

Chapter 1



Whiteness and Beyond

Sociohistorical Foundations of Whiteness and Contemporary Challenges

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In order for us, black and white, to disentrail ourselves from the
harshest slavemaster, racism, we must disinter our buried history.

—*Studs Terkel, Race (1992, p. 18)*

When race is isolated as a concept, even for the purposes of analysis,
there is a tendency to essentialize it, to fix it as an unchanging and
inflexible reality.

—*Mark Lawrence McPhail, "The Politics of Complicity" (1994)*

[We] must give up the hunt for the generic woman—the one who is all
and only woman, who by some miracle of abstraction has no particular
identity in terms of race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, language,
religion, nationality.

—*Elizabeth Spelman, Inessential Woman (1988, p. 187)*

Skin color (whiteness, blackness, yellowness, etc.) remains a concern in the late 20th century, not because it advances the mission of multiculturalism, helps us to understand different people, or allows us, as individuals, to congratulate ourselves on our "color blindness," but because skin color has been used to rank order people for practical things like jobs, promotions, loans, and housing (Condit & Lucaites, 1993). The social significance of color also reveals itself in our poverty statistics. In 1986, the Catholic Bishops of the United States issued a report titled *Economic Justice and the U.S. Economy*. Harsh poverty, they observed, plagues our country despite its great wealth. Thirty-three million Americans are poor and another 20 to 30 million are needy. This problem, however, does not fall evenly on the population:

These burdens fall most heavily on blacks, Hispanics and native Americans. Even more disturbing is the large increase in the number of women and children living in poverty. Today children are the largest single group among the poor. This tragic fact seriously threatens the nation's future. That so many people are poor in a nation as rich as ours is a social and moral scandal that we cannot ignore. (Catholic Bishops, 1991, p. 579)

Nearly 10 years later the statistics have, if anything, gotten worse. "Whiteness" does not stand alone. It draws part of its meaning from what it means to be nonwhite.

How did the concept of "whiteness" develop historically? How does it function in both the historical and contemporary United States? This seems to be a moment in the United States to take a new approach to discussions of race, identity, and communication. Our goal in this chapter is to provide a *sociohistorical* basis for discussions of race that allows us to contextualize thought and behavior and move beyond discussions of individual racism.

This chapter will first trace the roots of the concept of whiteness in the United States as it emerged from the racial classifications developed in Europe and the United States during the 19th century. *Caucasian*, the technical term during that period for Euro-American people with light skin, is still used interchangeably with *white* in the United States.

We then show how whiteness became different from white (a racial designation). The terms *race* and *white* (as in "White Power") came to mean an explicit assertion of superiority, which, in the United States, was broken spiritually (though not materially) in civil rights victories in the

1960s and 1970s. In contrast, whiteness refers to a *historical systemic structural* race-based superiority. Using the construct of whiteness allows a discussion where no *one* is a racist and permits an exploration of ways in which some people happily if unwittingly benefit from and informally reproduce patterns established by racism. Throughout this discussion, we emphasize that whiteness, like other categories, is "leaky"; that is, race can *only* be seen in relation to other categories, such as class, gender, sexuality, and so on, that render any category problematic.

Racial Categories in the 19th Century

The roots of racial classification emerge from the naturalistic science of the 18th and 19th centuries. During this time, scientific studies extended the classifications of humankind developed by zoologists and physical anthropologists by systematically measuring and describing differences in hair texture, skin color, average height, and cranial capacity in various races. These studies reflected a naturalist tradition—an assumption that the physical world had an intrinsically hierarchical order in which whites were the last and most developed link in "the great chain of being" (Webster, 1992, p. 4.). In 1800, botanist Georges Cuvier and later zoologist Arthur de Gobinau described a three-race hierarchy (Caucasian, Mongoloid, and Negro races). By the end of the 19th century, these and other race typologies provided a solid foundation for explaining behavioral variation and social inequity (Banton, 1983; Curtin, 1964; de Gobineau, 1967).

How were these categories used socially and politically? To answer these questions, we must examine the historical contexts in which this scholarship occurred. This scholarship occurred during a period of global expansion by European powers and of westward expansion in the United States. The research on racial categories supported these efforts—often aimed at subjugating nonwhite peoples (Foner & Rosenberg, 1993; Omi & Winant, 1994).

Anthropologists and Egyptologists found evidence of cultural, social, technological, and spiritual inferiority of nonwhite races throughout human history. These conclusions were corroborated by colonial officials and newspaper reports that described and discussed the inferiority of nonwhites in colonies and potential colonies throughout the world.

