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Decentering Whiteness

By Peter McLaren

I wish to make two claims in this article. One is that multicultural education has largely refused to acknowledge how imperialism, colonialism, and the transnational circulation of capitalism influences the ways in which many oppressed minority groups cognitively map their paradigm of democracy in the United States. The other claim is that the present focus on diversity in multicultural education is often misguided because the struggle for ethnic diversity makes progressive political sense only if it can be accompanied by a sustained analysis of the cultural logics of white supremacy. While these two claims mutually inform each other, it is the latter claim that will occupy most of the space in this article.

Shifts in the Global Economy

Sustaining a meager existence is becoming frighteningly more difficult with the passage of time for millions of Third World peoples as well as First World urban dwellers, including millions of inhabitants of the United States.

Labor markets are growing more segmented as full-time workers are replaced with part-time workers who are unable to

secure even meager health or dental benefits. The days of high-wage, high-benefit mass production manufacturing are receding into the horizon. Yet manufacturing has not completely disappeared from the United States. Of Los Angeles County's labor force now, 36 percent is in manufacturing (the nation's largest manufacturing base). The exploitation of these workers continues to increase. The information revolution that has accompanied the global shift to post-Fordism and flexible accumulation has increased social inequality rather than diminished it.

The greed and avarice of the United States ruling class is seemingly unparalleled in history. Yet its goals remain decidedly the same. Michael Parenti writes:

Throughout history there has been only one thing that ruling interests have ever wanted—and that is everything: all the choice lands, forest, game, herds, harvests, mineral deposits, and precious metals of the earth; all the wealth, riches, and profitable returns; all the productive facilities, gainful inventiveness and technologies; all the control positions of the state and other major institutions; all public supports and subsidies, privileges and immunities; all the protections of the law with none of its constraints; all the services, comforts, luxuries, and advantages of civil society with none of the taxes

and costs. Every ruling class has wanted only this: all the rewards and none of the burdens. The operational code is: we have a lot; we can get more; we want it all. (1996, p. 46)

The application of market principles to higher education, the vulgar mercantilism that undergirds public educational reform, the bureaucratic centralism, new class managerialism, hyperprofessionalism, evisceration of public protection programs, shamefully absent enforcement of environmental standards, rising health insurance premiums, and drastic declines in salaries for working people have catapulted the United States onto a tragic course towards social decay and human misery—a course that is far from inevitable.

The kindling of fascism lies in the furnace of United States democracy, waiting for a spark to ignite a firestorm of state repression. Previous firestorms have occurred in the Watts rebellion of August, 1965, the civil rights movement, and the anti-war movement of the 1960s, but also in more current forms such as the Los Angeles uprising of April 29, 1992, and the East L. A. high school walk-outs of 1994 over Proposition 187. We don't get many firestorms because, as Parenti (1996) has so presciently noted, fascism is already here on low-flame, camouflaged by codes of commerce and corporate correctness, a fascism that burns steadily with an occasional stoking from reactionary

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In Search of a Revolutionary Multiculturalism

governors such as Pete Wilson and other sun-belt political leviathans.

As long as global economic advancement and the integration of U.S. workers into the international economy is synonymous with educational success, and as long as development discourse increasingly drives school reform efforts, then an emphasis on diversity makes little sense when it comes to developing a view of multiculturalism linked to the struggle for social justice.

No task is more urgent for multicultural education today than to re-understand its project as that of accounting for the exploitation of people of color in materialist, historical, and global terms. Multicultural education, for the most part, is little more than the interminable deferral of this urgent historical and class accounting. Capitalism not only structures opportunities for dislocated and disenfranchised groups, it also structures the way such groups **think about** their choices, values, and opportunities within a global market economy.

With shifts in the global economy placing increased pressure not only on economically disenfranchised groups but also upon increasing numbers of the white middle class, we are witnessing increasing assaults on affirmative action, political correctness, and practices and policies established to lessen discrimination and increase the opportunities of historically disenfranchised groups.

