, it is unclear how one would predict which singly-burdened white women will resist subordination and which will fall prey to compensatory subordination and assimilation. Under Ehrenreich’s foundation, either response is possible.

2. Material Whiteness and the Redefinition of White Women’s “Self-Interest”

a. “Practically Identical Interests”? Or DuBois’ Wishful Thinking?

A more complete explanation of white women’s opposition to affirmative action has its roots in what I refer to as “material whiteness.” By material whiteness, I refer to the measurable economic benefits and privileges that are conveyed merely by belonging to the advantaged racial group under white supremacy. W.E.B. DuBois (“DuBois”) articulated the economic dimensions of

40 Foster, supra note 36 at A1.
41 Id.
42 Of course, Professor Cheryl Harris’ brilliant work on “whiteness as property” lays the foundation for this analysis. Cheryl Harris, Whiteness as Property, 106 HARV. L. REV. 1707 (1993) (arguing that white identity confers tangible and economically valuable benefits that have been legally recognized as a form
whiteness in his conception of the psychological wage. While DuBois referred to a psychological wage, he made clear that this wage was more than psychological, for it brought with it real social and economic significance as well:

They were given public deference...because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions [and] public parks . . . . The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent upon their votes, treated them with such leniency . . . . Their votes selected public officials, and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment . . . . White schoolhouses were the best in the community, and conspicuously placed, and they cost anywhere from twice to ten times as much per capita as the colored schools.43

In much of his work on Reconstruction, DuBois was a Marxist writing within the Black nationalist tradition. Perhaps because of his Marxist filter, DuBois may have seen more commonality between poor whites and Blacks than actually existed. He felt that whiteness made Southern white workers forgot they shared “practically identical interests” with poor Blacks.44 But as Michelle Brattain argues in her new book, The Politics of Whiteness (and as DuBois himself had described), white workers “did not in fact share identical interests with black workers.”45 Whiteness per se provided entrée into politics, employment and society. Poor whites had clear material advantages over poor African Americans in addition to a good dose of psychological “capital” as well. Their whiteness determined their ability to enter industrial wage work in the South.46

Moreover, the relationship between white elites and poor whites was not one-sided as suggested by either the psychological wage or compensatory subordination analyses. Poor whites were not merely racially regressive actors seeking approval from white elites.47 Nor were they politically naïve “dupes” “easily distracted from the ‘real’ class interests” in exchange for little or nothing in return other than superficial social niceties.48 Rather, they were “realistic political actors inspired by the events and opportunities around them.”49 Whiteness provided the potential for mutually advantageous alliances between different classes of whites.50 For example, Brattain comments on the “remarkable flexibility” of Georgia Democrats to accommodate an extremely diverse set of white interests.51 These vital connections, facilitated by whiteness,
allowed poor whites to enjoy the “spoils of discrimination,” i.e., jobs, the franchise, welfare, and status. As such, poor whites had quite significant social and economic interests vested in maintaining white privilege—a conflation of race and class that comprises material whiteness. Despite the pronounced economic and class distinctions among whites, the effect of material whiteness was to provide whites of all classes with “practically divergent interests” and identities from those of African Americans.

Professor Ehrenreich’s theory of symbiosis and mutually supportive systems of subordination is premised upon her rejection of the possibility that interests of subordinated groups can in fact conflict.52 “[T]he zero sum problem is a false concern,” she states.53 “The point is to look for the solution that challenges both (or all) systems simultaneously.”54 She criticizes identity theory for seeming to suggest that “there are irresolvable conflicts among identity groups.”55 Because hierarchies interlock and reinforce one another, group interests are “inevitably intertwined.” Given the interlocking nature of oppression, if one targets only one source of subordination without also targeting a supporting source of oppression, the entire system of subordination will survive the partial attack and likely be strengthened, not weakened.56 Thus, subordinated group interests are intertwined and the focus of critique must be appropriately multifaceted, focusing on multiple systems of subordination instead of only one.