From Racial Classification to Race Theory

By using the research findings described above, race theory helped to explain and justify the expansion and colonizing by white peoples, their subjugation of nonwhite peoples in Africa, Asia, and the Orient, and the continuing domination of nonwhite peoples—slaves, peasants, aborigines, and the poor at home.

This attitude was also promoted by religious institutions. Presidents, scholars, theologians, and the elites in Europe and the United States in the 19th century proclaimed that the mission of the white race was to “civilize and Christianize” the heathen, the savages, the less fortunate—all lesser beings in God’s creation. Defenders of slavery and colonialism claimed that these efforts were in fact a blessing to Africans—who by their biological inferiority were incapable of taking the first steps to civilization. This civilizing mission often included armed intervention and the establishment of empires, like Great Britain, that stretched around the world (Webster, 1992).

There was often fierce resistance. Colonial slaughter took the lives of tens of millions of people, six million in the Belgian Congo alone. There are many accounts of slave resistance in the United States, and there were white men and women who fought against white supremacy in the United States, in spite of the obvious benefits this supremacy afforded them (Aptheker, 1992; Chaudhuri & Strobel, 1992).

At first there were white and black slaves who suffered alike from the overwhelming English and European passion for material and spiritual expansion. A closer look at U.S. colonial history reveals the move from racial classification to racialization—as *slave* and *black* become synonymous. According to some scholars, this move was due to two unique characteristics of the American colonial experience. The first was the prevailing attitude toward property. For centuries, Europeans held a firm belief that the best in life was the expansion of self through property and property began and ended with possession of one’s body (Kovel, 1984, p. 18). However, this law was violated by New World slavery, and it differed in this way from other slave systems. The slave owners, in proclaiming ownership of the bodies of slaves, detached the body from the self and then reduced this self to subhuman status (justified by the racial categorization system). Slave property became totally identified with people who happened to have black skin, the color that had always horrified the West (Kovel, 1984, p. 21).

The second characteristic revolves around the institutionalizing of slavery in the formation of the nation. There was some antislavery activity around the time of the War for Independence, but when the time came to structure the nation, the interests of property asserted themselves and the slave-race complex became part of the American culture and was made official in the Constitution where black slaves were quantified as three fifths of a person for purposes of representation. Thus, the paradox of U.S. history: that the ideal of freedom is historically rooted in the institution of slavery and the two inextricably racialized (Morgan, 1975).

You might think that because skin color was so central to the law, that “whiteness” and “blackness” were carefully defined and easy to understand. They were defined by law, but they were not easy to understand in practice. The best minds in the Old South tried valiantly over the years to draw a legal line to define who was white and who was black, in order to maintain a racial hierarchy. The inferior were, by God’s will, destined to be enslaved by the superior. Such was the happy blend of theology and race theory advanced by spokespersons for the master class (Wander, 1972).

But not all black people were slaves. There were free black people, even in the South. Some of them prospered and even owned slaves. On the slave plantations in the 19th century, there were dark-skinned slaves and there were slaves who were lighter-skinned than their “white” masters. Antebellum newspapers in the South sometimes carried stories about “white” children almost sold at auction.

Most white people in the Old South did not own slaves. Slave owners were a small but extremely powerful minority. When agitating for secession from the United States, they faced opposition from white farmers and workers who did not own slaves and did not idealize slavery as a way of organizing working-class people. Counties in Northern Alabama, a hilly country populated by white farmers and unsuitable for plantation agriculture, voted against secession.

Some members of the master class had reservations about slavery. The diaries of the wives of plantation owners at times reflect an awareness of their own condition as the property of males in their family who had complete control over their money and property. Some of these women expressed misgivings about the ways their sons and husbands were “using” female slaves. Others expressed anger over how this “property” was misleading their husbands and sons.

There were white Southerners who objected to slavery. There were white Northerners who opposed its abolition. In the South, PSWMs

(propertied, straight, white males) tended to defend slavery, especially those who held property in slaves; in the North, PSWMs tended to oppose or refuse to take a stand on abolition. In part, this related to interests linking wealthy people together, as in the case of the production of cotton in the South and its purchase by mill owners in the North, but it also related, in part, to the nature of the Abolitionist movement.