While on the one hand this current historical juncture is witnessing an unprec-

edented growth of immigrant populations within the United States and elsewhere, on the other hand white supremacist organizations living on the fringes of social life are also expanding exponentially. Establishment conservatives and liberals stridently assert nativistic and populist sentiments that barely distinguish them ideologically from their counterparts in racist far right groups and citizen militias. The Ku Klux Klan, Posse Comitatus, The Order, White Aryan Resistance, Christian Identity, National Alliance, Aryan Nations, American Front, Gun Owners of America, United Citizens of Justice, and militia groups have organizations in most, if not all, of the fifty states.

Latinophobia, Affirmative Action, and White Supremacy

Young white males and females who may find these racist groups unappealing can still find solace in politicians such as Wilson and Bob Dole, whose anti-immigrant and Latinophobic policies and practices deflect their racializing sentiments through flag waving, jingoism, and triumphalist acts of self-aggrandizement—such as the disguising of Proposition 209 as a civil rights initiative—designed to appeal to frightened white voters who feel that growing numbers of Spanish-speaking immigrants will soon outnumber them. Politicians have become white warriors in blue

suits and red ties dedicated to taking back the country from the infidel.

On the day of General Colin L. Powell's address to the 1996 Republican Convention in San Diego, former Education Secretary and current director of Empower America, William J. Bennett, published a commentary in the *Los Angeles Times* entitled "Civil Rights is the GOP's mission" (Monday, August 12, 1996, B5). Evoking the figure of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (in a manner similar to his neoconservative counterpart, Dinesh D'Souza), Bennett called for the end of racial discrimination through the abolition of affirmative action. He putatively wants African Americans, Latino/as, and other ethnic minority groups to be judged by the "content of their character." He cites African Americans such as Ward Connerly, chairman of the Civil Rights Initiative, and Powell as continuing "the great civil rights tradition of Dr. King."

However, Bennett's vision is shortsighted, maleficent, and effectively domesticates King's place in the Civil Rights struggle. His logic is as flawed as that of the conservative school board that abolishes school breakfast programs for hungry children because such programs are "anti-family." Supposedly, it is better to go hungry with your family than to be fed at school.

First, Bennett appears to work under an assumption that U.S. society has reached a point of relative economic justice and affirmative action is no longer necessary. Yet it is

clear that while there has been increased representation by African Americans in some trade and blue-collar jobs, African Americans have not made significant advances in certain fields (Feinberg, 1996). Walter Feinberg elaborates:

Take, for example, a number of important professional fields: Whereas blacks represent over 12 percent of the population in the United States, they comprise only 4.2 percent of the doctors, 3.3 percent of the lawyers, 5 percent of the university teachers, 3.7 percent of the engineers. The percentage of black lawyers and judges has risen from 1983 to 1993 by but one-tenth of 1 percent and the number of black college teachers rose by just four-tenths of 1 percent during the same period. Moreover, salary equity continues to be an elusive goal. The average salary of white women is 70.8 percent of the salary of white men; for black women the figure is 63.7 percent and for Hispanic women it is 53.9 percent. And the salaries of black and Hispanic men relative to those of white men actually dropped between 1975 and 1993. Moreover, while a smaller percentage of white men are in the active labor force now than in 1970, there has been a larger percentage drop for black males. However, the percentage for both black and white women has increased. (1996, pp. 366-367)

Second, Bennett appears either to be unable or unwilling to fathom the nearly intractable reality of white privilege and uncontested hegemony in the arena of the economy. For instance, Feinberg notes that were affirmative action to be reorganized according to need-based policies without attending to the present racial distribution of position, this would have severe consequences for African Americans and "would clearly be to redirect some of the resources presently being spent on African Americans" to white males.

Third, Bennett fails to realize that racist white people are going to be suspicious of African Americans and Latinos whether they are assisted by affirmative action initiatives or not. And fourth, his vision is propelled by a nostalgic view of the United States as a middle-class suburban neighborhood in which people of color don't have so much "attitude" and where whites are the uncontested caretakers of this prelapsarian nation of consensus and harmony. To be colorblind in Bennett's restricted use of the term is to be naive at best and ignorant at worst. Because not to see color in Bennett's view really amounts in ideological terms to be blind to the disproportionate advantage enjoyed by white people in nearly all sectors of society. Bennett has

turned the logic of Martin Luther King upside down. He has replaced social analysis with homilies about "character."