While Ehrenreich’s analysis of “false conflicts” imposed by identity theory may be attractive or even compelling in certain instances, it risks the same wishful thinking evinced by DuBois’ mis-conceptualization of “practically identical interests” between poor whites and African Americans. The move to flatten difference in the service of a presumed unity of interests among all subordinated groups relies on an unfortunate avoidance of material distinctions. In the case of I-200, symbiosis theory misses the significance of material whiteness, which provides a fuller understanding of white women’s support for the anti-affirmative action measure.

b. Raced Families, Raced Nation: White Women’s Economic Interests under Euroheteropatriarchy

In order to understand the perplexing results in the I-200 vote, a closer look at post-election polling data is required. This polling data revealed that white women, despite enjoying the lion’s share of economic benefits from Washington’s affirmative action plan, feared that affirmative action benefiting

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52 Ehrenreich, supra note 25, at 267.
53 Id. at 317.
54 Id. Professor Devon Carbado challenges the progressive wisdom that merely contemplating hierarchies of oppression necessarily problematic, divisive, and “zero sum.” Devon Carbado, Race to the Bottom, 49 UCLA L. REV. 1283, 1290 (2002) (forwarding his notion of “a politics of racial priority” which views race as being on the “bottom of the bottom” throughout U.S. history).
55 Id. at 269.
56 Ehrenreich, supra note 25, at 313.
people of color would injure the material interests of their family. Following the passage of I-200, feminist political consultant Cathy Allen further analyzed the reasons for defeat: "[A]lmost every white woman has had a husband, boyfriend, brother, or son gripe about losing a job or a promotion to a black person. It gets to the point where women themselves talk this anecdote to death and to the point where it becomes institutional memory." News reporters covering the initiative's surprising strength among white women uncovered similar narratives. Christine Griffiths, a "wife and mother of two" in Bothell, Washington, stated her misgivings about affirmative action. "I believe we had to have something like the anti-discrimination laws to make some changes in the country, but they've gone too far, and now everybody seems to be a minority group except white males." A post-election analysis article by the same reporter later places Griffiths' comments in context, reusing her original quote, and then adding her comments that her son "was nearly a 4.0 student," but that "all the scholarships offered by the state went to minorities."

White women's ambivalence towards affirmative action did not solely track with the fate of male relatives. Vangie Pepper, identified as a Washington voter who once felt that "giving special breaks, especially to minorities, was moral and just." Recently, however, with a daughter who is a high school junior considering college choices, Pepper is not so sure. "I have always been for affirmative action," Pepper stated. "If all things are equal you should probably have some kind of affirmative action. But should my daughter not get into school because of it?" But for the most part, the anecdotal evidence recorded by reporters in the Washington election identified white women's concerns about white male spouses, sons and other family members, as exemplified by a Tacoma resident, Patricia Sontstreng, who voted for I-200 and for U.S. Senate candidate, Patty Murray, because "she's a good Democrat." In explaining her reasons, Sontstreng disclosed, "[m]y husband’s a longshoreman. He’s a union member.

57 See infra, notes 58-63 and accompanying text.
58 Derrick Z. Jackson, When Women Spurn Equality, BOSTON GLOBE, Nov. 13, 1998, A27. See also Tom Brune, Poll Indicates, SEATTLE TIMES, Nov. 4, 1998, A1 (quoting Velma Eastwood, a "retiree in Spokane" who stated her ambivalence about I-200: "We know of a black person who was given a promotion over a white person, and it appeared to me that the white person was better qualified. For that reason, we were tempted to vote in favor of the initiative. . . . Then we got thinking about the women. They are not getting paid or receiving credit for what they do. So that’s why we decided to vote against it."). Lydia Chavez has traced a similar narrative in California's Prop. 209 campaign. LYDIA CHAVEZ, THE COLOR-BIND: CALIFORNIA’S BATTLE TO END AFFIRMATIVE ACTION 98 (1998) (identifying white women’s concerns that their husbands and sons were losing jobs because of affirmative action).
59 Brune & Varner, supra note 4 (using partial quote of Christine Griffiths before the election). See also Brune, supra note 3, at A1 (reusing longer, contextualized quote from Christine Griffiths after the election). See also David Postman & Tom Brune, Positions on I-200 Are Fluid, SEATTLE TIMES, July 12, 1998 (reporting that a new state poll of voters across the state of Washington finds that most voters "think affirmative action benefits unqualified people and discriminates against white men.").
60 Brune, supra note 3, at A1.
But before he belonged to the union, he was a middle-aged white male, and it's very hard to get a job as a white American male.  

