

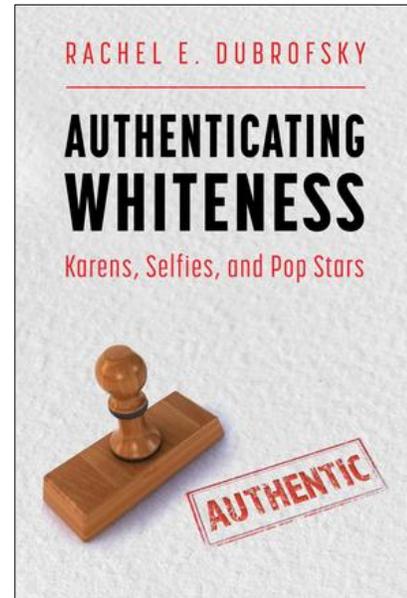
Rachel E. Dubrofsky, **Authenticating Whiteness: Karens, Selfies, and Pop Stars**, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2022, 165 pp., \$99.00 (hardcover).

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Much has been written and discussed about authenticity broadly in academia. As a term, it is as contentious as it is practically helpful for studying affective communication, culture, and strategies of capitalism. Suppose we trace the genealogy of the term as Rachel E. Dubrofsky briefly attempts in the opening of her book **Authenticating Whiteness: Karens, Selfies, and Pop Stars**. In that case, the essentializing approach to authenticity maintains that every person has a stable, distinct, and singular core: in other words, a one true self. To be authentic means to find this true self and perform—or not perform, as Dubrofsky elucidates in her introduction.

There are many reasons we are drawn to this concept and why it continues to hold much gravity in our evolving present. Indeed, having a true self can provide tangible narratives for us to hold on to in the face of growing and overwhelming uncertainty in our daily environments. However, as Dubrofsky articulates, “few scholars within media studies have given substantial attention to authenticity” (p. 14). Among the more notable names are Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012), who examines authenticity in relation to branding, Richard A. Peterson (1999), whose direction leads to a coining of “fabricated authenticity,” or Helene Shugart (2016), whose writing seeks to reevaluate competing discourses of obesity with ideals of authenticity. However, Dubrofsky notes what is missing within these articulations is a significant exploration that associates framing of authenticity with race and Whiteness. What, then, is new about Dubrofsky’s establishment of the concept is that it situates authenticity as “a strategy of Whiteness in popular contemporary media and for how Whiteness and authenticity function similarly by seamlessly marking people as good” (p. 34). Put another way, under this definition, authenticity is part of culture, emerging discursively through culture and a morally significant voice of culture working independently to mark actions as right, sincere, or believable.

Set against the backdrops of ongoing, heated debates across many states in the United States surrounding concepts of structural and institutional racism, banned books, and the teaching of Critical Race Theory (CRT), Whiteness is an uncomfortable topic precisely because Whiteness is not a fixed property per se, nor is it a topic that can dissociate from feelings of shame, guilt, and reproach. Nevertheless, as a practitioner of CRT, Dubrofsky centers on the critical aspects of Whiteness that principally stress Whiteness as socially constructed, maintained through a history of racism and discrimination. Here, discourses of difference are fueled and polarized by the implication that differences between the White body and the other are primarily negative, lacking value, sometimes dangerous, and linked to other forms of oppression. Therefore, the power of Whiteness lies in its ability to reproduce itself regardless of (good) intentions or



power differences because it is not seen as Whiteness but as the ideal or normal. Drawing between these two discourses, Dubrofsky poses an interesting parallel between Whiteness and authenticity. Both are often attached to the body, where people are seen as authentic. Those who appear White have access to certain unacknowledged (conscious or unconscious) affordances, making it easier for some bodies to perform their privilege in largely unexamined spaces and institutions. Quite crucially, then, Dubrofsky's comparison highlights the silenced tension that underlines authenticity and the rising impetus that it, like Whiteness, must be made strange.