Politicians of Bennett's ilk want to increase the role of charitable institutions in this country. If economically disenfranchised people of color are to be helped, then it should be done by private individuals or organizations and not the government—or so these conservatives maintain. But wealthy private organizations have benefited from the hegemony of white privilege in the government and the marketplace for centuries. Nevertheless, transferring the challenge of economic justice from the government into the hands of philanthropists who feel "pity" for the poor is not the solution. Bennett misses the crucial point: that not to have affirmative action for people of color in the present social structure amounts to a hidden affirmative action for white people.

Bennett's position tacitly seeks the incorporation of racialized groups into the corporate ethics of consumption where white privilege increasingly holds sway. His ethics of racial tolerance can therefore work as a means of social control of populations of color. There is a false assumption at work in Bennett's logic that views culture as essentially self-equilibrating, as providing similar sets of shared experiences to all social groups. The culture of diversity heralded by Bennett is a decidedly homogenized one, cut off from the contingencies of state power and economic practices. Bennett betrays a stubborn unwillingness to recognize the asymmetrical allocation of resources and power that overwhelmingly favor white people as much now as during King's era.

A Special Kind of Disadvantage

Bennett fails to understand how, in the case of African Americans especially, race presents a very special kind of disadvantage in the United States. Whereas some politicians of Bennett's ilk have argued that affirmative action stigmatizes all those women and minorities who would have been successful even without affirmative action, this position "actually begs the question and assumes what it sets out to prove" according to Feinberg. Feinberg also notes that this is an effective position "only if it assumed that most remnants of discrimination have been eliminated and that few, if any, **truly deserving** candidates are now admitted under affirmative action standards" (p. 375).

For those who, like Bennett, would argue that affirmative action balkanizes the United States by providing certain groups with rights over others, Feinberg argues that

affirmative action is not a group right but rather a **group-based** right. The distinction is worth noting. A group-based right "results when some people are wrongly denied the treatment that should be afforded to individual, rights-bearing citizens because of characteristics that they all share" (p. 377). Affirmative action does not try to advance the coherence or the status of one group over another.

The moral force behind affirmative action is that African Americans are less well served by professional talent than other Americans due to profound historical reasons. A debt is owed to African Americans as a result of unprecedented violation of human rights and liberties during slavery. To accept such a debt is not to accept a group right. Such a debt "results from a forced, involuntary act that brings about serious and long-standing intergenerational disadvantages." Immigrants to the United States, despite how cruelly they were or in some cases continue to be treated, "were not forced by anyone in this country to come here" (Feinberg, p. 384).

While we do not owe a debt to present individuals as compensation because of the injury done to their ancestors by slavery, we still owe a debt to the slave which cannot be canceled because slavery has ended. Compensating the descendants of slaves in general is, Feinberg argues, the best we can do under present circumstances to compensate any particular slave. Slaves were not recognized as human beings, and this lack of recognition and public denial of intentionality and of their right to have rights has cultural and intergenerational significance. Present-day descendants of slaves deserve compensation "because the institution of slavery violated essential elements of collective and individual development and that this institution and those that followed it must be seen as accountable for many of the problems confronting the African-American community today" (p. 393).

Rather than stressing the importance of diversity and inclusion, as do many multiculturalists, more emphasis should be placed on the social and political construction of white supremacy and the dispensation of white hegemony. The reality-distortion field known as "Whiteness" needs to be identified as a cultural disposition and ideology linked to specific political, social, and historical arrangements. This is a theme to which I shall shortly return.

A related theme that I wish to emphasize is the need to affirm with caution, yet move beyond the politics of diversity and inclusion when developing programs and policies related to multicultural education. What is often not recognized is the fact that

positions on diversity and inclusion are often predicated on hidden assumptions of assimilation and consensus that serve as supports for liberal democratic models of identity. Further, identity politics are often predicated on modernist conceptions of negatively defined difference.