Exit polling and post-election interviews suggest a consistent pattern of white women's articulated concerns about affirmative action's negative impact on their male (and sometimes female) family members. This feminist "ethic of care" is positive in the sense that it reflects a concern for others outside of the liberal individual. However, it is problematic in that such care and concern is racially bounded within the white family. The notion of family developed within a culture dominated by Euroheteropatriarchy, reproduces racial inequalities in a society where over ninety-eight percent of all whites that are married are married to other whites. The laudable campaign to preserve affirmative action fell short in large part because pollsters and political consultants severely misjudged white women's interests. A majority of white women voting in Washington rejected the presumed unit of analysis—the white woman as individual in the workplace—and substituted instead the white woman as protector of the larger interests of the white family in the economy and larger society. In short, the political analysts underestimated the role that race, racism, and material whiteness would play in redefining white women's individual interests through the narrative of family. 

Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins has been at the forefront of analyzing the rhetoric of family and its connection to racial hierarchy. Hill Collins points out how feminist analyses "blame white men for racial oppression" yet are "strangely silent concerning white women's culpability." Feminists have long debated how the language of family has been used to promote male and heterosexual privilege. But little work has been done by feminists to understand how the language of family promotes racial subordination. Hill Collins identifies the rhetoric of family as a key method of naturalizing white women's oppression of women of color. As she has observed, "the centrality of family as both social
institutions and ideology in shaping racial meanings and racial practices" has been under emphasized. The "family," with its racialized and territorialized content, gives rise to a broader definition of white women's self-interest. Thus, the latent "white family" rationale counteracts the individual material gains of affirmative action for white women.

Professor Ehrenreich might view the white family rhetoric as evidence of support for her symbiosis theory of interwoven structures of subordination. Perhaps she would point out how the family, as feminists have maintained, is a primary vehicle through which gender subordination is effectuated. As Martha Fineman argues in The Neutered Mother, The Sexual Family And Other Twentieth Century Tragedies, "family continues to operate as the most gendered or role-defined of our institutions, allowing for and justifying pervasive, ingrained, and persistent patterns of gender inequality in the larger society."69

Using a symbiosis approach, one might analyze how the family rationale, which undergirds white women's opposition to affirmative action, also prevents heterosexual white women from seeing how the family subordinates women (and sexual minorities) under heteropatriarchy. Because of the nature of reinforcing hierarchies, Ehrenreich might argue that attacking only one hierarchy (racial, in this example), would not only fail, but would serve to reinforce all the raced, gendered, and sexualized hierarchies inherent in the social institution of the family.

My response to this reinforcing hierarchies analysis is that it raises a serious analytical and political problem. In the quest to avoid the "battle of oppressions" problem she identifies, Ehrenreich infuses symbiosis theory with the problem of relativism. This flattening of difference—that ever expanding claims by subordinated multiple- and singly-burdened individuals (i.e. everyone, as recognized by Ehrenreich herself), absent any prioritization of claims—risk rendering all claims as morally and politically equivalent and hierarchical power relations as non-existent. Professor Ehrenreich perceptively acknowledges the problem that symbiotic analysis may have a "depoliticizing effect, leading to the conclusion that no one is worse off than anyone else, that no one is to blame for the situation, and that therefore progressive reforms are unnecessary."70

Because of the force of material whiteness in the lives of white women, however,

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70 Ehrenreich, supra note 25, at 320.
Ehrenreich’s “equal time” approach to analyzing race falls short of the goal required to defeat I-200.