Abolitionism was the first mass-based movement in this country. It included blacks and whites, men and women, religious and nonreligious people. Those outside this movement sometimes found this alarming. Along with condemning slavery, abolitionists condemned the idea that working-class people, black or white, should be treated as slaves (a view advanced by the upper class in the South who argued that chattel slaves in the South were better off than "wage" slaves in the North). They also denounced a system in which women, black or white, were treated as property by men (Fuller, 1855/1971). Abolitionists not only wanted to abolish slavery, they wanted to abolish other forms of involuntary servitude as well, and this had implications for relations between the North and the South (Aptheker, 1989).

White abolitionists opposed slavery and sometimes worked with black people in the process, but they did not necessarily believe in racial equality. In part, among the abolitionists, were a society of people ("colonizationists") dedicated to sending black people back to Africa (Wander, 1971). When Frederick Douglass, a leading abolitionist, spoke to white and black audiences, white people sometimes came up afterward and touched his cheek. They could not believe a black man could be so brilliant an orator. They thought he might have bootblack on his face. Abraham Lincoln was a Colonizationist. He believed in the racial superiority of white people, though he thought black people ought to be paid a fair day's wage for a fair day's work. People in the South thought he was an abolitionist in disguise. Abolitionists thought he was wishy-washy.

The above hints at the complexity of thinking about "whiteness" (and "blackness") in U.S. history. The confusion and the horror surrounding these complexities emerged, after the Civil War, in Jim Crow laws designed to keep the "races" apart. The law, pressured by the leaky nature of racial categories, devised a "one drop" theory—if you had one drop of "nonwhite blood" in your veins, you could not qualify as white. Not qualifying as white had, as the history of slavery and the exploitation of Indians shows (Frickey, 1993), tremendous implications for the ways people lived and even for their right to earn a living. Throughout

our history, "whiteness" has, legally speaking, been a form of property (Harris, 1993).

At the turn of the 20th century, whites in the United States were pursuing the industrial, capitalist dream and a continued manifest destiny. As immigrants poured in to the United States to help with the expansion, however, nativism, anti-immigrant feelings (e.g., The Chinese Exclusion Act) ensured that the prosperity benefited mainly the whites. Poor European immigrants and the many Southern ex-slaves represented a potential massive threat to the existing powers. The answer was racism.

For example, in 1912, Woodrow Wilson proclaimed his wish that "justice be done to the colored people in every matter; and not mere grudging justice, but justice executed with liberality and cordial good feeling." He also, at the same time, issued an executive order that racially segregated eating and toilet facilities of federal civil service workers. The order also gave Southern federal officials the right to discharge or downgrade any black employee on any ground they saw fit. When a group of black leaders protested to the President, they were summarily dismissed (Kovel, 1984, p. 31).

As many scholars have noted, it is in the story of U.S. labor history in the first part of the 20th century that the racialization become solidified. W. E. B. DuBois (1935) describes how white laborers were paid meager monetary wages, but were provided additional public and psychological "wages": better schools and access to public facilities, deference, and so on. In continuing the story, Roediger (1991) shows how this category of whiteness was carefully constructed through trial and error to assure white workers a secure place in the sometimes fragile economy. The whites distanced themselves from blacks, projecting on to them qualities they themselves lacked—sensuality and spontaneity—and in stressing this contrast, allowed despised ethnic groups (Irish, Eastern Europeans, Jews) a way to transcend their minority status and assimilate into the majority (Roediger, 1991).

Stowe argues that African Americans were largely written out of labor history (e.g., Wilentz's [1984] highly regarded book, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class 1788-1850*, contains only two references to African Americans and no mention of its subjects' whiteness). The point that Stowe, Roediger, and other scholars make is that "in the lived experience of actual people, race and class can never be disentangled" (Stowe, 1996, p. 72).

After two "world" wars, European imperialism receded and former colonies secured their independence and the civil rights movement took hold in the United States. However, economic domination by and cultural influences of whites continued. International corporations, banks and development organizations, and mass media owned and operated by Europeans and U.S. elites have combined to produce what is being called the global economy or globalization.

From Race Theory to Whiteness

How is the social and cultural influence of whiteness maintained long after governmental and military imperialism and colonialism have disappeared? Scholars argue the domination that white elites enjoyed in the 19th and for most of the 20th century *continues to reproduce itself*. The dramatic difference in aggregate power, wealth, and influence established over the past three or four hundred years and rationalized through race theory over the past one hundred fifty years has been well documented. Andrew Hacker (1992) paints a bleak picture of continued disparity in income, continued underrepresentation in areas of employment, and continued segregation (voluntary and imposed) in schools and neighborhoods. Other scholars have described the differing perceptions and attitudes of the races toward the causes and state of interracial relations (Cose, 1993; West, 1993).