In the pluralizing move to become a society of diverse voices, liberal democracy has often succumbed to a recolonization of multiculturalism by failing to challenge ideological assumptions surrounding difference that are installed in its current anti-affirmative action and anti-welfare "reform" initiatives. In this sense people of color are still placed under the threshold of candidacy for inclusion into the universal right to self-determination, and interpolated as exiles from United States citizenship. After all, as a shrinking minority, whites are running scared, conscious of their own vulnerability, and erecting fortresses of social regulation while they still have the power to do so.

Today, immigrants from Latin America—primarily Mexican—have become the new scapegoats for the strain that the global economy has put on white constituencies. When immigrants speak out against injustice and racism in the United States, this greatly disturbs many white people who accuse the new immigrants for not being "grateful" enough to their new host country for giving them a better standard of living. Yet the imperatives of global capitalism have challenged many of the core values of immigrant communities. Bertoud (1992) speaks to the process of social disorganization that the discourse of development creates among what Western researchers call "underdeveloped people" when he writes:

economic development of an underdeveloped people by themselves [pre-modern Europeans included] is not compatible with the maintenance of their traditional customs and mores. A break with the latter is prerequisite to economic progress. What is needed is a revolution in the totality of social, cultural, and religious institutions and habits, and thus in their psychological attitude, their philosophy and way of life. What is, therefore, required amounts in reality to social dis-organization. (pp. 72-73)

Notask is more urgent for multicultural education today than to re-understand its project as that of accounting for the exploitation and oppression of people of color in historical and materialist terms. The historical present demands a return to the issues of people's fundamental material needs as distinct from what they have been told by custodians of consumer culture that they

should want. This will not be easy in an era in which the promotion of commerce is now a cultural event, while simultaneously culture is used to valorize capitalist social relations, the international division of labor, and the individualization of cultural practices.

In the last analysis, what conservative and liberal multiculturalists espouse is a cultural politics of diversity. True, within a cultural politics of diversity the individual is seen as socially constructed rather than metaphysical or autonomous. But the construction of the individual is accounted for ultimately in terms of how it is constructed within an economy of signs or a regime of representation (read "a discourse community"). Representation, however, deals mainly with the level of culture as it is implicated in the production of desire or in economies of pleasure that are discursively fashioned by the media, the culture industries, etc.

This approach to multicultural education, while important, ignores the concept of individual **need** which is linked to the material mode of production of individuals within capitalism. The difference between desire and need cannot be emphasized enough. Multicultural education needs a stronger conceptual analysis of the social totality and how individuals are constructed within it. This means understanding how individuals are positioned within economic determinations and social relations of production. Social conditions determine production and consumption, and thus social needs are not a **natural** development of productive forces. What must be analyzed is the role of social relations and class struggle in the formation of needs. Needs, or social demand, cannot pre-exist or be placed outside of social relations. Needs cannot be linked solely to the requirements of value realization, but must be understood as linked to conditions of production and reproduction.

Models of Global Culture

Jan Nederveen Pieterse (1996) has offered three models of understanding global culture. Pieterse defines what he calls *cultural differentiation*, which views culture as lasting and immutable, *cultural convergence* or growing sameness, which views culture as erasable and being erased, and *cultural hybridization* or ongoing mixing which views culture as mixing and in the process of generating new, translocal forms of difference. Each of these positions represents a particular politics of difference and speaks to a distinct form of subjectivity.

Conservatives often adopt a cultural differentiation model in which the West is viewed as a universal civilization. From this

perspective, culture is politicized and bound in civilizational packages linked to geopolitical entities. Culture becomes an ideological battleground or clash of civilizations. Culture becomes a set of characteristics which distinguish "us" from "them." The world, in other words, is divided into civilizational spheres. Ignored in this model is the way in which the United States has historically controlled important geopolitical security games. Intergroup or transnational cultures cannot, within this model, exist. This model can only work within the binary opposition of sameness-difference. Intergroup diversity would therefore be outside the domain of culture. Fields of cultural tension which flow from this model include the east-west polarity of communism-capitalism and the north-south polarity of imperialism and the colonising and colonized world. This is the model of global culture that reflects the ideas of Bennett and other conservative educationists.