Ironically, feminism and the gains it has brought have replaced strict patrilineal political economy and property relations with liberal political economy. What white women got by marching in DC was not just a psychological wage, but also a real material wage, such as access to better-paying, higher status jobs and quality education. Theoretically, the same might be said for what the civil rights movement achieved for people of color, particularly African Americans. However, the historical and ongoing legacy of segregated space, under funded public schools, and racialized housing policies and markets, and employment discrimination have maintained a rigid racial political economy. The rising tide of racial political economy does in fact lift all white boats and therefore raises the stakes for white women to protect those gains for their families. In this context, one again can see the white family rationale at work in increasing racial inequality and segregation. Suburban white flight, the “War on Drugs,” California’s “three strikes and you’re out” sentencing laws, failing urban public schools, all are connected to the desire to insulate and protect the white family from intrusion by the racial “other.”

Professor Hill Collins acknowledges how segregation impedes construction of an alternative family through feminist organizing under the rubric of “sisterhood.” “[I]maging multicultural, multiethnic, multiracial, women’s groups predicated on family-based notions of sisterhood is much easier than building such communities across lived, institutionalized segregation.” Hill Collins criticizes in particular, white American feminist theories that “maintain the illusion of gender solidarity while allowing hierarchy to be reformulated via actual practices.”

I fear that despite her best intentions, Ehrenreich’s theory of “inevitably intertwined” reinforcing hierarchies, coupled with her rejection of conflicts among identity groups as “false conflicts,” echo to DuBois’ in denial utopian but mistaken understanding of “practically identical interests.” This assumed solidarity of interests fails to recognize hierarchies and practices organized around material whiteness that serve as a formidable barrier to the development of a shared political consciousness. Perhaps Engels was right, as suggested by labor historian Stanford Lyman, in identifying ethnoracial differences as a primary reason when queried as to the origins of American exceptionalism explaining why a multiracial, multicultural class consciousness did not develop in the United States.

71 Patricia Hill Collins, Fighting Words 222 (1998). Hill Collins continues: “The path from women conceptualized as a numerically superior ‘minority group’ . . . under the banner of sisterhood, to building actual women’s groups organized around sisterhood encountered considerable resistance, much of it from African-American women and other similarly situated women.” Id.
72 Id. at 223.
B. Symbiosis Theory Suggests Unrealistic “All or Nothing” Political Strategies

Ehrenreich faults identity theory and intersectionality analysis for “the fact that [they] lend themselves to such divisive thinking.”\(^{74}\) In order to sidestep “divide and conquer” strategies and “zero-sum” analyses often generated by the right and promoted by identity categories, Ehrenreich promotes symbiosis theory as a way out. Symbiosis theory also addresses the “infinite regress” and “relativism” problems attending intersectionality theory which in turn creates ever-expanding oppressed subgroups. And if everyone is oppressed, then no one is — thus, giving rise to the problem of “relativism.”\(^{75}\)

I must point out the internal contradiction in her criticisms of identity theory as presenting perils of divide and conquer or battle of oppressions as well as the problem of relativism. It seems quite a bit is being attributed to identity/intersectionality theory—that they create unnecessary and divisive hierarchies and that they do not create enough hierarchies! Nevertheless, symbiosis theory would suggest that identity groups become wed to protecting their political turf, and therefore fall victim to divisive, “me first” tendencies, often promoted by the right.

Certainly, there is evidence of the divide-and-conquer dynamic at work in I-200 Campaign.\(^{76}\) One newspaper headline emblazoned that “In a Battle Over Preferences, Race and Gender at Odds.”\(^{77}\) Another article covering the importance of the women’s vote for the election profiled Kellie Brown, “a married, 32-year-old Seattle resident who works as a food server” as expressing her uncertainty as a voter priority to the election. “I feel like the Democrats are concerned with all these super liberal things like gay rights,” she said. “I care about gay rights, too, but how about working families?”\(^{78}\) Of course this framing represents exactly the problem identified by Professor Ehrenreich—the zero-sum deployment of identities as vying for scarce resources, in competition with one another. To Kellie Brown, gay rights and working families never intersect, much less undergo symbiosis.

