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## WHITENESS STUDIES: PAST RESEARCH AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

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### Introduction

Over the last few years there has been increasing attention to a burgeoning academic field often referred to as “Whiteness studies.” This has generated an increasing amount of academic writing and an equally increasing amount of controversy. Although there are good reasons to be cautious about a research focus on Whites, in this paper I argue for the continuing study of Whiteness – but for studies of a particular kind. Specifically, I argue that research on Whiteness must pay close attention to both cultural and material elements of race and must also be attentive to the changing nature of racism.

Too much recent research on Whiteness has focused exclusively on cultural manifestations of Whiteness without adequate consideration for issues of power and resources. As I will outline more in what follows, I argue that race would not exist without racism – the racialization of Whites is inherently about domination and exclusion because the category’s very existence is dependent on the continuation of the oppressive racialized social system. Thus, studying Whites will always be at some level about studying patterns, processes, and principles of racial exclusion. Work which does not pay attention to this fact threatens not only to support racist structures and hierarchies but to distort social reality.

Moreover, such studies need to also attend to the shifting nature of racism if they are in fact to accurately identify social patterns. For example, in the present moment, while there are still cases where racism gets enacted in quite overt ways (i.e., explicit racial exclusion and discrimination still exist), the nature of racial exclusion has changed such that it often manifests itself in more covert and subtle forms (Bobo, Kluegel & Smith 1997; Bonilla-Silva 1997; Crenshaw 1997). This then requires that work on Whiteness concern itself with the multiple, often covert processes in which race and racial exclusion get enacted and deployed. Today, for instance, if one wanted to study housing discrimination it would not be enough to look for explicit statements of racial preference or to ask traditional survey questions about housing segregation. Such discrimination today largely takes the form of covert processes of steering or selectively distributing information (Massey & Denton 1993; Yinger 1995). These patterns are only ascertainable through the use of methods such as housing audits. In what follows I address some of the challenges to research on Whites, provide a brief review of the historical and social scientific work on Whiteness, review work on the

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shifting nature of racism, and then offer a research agenda for ways to study Whiteness today.

### **Challenges to Research on Whites: Are Whites a Group?**

In challenging the research focus on Whiteness some have questioned the coherence of the racial category “White.” In fact, “White” is not a fixed category with historically stable boundaries and meanings. Since the early part of this century, social scientists have recognized race to be socially constructed (DuBois 1968; Gossett 1963; Omi & Winant 1994).<sup>1</sup> As social constructs, racial categories reflect no nature or essence but they do carry and express relations of privilege and subordination. “White” then is not a natural or biologically bound entity but a social category with meaning in particular social contexts. This does not mean it is a peripheral or unimportant category. Racial categories are not merely sociological abstractions but are potent social categories around which people organize their identities and behavior. In this way, even as they are not natural or fixed, racial categories are socially “real” and are powerfully material in their consequences for people’s lives. Thus, there are objective, measurable differences in the life circumstances of different racial groups. As Omi and Winant (1994: vii) state: “Concepts of race structure both state and civil society. Race continues to shape both identities and institutions in significant ways.”

There is not one form of Whiteness nor one way of being White, yet within a racialized social system, every person’s life is shaped by race (Bonilla-Silva 1997). *Race matters*, for everybody. The difference for Whites is that they do not even have to recognize their own Whiteness in order to benefit from it (McIntosh 1989). Particularly in regards to dominant racial groups, one does not have to consciously identify with being “White” to benefit from a system in which being designated as a racial “other” carries severe physical, psychological and material penalties (Almaguer 1994; Farley 1990; Feagin & Sikes 1994; Harris 1993; Hacker 1992; Oliver & Shapiro 1995; Roediger 1991).

Like arguments against the “groupness” of Whites, others argue against studying

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<sup>1</sup> While biological arguments have not totally disappeared, they are widely condemned. For example, following the recent publication of Herrnstein and Murray’s *The Bell Curve*, a whole spate of books came out condemning their work. See for example, *Measured Lies: The Bell Curve Examined* (1996, New York: St. Martin’s Press), *The Bell Curve Debate* (1995, New York: Times Books), and *The Bell Curve Wars* (1995, New York: Basic Books). Additionally, survey research has shown that few Whites publicly support the idea of biological inferiority. See Schuman, Steeh and Bobo (1985) and Sniderman and Piazza (1993).