For some multiculturalists, culture is often conceived along the "McDonaldization" model of cultural standardization and worldwide homogenization brought about through multinational corporations. According to this model, the world is going through a process of modernization and universal progress. It is important in this model for individuals to adapt to local cultures and markets in order to succeed—something known as "insiderization" or "glocalization." This is a model of global culture that many conservative educationists feel will benefit underdeveloped nations as they become more Americanized (*i.e.*, civilized).

Pieterse refers to the third model of culture as hybridization. Hybridization offers an antidote to essentialist forms of cultural identity that occur in the cultural differentialism of racial and nationalist doctrines. It achieves this since it takes as its central premise the primacy and legitimacy of subjugated voices and knowledges of marginalized peoples. In this way it is able to contest those who would valorize ethnic or racial "purity." It foregrounds the fundamental processes of syncretization, creolization, metissage, mestizaje, and border-crossing.

Culture hybridization is a paradigm of culture that is generally supported by progressive left-liberal multiculturalists. While preferable to the other two models that suggest either a lasting conflict and rivalry leading to a policy of closure and cultural apartheid among cultures, or a triumphalist Americanism leading to assimilation, hybridization contains some serious limitations. Hybridization does offer a model of assimilation without the need to sacrifice

identity and the development of cross-cultural patterns of difference.

Yet too often progressive multiculturalists will argue for the construction of a border identity or border-crossing without paying sufficient attention to the asymmetry of power relations that occur in the process of cultural mixing. For some, border-crossing is easier than others, especially when the reality of institutionalized racism is taken into account. Some groups, such as whites, have more options in the mix than others. Border-crossing is evaluated differently depending upon the cultural context in which it occurs. As my Chicano/a students are quick to remind me: "We didn't cross the border, the border crossed us."

Democratic Citizenry: A White Thing

In addition to emphasizing the relationship among global economic restructuring, growing anti-immigrant sentiment, and current efforts to abolish affirmative action, multicultural education should place an increasing emphasis on understanding the social construction of whiteness. Such an effort will help put a different and important focus on the problems surrounding identity formation at this particular juncture in our particular and global history.

When North Americans talk about race, they inevitably refer to African Americans, Asians, Latino/as, Native Americans, to the consistent exclusion of Euro-Americans. I want to challenge the prevailing assumption that in order to defeat racism we need to put our initiatives behind the inclusions of minoritarian populations—in other words, of non-whites. I want to argue instead that in addition to calling for diversity and inclusion we need to put our emphasis on the analysis of white ethnicity, and the necessary destabilization of white identity, specifically white supremacist ideology and practice.

I would ask you to consider Pat Buchanan's remarks in light of United States history. First, I offer some comments made by Abraham Lincoln during a speech made in southern Illinois in 1858:

I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social or political equality of the white and black races.... I will say in addition that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which, I suppose, will forever forbid the two races living together upon terms of social and political equality; and in as much as they cannot so live, that while they do remain together there must be a position of the superiors

and the inferiors; and that I, as much as any other man, am in favor of the superior being assigned to the white man." (Zinn, 1970, p. 148)

Another United States hero, Benjamin Franklin, wrote:

Why increase the Sons of **Africa**, by planting them in **America**, where we have so fair an Opportunity, by excluding all Blacks and Tawneys, of increasing the lovely White and Red?" (Cited in Perea, 1995, p. 973)

The educational left has failed to address the issue of whiteness and the insecurities that young whites harbor regarding their future during times of diminishing economic expectations. With their "racially coded and divisive rhetoric," neoconservatives may be able to enjoy tremendous success in helping insecure young white populations develop white identity along racist lines.

Cornel West has identified three white supremacist logics: the Judeo-Christian racist logic, the scientific racist logic, and the psycho-sexual racist logic. The Judeo-Christian racist logic is reflected in the Biblical story of Ham, Son of Noah, who, in failing to cover Noah's nakedness had his progeny blackened by God. In this logic, unruly behavior and chaotic rebellion are linked to racist practices. The scientific racist logic is identified with the evaluation of physical bodies in light of Greco-Roman standards. Within this logic, racist practices are identified with physical ugliness, cultural deficiency, and intellectual inferiority. The psycho-sexual racist logic identifies black people with Western sexual discourses associated with sexual prowess, lust, dirt, and subordination.