Evidence of the reproduction of whiteness is seen in the history of law, in the extension and denial of credit, in the quality of health care and life expectancy, in the quality of education, and in job opportunities that, in the United States, continue to favor whites over nonwhites. A similar pattern exists between the United States and Europe and people of color in the developing/underdeveloped third world (Said, 1978, 1993).

Recently the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported that, in managerial positions, "white males" stand at the top and women of color at the bottom, with white women and men of color in between. We are accustomed to reading this statistic. What do statistics prove? If you're young, white, and male, you've got the world by the tail! What this leaves out, of course, are the millions and millions of *poor* white males.

We have names for poor whites in this country, such as "Arkies" and "Oakies" for those who left the dust bowl for California in the 1930s (the folks in the classic film, *The Grapes of Wrath*). Or, "red necks," people

who live in the rural South (the fat, sloppy, low-class fellows who drink beer, hang out in pool halls, bars, and bowling alleys, and are racist), and "poor white trash," those poor whites who make up the majority of people on welfare. We see them in the movies. They chew tobacco and say prejudicial things and are prone to violence. They are nothing but stereotypes.

Why are *poor whites* ignored or denigrated in our society? Given the social significance of "whiteness" as a sign of importance or privilege, one might think that the cause of poor white women and children on welfare would be on the lips of the powerful and influential white people. Yet, the existence of these poor whites also exposes the fiction of white superiority. See Moon (Chapter 9, this volume) for an analysis of class, gender, and whiteness.

Color, race, whiteness, blackness—these are contested terms. They are part of the vocabulary of historical struggle going back into the 19th century when poor whites were sometimes called "white negroes." Poor whites are both a reality in this struggle, as participants, and a figure in the discursive struggles on both the Right and the Left.

The point is not that poor whites have it worse (or better) than poor minorities, or that many privileged whites are simply "lucky." At issue is the construction of "whiteness" as an elitist category. "Whiteness" as we have come to think about it, not only lets millions of nonwhites fall through the cracks, but also millions of whites—men, women, and children—as well. The ideological debates over "whiteness" and "race" often lead to endless confusion and frustration. What is worse, questions about justice, equality, and human suffering tend *sometimes by design* to get lost in it.

Today we live in a society that has largely eliminated explicit racial segregation in its laws and customs. We no longer have "white-only" establishments or schools, nor do we have laws regulating heterosexual interracial marriages. The legacy and victory of the civil rights movement has been to eliminate these racial barriers and laws that explicitly reinforced the socially and economically privileged position of whites in the United States. Instead, we have moved toward a more "race-blind" society. No longer are white people privileged in U.S. society through blatant race-based laws and customs.

This move toward a race-blind society has not meant an overthrowing of white privilege. In many ways, the ideology and rhetoric behind race blindness serves to work well with the contemporary "invisibility" of whiteness (Hayman & Levit, 1997). In the late 20th century, the social and discursive practice of not marking whiteness may serve to work with the

racial ideology of race blindness in particularly insidious ways. Attacks on affirmative action, for example, are largely premised upon the argument of race-blind merit. In many ways, these attacks are motivated by a concern over the limited spaces available to white applicants and a desire to increase opportunities for white people, yet they are masked in a rhetoric of innocence (Ross, 1997). Merit, of course, is also socially constructed from the relative values we place upon the ability to speak non-English languages—for example, the high cultural value of French versus the lower cultural value of Tagalog, Hmong, Korean—to the ways we “measure” merit.

These shifting social conditions and contemporary rhetorics have led scholars to move away from racial theories that largely focused upon theorizing the social experiences of nonwhite racial/ethnic minority groups to the study of whiteness, a focus centering on the ways that white domination—as a social and ideological phenomenon—reproduces itself and configures the “place” of other racial/ethnic groups in “centering” itself (Pfeil, 1995).

Clearly, to make any sense of “whiteness,” we have to include the notion of class, for example, because rich whites have it better than poor whites. The phrase “beyond whiteness” refers to the notion that race cannot be understood apart from class, gender, and sexual orientation. There are myriad differences that fragment “whiteness.” How are we going to cope with these “differences”?