In orienting chapter 3 around a selfie posted on Twitter in 2014 by Breanna Mitchell, who is seen smiling at the Auschwitz concentration camp, Dubrofsky colors how mediated coverage of the selfie underscores discourses of Whiteness, authenticity, agency, emotion, and surveillance. The chapter examines 25 newspaper articles, mainly from the United States, and is interested in how they construct emotions within their narratives and how the overall concept of selfie(s) centers on notions of performance. Against the backdrop of this performance, people (women) of color are more surveilled and policed in their selfie(s) and social media, while White women are evaluated differently. In this instance, Mitchell is positioned as an exemplar of authentic redemption permitted to White middle-class women whose mediated access to depth enables a bodily enactment of credibility that invites audiences to see an authentic inner core whose well-roundedness softens the impact of offensive acts.

Indeed, underscoring many of the chapters in this book is that, unlike their counterparts, White women are perceived as most genuine (*read*: authentic) when they relinquish their agency and act instinctively and without inhibition, with little to no regard for broader sociopolitical and economic contexts or consequences. Instead, Dubrofsky's analysis and carefully selected case studies place greater theoretical concentration on how the White body negotiates performances of accountability regardless of whether their actions are deemed normatively good or bad through reliance on authenticity. Therefore, even negative actions by White individuals can be seen as positive when perceived as authentic in comparison to the bodies of racially marginalized groups.

A closer textual analysis of the Lifetime series *UnREAL* (Shapiro, 2015–2018) in chapter 4 further necessitates how White characters are given depth and complexity, inviting our wider sympathy, while characters of color remain flat and one-dimensional. In fetishizing subjects whose bodies can be read for authenticity, these mediated expressions of authenticity promote critiques of racism while simultaneously enacting racism and denying responsibility for it. It is also noteworthy, particularly within this chapter, to focus on the role of surveillance. Moving away from conventional approaches, Dubrofsky views surveillance as constitutive of aspects of culture as well as a culture in its own right. The term "inferential surveillance" is coined to note the presence of modes and behaviors that originate in contexts of surveillance but exist in situations not explicitly under surveillance. Thus, Dubrofsky engages surveillance studies scholarship to examine meaning-making practices in contexts where surveillance may not be the most apparent mediating technology but is nonetheless integral in speaking to broader claims of affect and racism. By widening out this scholarship so that surveillance is viewed as a culture, Dubrofsky critically emphasizes the constitutive role of this discourse in shaping aspects of our meaning-making processes that produce and reproduce understandings of bodies and the world in which we live.

Furthermore, Dubrofsky's descriptions of authenticity as a strategy of Whiteness is perhaps most striking in chapter 5 when she discusses Miley Cyrus's (2013) music video "We Can't Stop" and Taylor Swift's (2014) "Shake It Off." As of 2023, these music videos have amassed 961,260,686 and 3,282,712,723 views, respectively, on YouTube and display the popular culture and popular feminism (see also Banet-Weiser, 2018), where every day White femininity is put into relief against a backdrop of overtly racialized displays. Both artists utilize racialized displays that are cast as *fun* but function to reinforce an irrepressible stable White authentic identity that contrasts the agency of the other. Rather, the claims of authenticity projected by Cyrus and Swift center on exhibiting their *truth* regardless of risk, such as the judgment of others.

Ultimately, authenticity as a strategy of Whiteness allows White people to take up space easily and comfortably in most spaces. But this draws out a fundamental question that accents all of the examples discussed in the book: principally, whether White people can effectively do antiracist work alongside people of color. Indeed, the focus of the last chapter of Dubrofsky's book seeks to address this question and argue that while antiracist efforts by White people may be genuine, there are fundamental challenges that arise due to the alliances and affordances between Whiteness and authenticity. As a result, antiracist work requires White people to let go of authenticity, become uncomfortable and uneasy, and embrace the messiness of identity within antiracist spaces. Antiracism is a commitment that requires continuous questions of accountability, transparency, and an ethics of care. These conversations are not straightforward, and as Dubrofsky aptly articulates, often result in Whiteness taking up space that decenters Black activism, experience, and autonomy. So while antiracism is a slippery concept for White people, Dubrofsky restates how necessary it is to confront the incomplete tensions between comfort and freedom of Whiteness in given spaces if we are to do this work meaningfully.

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