A serious question is raised by West's typology in relation to the construction of whiteness: What are the historically concrete and sociologically specific ways that white supremacist discourses are guided by Western philosophies of identity and universality and capitalist relations of production and consumption? West has located racist practices in the commentaries by the Church Fathers on the Song of Solomon and the Yvain narratives in medieval Brittany, to name just a few historical sources. West has also observed that human bodies were classified according to skin color as early as 1684 (before the rise of modern capitalism) by a French physician, Francois Bernier. The famous 18th century naturalist, Carolus Linnaeus, produced the first major written account of racial division in *Natural System* (1735). White supremacy is linked to the way culture is problematized and defined. As we have seen, theories of culture are themselves

by-products of—and symptoms of—the theorists's relation to an ongoing global struggle over issues of social class.

When I refer to whiteness or to the cultural logics of whiteness, I need to qualify what I mean. Here I adopt Ruth Frankenberg's injunction that cultural practices considered to be white need to be seen as contingent, historically produced, and transformable. White culture is not monolithic and its borders must be understood as malleable and porous. According to Alastair Bonnett (1996), whiteness is neither a discrete entity nor a fixed, asocial category. Rather, it is an "immutable social construction" (1996, p. 98). White identity is an ensemble of discourses, contrapuntal and contradictory. Whiteness—and the meanings attributed to it—is always in a state of flux and fibrillation. Bonnett notes that "even if one ignores the transgressive youth or ethnic borderlands of Western identities, and focuses on the "center" or "heartlands" of "whiteness," one will discover racialized subjectivities, that, far from being settled and confident, exhibit a constantly reformulated panic over the meaning of 'whiteness' and the defining presence of 'non-whiteness' within it" (1996, p. 106). According to Frankenberg, white culture is a material and discursive space that:

is inflected by nationhood, such that whiteness and Americanness, though by no means coterminous, are profoundly shaped by one another... .. Similarly, whiteness, masculinity, and femininity are coproducers of one another, in ways that are, in their turn, crosscut by class and by the histories of racism and colonialism (1993, p. 233).

Whiteness needs to be seen as **cultural**, as **processual**, and not ontologically different from processes that are non-white. It works, as Frankenberg notes, as "an unmarked marker of others' differentness—whiteness not so much void or formlessness as norm" (p. 198). Whiteness functions through social practices of assimilation and cultural homogenization; whiteness is linked to the expansion of capitalism in the sense that "whiteness signifies the production and consumption of commodities under capitalism" (p. 203).

Whiteness is a sociohistorical form of consciousness, given birth at the nexus of capitalism, colonial rule, and the emergent relationships among dominant and subordinate groups. Whiteness constitutes and demarcates ideas, feelings, knowledge, social practices, cultural formations, and systems of intelligibility that are identified with or attributed to white people and that

are invested in by white people as "white." Whiteness is also a refusal to acknowledge how white people are implicated in certain social relations of privilege and relations of domination and subordination.

Whiteness, then, can be considered as a form of social amnesia associated with certain modes of subjectivity within particular social sites considered to be normative. As a lived domain of meaning, whiteness represents particular social and historical formations that are reproduced through specific discursive and material processes and circuits of desire and power. Whiteness can be considered to be a conflictual sociocultural, sociopolitical, and geopolitical process that animates commonsensical practical action in relationship to dominant social practices and normative ideological productions. As an ideological formation transformed into a principle of life, into an ensemble of social relations and practices, whiteness needs to be understood as conjunctural, as a composite term that shifts in denotative and connotative emphasis, depending upon how its elements are combined and upon the contexts in which it operates.

Whiteness in the United States can be understood largely through the social consequences it provides for those who are considered to be non-white. Such consequences can be seen in the criminal justice system, in prisons, in schools, and in the board rooms of corporations such as Texaco. It can be defined in relation to immigration practices and social policies and practices of sexism, racism, and nationalism. It can be seen historically in widespread acts of imperialism and genocide and linked to an erotic economy of "excess." Eric Lott writes that white people organize their own enjoyment through the other (1993). For instance, Žižek (1992, p. 196) writes that we always impute to the "other" an excessive enjoyment. The "other" is "either a workaholic stealing our jobs or an idler living on our labor; and it is quite amusing to note the ease with which one passes from reproaching the other with a refusal to work, to reproaching him for the theft of work."

