

**Stony Brook University  
The Graduate School**

**Doctoral Defense Announcement**

**White Ignorance and Complicit Responsibility**

**By**

**Eva Boodman**

**Abstract:** White ignorance is a pervasive, insidious form of structural racism that operates in habits, norms, laws and institutional practices. Rather than a lack of information, it is a “substantive” knowledge practice and a “need not to know”. This makes it very difficult to address. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that our prevailing models of responsibility tend not to serve us well when it comes to forms of structural racism like white ignorance, since they emphasize moral absolution and the preservation of innocence for individuals and institutions. The consequences of this include cycles of white disavowal, the inadvertent essentialization of racial identity categories, the racialization of moral concepts like guilt and innocence, and the “re-centering” of “dominant” social positions like whiteness. How can this normative problem be resolved? What normative approach can help address forms of structural racism like white ignorance in such a way that addresses its reproduction? In this dissertation I argue that responsibility for structural racism should be understood as “complicit”. I argue against “liability”-centered models of responsibility and complicity, and for a model of responsibility that understands itself to be “complicit” in terms of social positions, complex identities and relationships. I argue further that “resistance” is central to the way complicit responsibility is discharged. I use the work of José Medina, Ernesto Javier Martinez, Linda Alcoff and Mariana Ortega to suggest some practices of “complicit resistance” that, by de-emphasizing guilt and innocence, can open the door to a cross-identitarian, collective movement to deflate, destabilize and de-supremacize whiteness.

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**Dissertation Advisors:** Eduardo Mendieta,  
Anne O’Byrne