However, Ehrenreich’s contention that identity and intersectionality theory promote a “discourse of distinctness” that leads identity groups to fall prey to conservatives’ divide-and-conquer framings does not apply to the “No on I-200” campaign.\(^{79}\) Women’s groups and civil rights organizations cooperated to craft a campaign that would extend beyond traditional racial group beneficiaries to include white women. For example, speaking against I-200, Jesse Jackson pointed out that affirmative action is not a “minority issue.” “The reality is,” Jackson explained, “that the primary beneficiaries of affirmative action have been white families who have achieved economic stability in part because of the

\(^{74}\) Ehrenreich, \textit{supra} note 25, at 254.
\(^{75}\) \textit{Id.} at Part III.B.3-4.
\(^{76}\) Westneat et. al., \textit{supra} note 10, at A1. I differ with Ehrenreich on who or what is responsible for this divide-and-conquer narrative.
\(^{77}\) Verhovek, \textit{supra} note 9.
\(^{78}\) Westneat et. al., \textit{supra} note 10, at A1.
\(^{79}\) Ehrenreich, \textit{supra} note 25, at 259.
ascension of women in the workplace.” In fact, it was the conservative proponents of I-200 who objected to the coalitional and inclusive approach to framing the “No on I-200” campaign. But even if the “No on I-200” campaign had crafted a more troubling and divisive campaign, how much would symbiosis theory assist in providing a solution? As stated previously, Professor Ehrenreich maintains that the zero sum problem is a “false concern.” She argues that the ultimate objective is “to look for the solution that challenges both (or all) systems simultaneously.” While this approach may be useful analytically and theoretically, I’m not sure how well it translates to actual political campaigns such as I-200. It is difficult to imagine symbiosis theory as a thirty second soundbyte. Maybe the soundbyte test is unfair, as it would be difficult if not impossible to translate almost any critical theory into an effective thirty second pitch. But even allowing for greater educational efforts, it is doubtful that a symbiosis approach to the “No on I-200” campaign would have produced a different result. Pointing out that the white heterosexualized family construction is oppressive to women and sexual minorities as it is to people of color does not seem as though it would have won the day to save affirmative action.

If politics is the “art of negotiating the possible,” then symbiosis theory, which forwards an aspirational but future-oriented ideal, may be ill suited for application in the political realm. In other words, theorizing the future perfect does not translate well to the present imperfect. Rather than “taking the victim as one finds her,” as in tort, symbiosis theory requires a rather advanced subject. For example, Professor Ehrenreich offers the middle-class white women’s potential conflict with low-income, childcare providers of color as a potential “zero-sum” framing if identity theory is adopted. The middle-class white women should not view her nanny’s interests as separate from her own. Through symbiosis theory, Ehrenreich suggests instead that the interests of the two groups of women don’t necessarily or inevitably conflict. She identifies governmental subsidization of childcare for middle class parents as the “win-win” solution that would boost the wages of the childcare providers. “[A] symbiotic analysis challenges the zero sum assumption that policies benefiting certain identity subgroups will necessarily disadvantage others.” Until such forward-looking policies are implemented (if ever during the five years or so that she would need such childcare), however, the middle-class white woman would find that her privilege and access to employment is enabled by the availability of cheap childcare due to underpaying low-income women of color. In this sense, symbiosis theory suggests a somewhat haughty “let them eat theory” stance. Theory is all

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81 Verhovek, supra note 9 (quoting chair of I-200 campaign, conservative internet talk show host, John Carlson as saying, “They [I-200 opponents] are trying to make this a gender issue, rather than an issue of racial preferences, which is most of what is encompassed by 200.”).
82 Ehrenreich, supra note 25, at 317.
83 Id.
84 Id. at 318.
85 Id.
there is to offer between the present imperfect and the far into the future perfect. Indeed, even if after reading Professor Ehrenreich's work, the middle-class white woman becomes enlightened and ashamed of her previous zero-sum understandings, it is still unlikely that she (or her underpaid nanny) would engage in the "third shift" to lobby the U.S. Congress effectively for subsidized childcare. By requiring that all systems of subordination be attacked simultaneously suggests a rather unrealistic as well as doomed "all or nothing" approach to the art of negotiating of the possible.