Whiteness is a type of articulatory practice that can be located in the convergence of colonialism, capitalism, and subject formation. It both fixes and sustains discursive regimes that represent self and "other"; that is, whiteness represents a regime of differences that produces and racializes an abject other. In other words, whiteness is a discursive regime that enables real effects to take place. Whiteness displaces blackness and brownness—specific forms of non-whiteness—into signifiers of deviance and criminality within social,

cultural, cognitive, and political contexts. White subjects discursively construct identity through producing, naming, "bounding," and marginalizing a range of others (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 193).

Whiteness constitutes unmarked patriarchal, heterosexist, Euro-American practices that have negative effects on and consequences for those who do not participate in them. Inflected by nationhood, whiteness can be considered an ensemble of discursive practices constantly in the process of being constructed, negotiated, and changed. Yet it functions to instantiate a structural exclusion of certain groups from social arenas of normativity (Giroux, 1997).

Whiteness is not only mythopoetical in the sense that it constructs a totality of illusions formed around the ontological superiority of the Euro-American subject, it is also metastructural in that it connects whiteness across specific differences; it solders fugitive, breakaway discourses and re-hegemonizes them. Consumer utopias and global capital flows rearticulate whiteness by means of relational differences.

Whiteness is dialectically reinitiated across epistemological fissures, contradictions, and oppositions through new regimes of desire that connects the consumption of goods to the everyday logic of Western democracy. The cultural encoding of the typography of whiteness is achieved by remapping Western European identity onto economic transactions, by recementing desire to capitalist flows, by concretizing personal history into collective memory linked to place, to a myth of origin. Whiteness offers a safe "home" for those imperiled by the flux of change.

Whiteness can be considered as a construction of the process of positive self-identification into the service of domination through inscribing identity into an onto-epistemological framework of "us" against "them." For those who are non-white, the seduction of whiteness can produce a self-definition that disconnects the subject from his or her history of oppression and struggle, exiling identity into the unmoored, chaotic realm of abject otherness (and tacitly accepting the positioned superiority of the Western subject). Whiteness provides the subject with a known boundary that places nothing "off limits," yet which provides a fantasy of belongingness. It's not that whiteness signifies preferentially one pole of the white-non-white binarism. Rather, whiteness seduces the subject to accept the idea of polarity as the limit-text of identity, as the constitutive foundation of subjectivity.

Whiteness offers coherency and stability in a world in which capital produces regimes of desire linked to commodity utopias

where fantasies of omnipotence must find a stable home. Of course, the "them" is always located within the "us." The marginalized are always foundational to the stability of the central actors. The excluded in this case establish the condition of existence of the included. So we find that it is impossible to separate the identities of both oppressor and oppressed. They depend upon each other. To resist whiteness means developing a politics of difference. Since we lack the full semantic availability to understand whiteness and to resist it, we need to rethink difference and identity outside of sets of binary oppositions. We need to view them as coalitional, as collective, as processual, as grounded in the struggle for social justice.

Ian F. Haney López argues that one is not born white but becomes white "by virtue of the social context in which one finds oneself, to be sure, but also by virtue of the choices one makes" (1996, p. 190). But how can one born into the culture of whiteness, who is defined as white, undo that whiteness? Lopez addresses this question in his formulation of whiteness. López locates whiteness in the overlapping of **chance** (e.g., features and ancestry that we have no control over, morphology); **context** (context-specific meanings that are attached to race, the social setting in which races are recognized, constructed, and contested); and **choice** (conscious choices with regard to the morphology and ancestries of social actors in order to "alter the readability of their identity" (1996, p. 191).