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Whiteness saying that race is no longer important – that we should all be color-blind – that even talking about race or racial groups is racist in that it perpetuates racial classification (Berg 1993).<sup>2</sup> This kind of liberal individualism denies the reality of groups and group-based privileges/penalties and in doing so protects the currently inequitable status quo (Crenshaw 1997; Young 1994). As Young (1994: 718) argues in reference to gender, “Without conceptualizing women as a group in some sense, it is not possible to conceptualize oppression as a systematic, structured, institutional process.” Without recognizing racial collectives, including the collectivity of both dominant and dominated racial group, we obscure relations of domination. In thinking about research on race generally and on Whites in particular, it is not important to speak of racial groups as having specific cultures or even self-conscious group identities, but as having similar locations within the racial structure.

### **The History of the Category “White”**

Since the early 1960’s a considerable amount of work has mapped out the racialization process in the U.S. (Almaguer 1994; Berkhofer 1978; Dinnerstein, Nichols & Reimers 1979; Gossett 1963; Higham 1963; Horsman 1981; Jordan 1968; Montejano 1987; Roediger 1991; Takaki 1987). Moreover, in the last ten years we have seen the publication of several important books specifically focusing on the racialization of Whites, the emergence of “White” as a racial category (Roediger 1991; Saxton 1991; Ware 1992; Allen 1994; Ignatiev 1995; Rogin 1996).

Race, like gender, is a relational category in which groups are mutually constituted; we cannot then talk about the emergence of “White” without simultaneously discussing the emergence of related categories (e.g., Black or Indian). There are competing arguments about the exact origins of racial categories. Several authors have contended that the categories White and Black emerged with increased White European contact with Africans (Degler 1971; Jordan 1968). They maintain that race and racism pre-dated slavery in the U.S. Other historians have contended that the formation of Whiteness as a racial category came about with the rise of slavery in the U.S. either as a specific effort on the part of the upper class to divide what was a growing

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<sup>2</sup>As much as Whites want to deny the salience of race, under certain conditions they acknowledge the costs of being Black. For example, in Hacker’s *Two Nations*, he describes an exercise he conducted with White students; he asked students “how much financial recompense” they would require if they were suddenly to become Black (1992: 32). As Hacker states, most students felt that “it would not be out of place to ask for \$50 million, or \$1 million for each coming Black year. And this calculation conveys, as well as anything, the value that White people place on their own skins” (1992: 32).

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multiracial lower/working class, or as a result of specifically economic (nonracial) decisions regarding the largest available supply of cheap labor (Williams 1966; Morgan 1975; Takaki 1993). Whether we should date the history of American racialization to first contact or to the beginnings of slavery, it is clear that the emergence of these racial categories is intricately tied into the history of the United States and was about both meaning and domination.

In fact, issues of White racial identity have historically always been tied to a history of defining “self” not only through the construction of but through the *domination* of others (Said 1978; Hall 1991; Gabriel 1994; Almaguer 1994). The realm of ideas associated with race have historically been invested not only in representing groups of people, but in dominating people. In this way American forms of Whiteness should be understood to be closely tied to large ideas of both Westernness and Occidentalism. These various ideologies of superiority were used as justifications for intervening into the lives of those identified as “Oriental,” Black, or otherwise racially “other.” For example, in the contact between Europeans and Africans, colonialism and other material interventions were posited as if they were benefiting both parties (Adas 1989).

The colonial castes of the various nationalities worked together to forge the idea of ‘White’ superiority, of civilization as an interest that has to be defended against savages. This representation – ‘the White man’s burden’ – has contributed in a decisive way to molding the modern notion of a supranational European or Western Identity (Balibar 1991: 43).

As Said (1978: 5) argues, the forms of Orientalism (of which Whiteness is a part) have changed over time but at their heart, all these Orientalist projects are aimed at possessing what is represented as ‘the Orient’ or ‘the other’ – others who are not merely represented but subjugated if not enslaved. The “other” was bounded, exterior, and inferior, while new White identities were tied to feelings of group racial superiority, and more importantly a sense of superiority that was *active* rather than passive. These ideas of cultural superiority were put into action in the “defending” of civilization against the savages, the Orientals, Blacks, and in the taking over of the land, lives, and resources of these “others.”

The exact historical content of Whiteness in the U.S. has varied regionally according to who was present and according to the political, social and economic context in which this defining was taking place. As Robert Berkhofer (1978) shows in relation to Native Americans, defining the “other” was always integrally about defining “self.” “Christians” or Europeans were set apart physically, intellectually, militarily, politically and culturally in relation to the “savage” group, “Indians.” Racial categories

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were mutually constituted as clear boundaries were drawn between what were then coming to be seen as racial groups. In other parts of the country at different historical moments this process distinguished Whites from Africans or Negroes, and Anglos from Mexicans. In each case, categories took on meaning in specifically dialectical and relational ways. Race and even specific racial categories were not static, but flexible and adaptive. They were formed and shaped under specific conditions.