C. Symbiosis Theory Does Not Address Political Agency or Accountability

1. Underdeveloped Political Consciousness: Giving White Women a Pass?

The "present imperfect" creates difficulties for theorizing the future perfect ideal not only because of the difficulty of enacting such progressive "win-win" reforms as illustrated by the government-subsidized child care, but also because of the problem of underdeveloped political consciousness among subordinated subjects. Professor Ehrenreich seems to suggest that all that is needed to build better coalitions is better theory or better frameworks for understanding the complexity of mutually reinforcing systems of subordination. I suggest that problems encountered in coalitions may be much more remedial. Coalitions often break down over inability of groups to acknowledge or appreciate the claims, histories, or issues of other member groups of the coalition. In this sense, the problem too often lies in not recognizing the claims of one identity group.

In the 1-200 case, the problem is not the inability to frame the solution in terms of a "win-win" solution. Affirmative action proponents consciously campaigned that preserving affirmative action benefits both white women and people of color. However, as discussed above, the force of material whiteness and the white family narrative prompted a majority of white women in Washington to sever their interests from those of people of color. In contrast, the APA community response to such initiatives was quite different from that of white women, even though the material gains from affirmative action are much more equivocal for APAs. How might the difference in community response be understood? One way to understand the difference is through political consciousness. Where APAs may have viewed themselves as people of color (even if they did not benefit from some affirmative action programs as other

86 In my experience, I have often seen coalitions falter over over two common problems: in coalitions comprised predominantly of whites, over the issue of white privilege; and in coalitions comprised predominantly of people of color, over the issue of heterosupremacy. I have rarely seen coalitions falter over gender for the simple fact that in the movements in which I have been involved, although there were certainly problems and issues of male privilege and supremacy at work at times, these problems were not fatal for the simple fact that women often outnumbered the men in the membership, and overwhelmingly owned the "sweat equity" in the organization. Thus, it was relatively easy for women as a group to address and resolve such problems since we held the bulk of the power derived from "sweat equity." Conflicts over race and sexuality in coalitions have been much more difficult to resolve successfully.
people of color), white women saw their interests as diverging from people of color.

As stated previously, symbiosis theory seems to expect a high level of political consciousness from subordinated groups (i.e., future perfect idealized framings), but offers no mechanisms or incentives for developing such a heightened political consciousness. Symbiosis theory suggests that singly burdened hybrid individuals, such as white women, are as likely to engage in acts of resistance to existing power structures as they are to engage in acts of complicity with existing hierarchies through compensatory subordination.88 Ehrenreich never provides any explanation—structural, material, or otherwise—for why some white women (like Cathy Allen and other white women leading the opposition to I-200) choose strategies of resistance while others (like those interviewed post-election adopting the white family narrative according to her analysis) choose compensatory subordination. And her analysis of the coercive pressures confronting white women seems to excuse whatever choice white women may elect.89 Insofar as her theory emphasizes psychological responses to structures of subordination and obscures material distinctions between subordinated groups, the question of political agency and political consciousness is not asked nor answered.90 When white women vote to abolish affirmative action to protect their family's interest in material whiteness, identity groups and intersectionality theorists are not allowed to hold white women accountable without running afoul of Professor Ehrenreich's “zero-sum” or “discourse of distinctness” critiques. To do so presumably would engage the putative “divide-and-conquer” framing inherent to identity categories and theorizing.91 As such, symbiosis theory gives white women who voted for I-200 a “pass” when it comes to political accountability for anti-coalitional actions.

87 See supra, section II.B.
88 Ehrenreich, supra note 25, at 303.

the privilege that singly burdened individuals experience usually makes it easier for them to resist their subordination. But it can also induce compensatory subordination, which, by diluting the effects of their oppressed status, disables resistance to it. And it subtly coerces norm compliance, causing many singly burdened individuals to conform out of fear that, if they do not, they will suffer the same treatment as doubly burdened people receive.