Lopez's perspective offers potential, it would seem, for abolishing racism since it refuses to locate whiteness only as anti-racism's "other." I agree with Bonnett when he remarks that "to continue to cast 'whites' as anti-racism's 'other,' as the eternally guilty and/or altruistic observers of 'race' equality work, is to maintain 'white' privilege and undermine the movement's intellectual and practical reach and utility" (1996, p. 107). In other words, Whites need to ask themselves to what extent their identity is a function of their whiteness in the process of their ongoing daily lives and what choices they might make to escape whiteness. López outlines—productively in my view—three steps in dismantling whiteness. They are worth quoting in full:

First, Whites must overcome the omnipresent effects of transparency and of the naturalization of race in order to recognize the many racial aspects of their identity, paying particular attention to the daily acts that draw upon and in turn confirm their whiteness. Second, they must recognize and accept the personal and

social consequences of breaking out of a White identity. Third, they must embark on a daily process of choosing against Whiteness. (López, 1996, p. 193)

Of course, the difficulty of taking such steps is partly due to the fact that, as López notes, the unconscious acceptance of a racialized identity is predicated upon a circular definition of the self. It's hard to step outside of whiteness if you are white because of all the social, cultural and economic privilege that accompany whiteness. Yet, whiteness must be dismantled if the United States is to overcome racism. Lipsitz remarks:

Those of us who are "white" can only become part of the solution if we recognize the degree to which we are already part of the problem—not because of our race, but because of our possessive investment in it." (1995, p. 384).

I am acutely aware that people of color might find troubling the idea that whites populations can simply reinvent themselves by making the simple choice of not being white. Of course, this is not what López and others appear to be saying. The choices one makes and the reinvention one aspires to as a race traitor are not "simple" nor are they easy choices for groups of whites to make. Yet it is possible that when viewed from the perspective of some people of color, offering the choice to white people of opting out of their whiteness could seem to set up an easy path for those whites who don't want to assume responsibility for their privilege as white people. Indeed, there is certainly cause for concern. Choosing not to be white is not an easy option for white people, like deciding to make a change in one's wardrobe. To understand the processes involved in the racialization of identity and to consistently choose nonwhiteness is a difficult act of apostasy, for it implies a heightened sense of social criticism and an unwavering commitment to social justice (Roediger, 1994). Of course, the question needs to be asked: If we can choose to be nonwhite, then can we choose to be black or brown? Insofar as blackness is a social construction (often "parasitic" on whiteness) then I would answer yes. Theologian James H. Cone, author of *A Black Theology of Liberation*, urges white folks to free themselves from the shackles of their whiteness and become "created anew in black being" (1986, p. 97).

I would stress that choosing against whiteness is not a "mere" choice but a self-consciously political choice, a spiritual choice, and a critical choice. To choose black-

ness or brownness merely as a way to escape the stigma of whiteness and to avoid responsibility for owning whiteness, is still very much an act of whiteness. To choose blackness or brownness as a way of politically disidentifying with white privilege is, on the other hand, an act of transgression, a traitorous act that reveals a fidelity to the struggle for justice. Of course, in a very real sense choosing against whiteness, while necessary, can be only partial since white people will often be privileged even against their own wishes given the dominant cultural currency that trades in phenotype and skin color.

Towards a Revolutionary Multiculturalism

The work of revolutionary multiculturalists attempts to unsettle both conservative assaults on multiculturalism and liberal paradigms of multiculturalism, the latter of which in my view simply repackage conservative and neo-liberal ideologies under a discursive mantle of diversity without sufficiently addressing the questions: Diversity for what purpose? Diversity standing for what vision of the future? Diversity for the benefit of whom?

Multicultural education as a politics of praxis and a field of inquiry has to navigate through and then move beyond the Scylla of a liberal humanism which in its stress on hybridization all too easily sidesteps the social division of labor and the global circuits of white, patriarchal capitalist production as these are implicated—along with

race, class, and gender—in the construction of subjectivity, and the Charybdis of an ethnic essentialism that articulates ethnicity as a monolithic and homogeneous range of discursive practices linked to biology and nature.

Revolutionary multiculturalism as an alternative considers not just the ways in which difference is represented at the level of language and culture, but the ways in which subjectivities are constructed within material relations of power and privilege linked to the globalisation of capitalism.

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