This history of U.S. racialization then demonstrates that the formation and evolution of White as a racial category (the formation and evolution of race itself) has always been about struggles over resources – material (economic, social and political resources) and ideological elements of race have been inextricably intertwined. Work which attempts to study Whiteness as a cultural form divorced from any connection to racism or to oppressive racial structures threatens to obscure the persistent role of Whiteness as a linchpin in White supremacy as a system of domination. Moreover, because racial meanings and racial boundaries aren't fixed, such work also must be undertaken with an understanding of not only of the history of Whiteness but of the current contexts.

#### **Post Jim-Crow Racial Transformations – The New Content of Whiteness**

Whiteness has necessarily changed with the transformation of the U.S. racial context since the demise of Jim Crow. For example, the explicit defense of White racial superiority is no longer popularly acceptable.<sup>3</sup> As Essed (1991) points out there has been a shift in racial discourse. While “the traditional idea of genetic inferiority is still important in the fabric of racism, the discourse of Black inferiority is increasingly reformulated as cultural deficiency, social inadequacy, and technological underdevelopment” (Essed 1991: 4). Racial ideologies which perpetuate common sense understandings of racial groups as fundamentally different in certain ways have not entirely fallen by the wayside, but they are expressed in less “biological” and more “cultural” language. However, despite these discursive shifts, race continues to have a fundamental impact on access to resources and on life chances. Given that Whiteness continues to provide material and ideological benefits, how do Whites today understand their social location?

Recent research on both working class and middle class Whites has found, in addition to a rather frightening growth of White supremacy movements in the United

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<sup>3</sup> While overt racism is popularly condemned, there is considerable evidence that White supremacy movements are having a resurgence in the 1990's (Feagin & Vera 1995).

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States,<sup>4</sup> themes of growing White resentment and insecurity (Feagin & Vera 1995; Fine & Weis 1998; Macleod 1995). While there are clear class differences in the way resentment is expressed, all of it is in some way focused on protecting or defending historic racial boundaries that have secured privilege and status for Whites.

Working class Whites tend to articulate a sense that minorities are taking over their jobs and neighborhoods, taking what is rightfully theirs (Fine et al. 1997; Hartigan 1999; Macleod 1995; Newman 1988; Rieder 1985; Rubin 1994; Terkel 1992). In particular, recent research has found that working class White men blame fellow working class men of color for their hardships, contending with a sense that their rightful place is being incurred upon, in terms of jobs, actual geographic territory and symbolic community. They are actively contending with who counts as a legitimate part of their community or as a legitimate part of the local job market (Fine & Weis 1998; Macleod 1995). It is clear that, for them, like in the past, Whiteness is still one of the requirements on both these counts and that they emphatically resent any challenge to this. While most of what they say and do is about others, it is intimately tied up in a process of trying to define and protect their own interests and identities. Issues of identity and material survival overlap in their struggle to explain what is happening in their lives. Research on middle and upper-middle class White men shows that they too express resentment towards people of color but towards a population that tends to be more distant symbolically and practically. They speak of being tired of being directly or symbolically targeted as the oppressor and talk, in fact, of feeling oppressed themselves (Feagin & Vera 1995).

As is clear from the work cited above, most of the work on Whiteness has been done on White men. It is unquestionable that these perceptions of racial identity are, themselves, gendered. Anxiety about not fulfilling traditional breadwinning roles is not the source of White working class women's animosity towards other groups.

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<sup>4</sup> Some estimate that there are presently 20,000-30,000 white supremacy movement activists in the U.S. in the 1990's, up from approximately 1,500 in the mid-1970's, with approximately 180,000 less active supporters who purchase literature and support these organizations (Feagin & Vera 1995: 77). These groups and individuals have carried out numerous hate crimes in recent years all in the name of "defending the White race." Extreme though they may seem, it was not so long ago that David Duke, former grand wizard in the Ku Klux Klan, almost won the election for Governor in Louisiana. These groups promote pride in being White and express a sense of clear racial superiority which they believe should be rewarded. America, to them, is a White country and should be defended as such. Many Whites who are not actively involved in supremacy movements are sympathetic to many of its themes and share much of its ideology – even those who do not think of themselves as racist (Rubin 1994).