Whiteness is a sink. So are gender, class, nationality, and sexuality when approached in isolation. Opposition to racism or sexism or classism or xenophobia or homophobia does not automatically confer nobility. It may even result in regressive politics. Virtually all of the civil rights organizations that challenged race hierarchies in the 1950s embraced gender and sexual hierarchies. The need for broader coalitions in these matters is beginning to assert itself (Phelan, 1993; Nakayama, 1994). Yet reproducing established hierarchies among protest groups makes coalition formation difficult. Another difficulty lies in establishing and maintaining coalitions among groups who see themselves as inside an existing group—white women with minority women, lower-class with upper-class gays, and so on. The whole notion of *inside* and *outside* must be carefully interrogated, both in relation to a vision of human progress and in relation to democratic political theory and practice.

By exposing the “invisibility” of whiteness, the study of whiteness helps us understand the ways that white domination continues. The shift

from race to whiteness is an important conceptual shift in that it allows us to identify the ways that white privilege functions without having to name anyone a racist. Due to the social functions of whiteness, many people are (dis)empowered due to their racial/ethnic categorization, but these functions often operate insidiously. They allow some people to benefit without necessarily garnering their consent (Foner, 1997).

The rise in whiteness studies among critical race scholars is part of a larger attempt to reconfigure race relations. By interrogating the largely hidden ideology of white supremacy, the ways it continues to perpetuate a social order dominated by whites can be challenged. This important cultural work is being undertaken by those who fall under the sign of “white,” as well as those who do not (Ignatiev, 1997; Mahoney, 1997; Stowe, 1996).

Whiteness, then, operates as a tremendous social force in mobilizing how people act and interact, not only in the United States, but around the world, in the ways they think of themselves and others. In the recent case *Shaw v. Reno* in 1993, the Supreme Court embraced a standard of color blindness in drawing congressional districts. The discarding of race as a consideration in redistricting means largely that it is not permissible to establish majority minority districts. This color blindness plays into the dominance of whiteness by empowering whites in politics at the expense of others; notions of majority decision making are used to empower whiteness. Such notions of majority rule would have been unthinkable years ago when then Governor Wallace refused to allow African Americans entry into the University of Alabama. At that time, the people of Alabama were not allowed to vote on the entry of African Americans; Alabamians were simply told that majority did not rule.

In large part, this movement away from racial theories toward whiteness reflects a new approach to understanding the continuing dominance of white people in the social scene. It helps us to see how these racial categorization frameworks operate to reinforce their historically established hierarchies through a range of strategic devices that mask its true operations. For example, the historical dominance (and atrocities) associated with the colonization of the world have often left little mark on our collective memories. It just seems “natural” that so many of the world’s people speak European languages—for example, English, French, Spanish—and that so much of the world’s wealth is concentrated in white-dominated societies. The dramatic differences in aggregate power, wealth, and influence that have been established over the past three or four

hundred years was largely rationalized through race theories over the past 150 years. These historical legacies have had profound material and ideological effects upon the ways we live today. Although many of these former colonies are no longer properties of European nations, the legacies of colonization remain to benefit the earlier colonists. The international world markets and the increasing accumulation of wealth among the white-dominated nations of the world perpetuates itself through the exchange of natural resources from poorer nations for finished products and technology from the richer nations. The perpetual imbalance further secures the dominance of the former colonizers over the colonized.

Our own discursive practices, as well, perpetuate and reproduce whiteness. While Dachau and Auschwitz are burned into our social memories and carry with them tremendous linguistic weight, we do not feel that same weight when we mention other signifiers that mask the genocidal horrors that they hide: Australia, New Zealand, the U.S. Midwest. Our notions of the past are guided by these ideological blinders that allow us to reflect upon some of the horrors of the past that have shaped the world today, but not upon others. The patterns that emerge in what we remember and what we do not remember belie any randomness; the patterns expose a pattern of whiteness at work. Our words and our ways of thinking unwittingly reproduce these patterns of whiteness (Wildman & Davis, 1997).

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Chapter 2



What Do White People Want to Be Called?

A Study of Self-Labels for White Americans

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What does it mean to be a white person in the United States today? And which ethnic labels do most white people prefer? Do they prefer to be called white? European American? Anglo? or by some other label? Our interest in this topic arose from an earlier research project investigating ethnic labels preferred by various ethnic groups. As part of the research project, we asked approximately 100 white college students about their preferences for ethnic labels. While they consistently identified seven labels (Anglo, Caucasian, Euro-American, European American, WASP, White, and White American), we were surprised by their reluctance to identify these labels or to discuss the process of labeling. We interpreted

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