89 While Ehrenreich does make clear that engaging in compensatory subordination ultimately harms the interests of the singly-burdened individual by reinforcing all structures of subordination, the normative ethic is that the singly-burdened should not engage in compensatory subordination because it harms her own self-interest, not because it harms any “coalitional” interest.
90 Ehrenreich has added a new section in response to Professor Sherene Razack's related criticism that compensatory subordination individualizes and excuses subordination, “reducing it to nothing more than the understandable psychological reactions of” mistreated individuals. Ehrenreich, supra note 25, at 296. The added section emphasizes the work of Professor Yamamoto on racial group agency. While this addition is helpful, it still does not address individual political agency within a group.
91 Ehrenreich states, for example, “[T]he discourse of distinctness, as a rhetorical strategy, specifically invites compensatory behavior, by implying that the interests of various identity groups conflict (and thereby producing resentment of one group by another—e.g., by working class men of working class women).” (emphasis in original). Ehrenreich, supra note 25, at 299.
2. Women of Color as Unsophisticated Theorists or Regressive Coalition-Busters

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of Professor Ehrenreich’s article is the implication that those who dare to suggest that there are conflicting interests between white women and communities of color in the I-200 election are unsophisticated theorists hopelessly confined to an outdated mode of analysis, or worse, regressive threats to the possibility of true coalition. Women of color may have the most to lose in the ascendency of this type of “post-intersectionality” theorizing. Read in historical and political context, Kim Crenshaw’s and Angela Harris’ “pre-post-intersectionality” pathbreaking works (on intersectionality and anti-essentialism respectively) directly confronted the problems encountered by women of color in predominantly white feminist politics and theorizing. These bold demands for accountability are now to be seen either as naïve interventions that miss the bigger picture of interlocking oppressions, or as short-sighted confrontations that play into conservatives’ manipulation of zero sum and divide-and-conquer rhetoric. For example, Ehrenreich cites Patricia Hill Collins in this negative light:

Reflecting the belief that reform is a zero sum game where white women will have to give up something in order for Black women to gain, Patricia Hill Collins predicts that, “despite the support and leadership of many women’s studies professionals for intersectional analyses, such support may evaporate quickly if any real sharing of power appears on the horizon.”

Intersectionality theory was by, for, and about women of color and other intersectional actors. I hope that symbiosis theory, as applied to the I-200 case, will not be seen as by, for, and about white women or the singly burdened, for it has much to offer women of color and multiply burdened subjects. But it also carries with it great peril—namely the divestiture of political accountability of singly burdened individuals to multiply-burdened individuals.

III. CONCLUSION: A RETURN TO UNIVERSALISM IN THE NAME OF CRITICAL THEORIZING?

Initiated by the right, and joined in by segments of the white left, the renunciation of identity politics is indeed a troubling trend in academe. Progressive scholars in history, sociology, and political theory have fought the critique of identity politics, as have scholars in law. I remain wary of such critiques of identity politics and theorizing, and suggest that progressives should not partake in them. I make this argument not only because I believe that such

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93 Ehrenreich, supra note 25, at 268.
critiques are very bad strategy for the left, but also because the critiques are often substantively misfocused.

Too much fault is laid at the feet of identity and intersectionality theory. Many of criticisms are unearned. Just because the right may adopt a divide-and-conquer discourse deploying identity groups in an attempt to rearticulate group meaning does not make identity theory guilty of such a rearticulation. Michael Omi and Howard Winant aptly make this point in their groundbreaking work, *Racial Formation in the United States.*

I would like to challenge Professor Ehrenreich to apply her symbiotic approach to synthesizing intersectionality theory with her theory of symbiosis. In this way, her deeper insights may be seen as compatible with intersectionality theory, and not in competition with identity theory. Intersectionality theory attempts to address a real political problem—the lack of political accountability on the part of groups that spoke on behalf of all members without adequately representing their interests. Thus, the specific identities and challenges inherent to intersectionality theory are designed to address the “chutzpah” of the “essential subject.” It was and remains a vitally important tool for women of color and other multiply burdened subjects.

Symbiosis theory is useful in attempting to articulate a goal and vision of inter-group unity and justice. By explicitly stating that structures of subordination are mutually reinforcing, Ehrenreich challenges theorists and activists to look more deeply below the surface of problems and issues to find common root causes and common cause. But the attempt to theorize greater unity requires attempts to theorize greater accountability. Without the latter, one cannot achieve the former.

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