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Frankenberg (1993) uses life histories to examine White women's place in racial structures and analyzes their perceptions of what Whiteness is all about. Like Mary Waters' work on White ethnics, Frankenberg identifies the pervasive theme of Whites utilizing individualized narratives to understanding issues of race and equity. Frankenberg also, however, offers one of the few templates of Whites actually actively engaged in trying to fight racism and their very conflicted and confused engagement and resistance within the available discourses on race.

### **Racial Ideology, Color-blindness & Studying Whiteness**

Aside from the comparative-historical and qualitative work outlined above, most sociological work on Whites and race has been in the realm of survey work on racial attitudes. Historically this work has helped us to chart broad changes in Whites' attitudes towards racial "others" (primarily Blacks). Recently, some prominent public opinion researchers have argued for a new interpretation of trends in racial attitudes (Bobo, Kluegel & Smith 1997; Jackman 1994). Drawing on Blumer (1958) they state that attitudes should not be understood as emotional reactions to "groups, group symbols, or situations" but are rather "fundamentally, statements about preferred positional relations among racial groups" (Bobo, Kluegel & Smith 1997). Closely connected to historical work on racialization, this new stance highlights not only the relational nature of racial understanding but the inextricable connection between ideas, beliefs, and material interests.

Similarly, others have pushed for focusing on racial ideology as a group-level phenomenon rather than on (individually generated) racial attitudes (Bobo 1988; Bonilla-Silva 1997; Hall 1990; Jackman 1994). They argue that ideas about race and racism themselves need to be understood in regard to structures, institutional and cultural practices, and discourses, not simply as "something which emanates from certain individual beings" (Hall 1990: 7). Racial ideologies provide ways of understanding our lives and of how we fit into social relations. In this regard racial ideologies provide narratives about and explanations for both the causes and solutions to personal and social problems. Racial ideologies are always produced and rearticulated in relation to material circumstances. They are "meaning in the service of power, meaning that serves to sustain relations of domination" (Bonilla-Silva 1999: 8). As work on racial ideology has argued, it is important to go beyond formulations which merely track shifts in responses to long existing racial attitudes questions, but to track the shifts in racial discourse and racial ideology that are not reflected in such responses.

Recently several authors have argued that a new racial ideology is gaining hegemony in the U.S. today and shapes many of the ways Whiteness takes shape. A key part of this color-blind ethos is the claim made by many Whites that race is no longer

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important, that even talking about race is racist (Berg 1993). Part of this new color-blind ideology is the presumption or assertion of a race-neutral social context (Bobo, Kluegel & Smith 1997; Bonilla-Silva unpublished; Bonilla-Silva & Forman 2000; Crenshaw 1997; Doane 1997; Smith 1995). This discourse stigmatizes attempts to raise questions about redressing racial inequality in daily life through accusations such as “playing the race card” or “identity politics” which imply that someone is trying to bring race in where it does not belong (Bonilla-Silva unpublished; Crenshaw 1997; Gitlin 1995; Tomasky 1996). It also involves the technique of “non-recognition” or the implied process of “noticing but not considering” race (Crenshaw 1997).<sup>5</sup> As Bobo, Kluegel and Smith (1997: 40) argue, color-blind ideological assertions stand in the face of “substantial and widening racial economic inequalities, high levels of racial residential segregation, and persistent discrimination experienced across class lines in the Black community.” Not ironically, color-blind ideology has emerged as a dominant framework within which to understand issues of race and racial justice at the precise time that broad-scale reforms aimed at addressing vast racial inequality have been abandoned (e.g., rollback of Affirmative Action) (Bobo, Kluegel & Smith 1997; Crenshaw 1997). The dismantling of such reforms in the context of persistent inequality only makes sense as part of an ideological frame which asserts that race no longer matters and that if we allow the market to operate freely, historical inequities will naturally erode over time.

This new color-blind ideology introduces new challenges into our studies of race and Whiteness as it is difficult to ask questions of people about a subject they either have thought little about, a subject they don’t believe is important or one they are not likely to talk about in explicit ways. Because of this, some recent authors have argued for more mixed-method research to unearth Whites’ present-day racial attitudes (Bonilla-Silva & Forman 2000). However, it seems increasingly important, in addition, to pursue ethnographic or participant observation studies to examine not only what people say, but what they do.<sup>6</sup> Especially today when racial thinking and behavior remain

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<sup>5</sup> For example, in interviews with college students, Lewis, Chesler and Forman (2000) quote one student as saying, “I’m not going to think of you as Black, I’ll just think of you as my friend.” This assertion that though color is noticed it is not ‘seen’ or given meaning, illustrates the power of race in that it presumes that seeing race or acknowledging someone’s Blackness is a negative thing with possible deleterious consequences (Crenshaw 1997).

<sup>6</sup> There is a long and important history of ethnographic studies of race relations (Bourgois 1995; Gans 1962; Hannerz 1969; Ladner 1971; Liebow 1967; Rainwater 1970; Rieder 1985). Much of this work, however, has focused on dominated groups, particularly the urban poor. There are a few recent exceptions to this, particularly work on far-right White groups.

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pervasive but operate in much more covert ways, ethnographic work in White settings, on the “everydayness” of Whiteness is essential. While survey and interview-based studies can provide an important breadth of information that participant observation studies can’t, participant observation or ethnographic work may well be the best way to tap into the current racial context with regards to Whites. Moreover, by examining the day-to-day life of Whites one is able to describe how race may be operating in settings where those present would deny its cogency.

For example, in recent ethnographic research in a White, suburban school on the west coast, I documented the simultaneous existence of color-blind discourse as the explicit racial logic/talk side-by-side with quite pervasive color-consciousness in both talk and action. People verbally expressed the idea that “everybody is human” just as they expressed in various forms, beliefs in group-level racial differences (Lewis 2000). For better or worse these were differences that mattered to them – that shaped where they chose to live, who they wanted their children to marry, who they chose to play with in the schoolyard, what television shows they liked to watch, and how they understood gaps in achievement. These were not part of contrived arguments to defend privilege but just what they believed “to be true,” a result of “natural” instincts to be around people who are “like themselves,” or of “cultural differences” in values. In fact, almost all the White people I spoke to rarely, if ever, thought about their own ‘racialness.’ In response to questions about what impact they thought race had had on their lives they said things like, ‘I haven’t been around it very much.’ While only conducted in one setting, this study provides preliminary evidence of the unique ability of Whites to live their lives in multiple, racialized ways, and to simultaneously deny the salience of race generally and to not think about their own Whiteness. It also highlights the importance of doing ethnographic or observational research.

Another possible lens into how Whiteness works is suggested in a recent body of work focused on the Black middle class. It is Blacks (along with other racialized ‘others’) who currently and historically have had to spend the most time and energy contemplating just what Whiteness is all about as their ability to survive and thrive has historically depended on understanding Whites and how Whiteness works. It is to racial minorities, then, that we might also turn in an effort to understand how Whiteness works today. In the recent work by Feagin and Sikes (1995) and Cose (1993) we can see that Blacks are particularly coherent in discussing the various components of racial privilege. While the authors of these texts talk most explicitly about racial discrimination – it is clear that what they outline can also be understood as being about racial advantage. In detailing discrimination they describe patterns most often perpetuated by Whites and White institutions and it is Whites who predominately benefit both indirectly from the absence of such costs to themselves and from the direct reduction in competition.

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On the other hand there are the multiple ways in which Whiteness is a direct advantage (rather than merely the absence of disadvantage). This most often gets enacted as Whites' desire just to be around folks like themselves (again enacting systems of inclusion as much as older forms of exclusion). They make life decisions (where to live, where to send their kids to schools) based at least in part on race (e.g., see Saporito & Lareau 1999). As a result of these decisions most Whites live predominantly White lives and have little to no meaningful interaction with people of color.

In numerous important ways (hiring, showing houses) covert racial processes of preference privilege some groups over others. Recent efforts to conduct audits and send out Black and White testers into work, housing, and other arenas have consistently revealed racial advantages given to Whites (Ayres & Sigelman 1995; Schuman et al. 1983; Turner & Struyk 1991; Yinger 1995). We need, therefore, to continue to pursue these less direct methodologies to tap into the pervasiveness of these kinds of phenomena. Conducting testing studies has been one successful way. Ethnographic studies both of primarily White settings (neighborhoods, boy scout troops, schools, etc.) and service-oriented settings (malls, car dealerships, restaurants, stores) may be another. Finally, large-scale demographic work which describe macro and micro level patterns of racial phenomenon like that undertaken by Massy and Denton (1993) or Oliver and Shapiro (1995) provide another option.

### **Conclusion**

As I have argued, it is practically impossible to divorce the social category Whiteness from its role as a force of domination and subjugation. This makes it essential that studies of Whiteness not attempt to discuss racial discourse or "culture" separate from a discussion of material realities of racism. In fact, studying dominant racial categories is a business which requires particular care in order that it not take on either supremacist tendencies of making "White" fashionable or serve to undermine long-fought for space within the academy for both minority scholars and ethnic studies. Studying Whiteness or White people absent from the social context obscures the precise reason why it is important to focus on Whiteness in the first place – in order to remove the cloak of normality and universality that helps to secure continuing racial privilege for Whites.

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