Critical whiteness studies

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Abstract: Until relatively recently the sociology of race and ethnicity, with a few notable exceptions, has been predominantly concerned with ethnic minorities and colour-based forms of racism. However, developments across a range disciplines have seen a new attention given to the question of white ethnicity and the meaning of whiteness. This paper considers three discernable approaches to critical whiteness studies and is focused upon developing a productive dialogue between the materialist, deconstructionist and psychoanalytic frameworks identified. The author argues that these repertoires differ in seeking to abolish, deconstruct or rethink the meaning of whiteness and white identities as they currently stand. It is suggested that each of these positions can inspire an interrogation of white identities capable of disturbing the more traditional focus of race enquiry to engender new theory and political practices in the field. The article concludes by pointing to some of the limits of white ethnicities research and argues for more international approaches to off-set the parochial possibilities of a ‘White Studies’ agenda. It is suggested that new geographies of whiteness can displace the construction of critical whiteness studies as a Western pursuit and open up researchers to a global interpretation and postcolonial understanding of such race markers.

Introduction

‘Whiteness studies ... is not only here, it is hot. On campuses from Berkeley in California, to the University of Massachusetts and Georgia State in Atlanta, they are flocking to sign on. ‘They” being mostly young whites’ (David Usborne, Independent on Sunday, 26/4/98, p.3).

‘Whiteness Studies is the latest fashion to sweep through the corridors of American academia. Ethnic Studies departments all over the country are offering courses; last month the University of California at Berkeley held the first conference on whiteness’ (The Guardian, The Editor, 27/6/98).

Reading the journalistic prose above one might be forgiven for thinking that whiteness is a novel and distinct area of debate. While discussions on the ‘white race’ have their roots in imperial history until relatively recently few scholars within the Western world paid much attention to whiteness. Like most social norms it has operated as a taken-for-granted category, something so ordinary it can pass without remark. It is perhaps unsurprising then that in marked contrast to ethnic minorities, those people designated as ‘white’ tend to be defined and define themselves not by the colour of their skin but by nationality, occupation, age or sex. But what would happen if we were to ‘make strange’ something so palpably familiar? What could transpire if we were to regard whiteness less a matter of skin pigmentation and more as an organising principle in late-modernity?
To the casual reader this may appear a breathtaking claim, swiftly met by the measured response, ‘Surely being white is not that important?’ But what new scholarship can impart is the certainty that whiteness is the rubric through which many of our ideas of citizenship and human rights are written. Crucially ‘opposing whiteness is not the same as opposing white people’ (Lipsitz, 1998:viii). Rather, critical whiteness studies is underpinned by the belief that:

- whiteness is a modern invention, it has changed over time and place
- whiteness is a social norm and has become chained to an index of unspoken privileges
- the bonds of whiteness can yet be broken/deconstructed for the betterment of humanity

Today critical accounts of whiteness are recognised to be a vital and necessary corrective to a sociology of race relations that myopically explored colour-based racisms with little attempt to reflect upon constructions of whiteness. So how has whiteness come into focus, what does it mean to state that white people also have an ethnicity, and what are the different means by which whiteness can be approached? In seeking to address these issues I will outline and critically discuss three distinct, if occasionally overlapping paradigms on whiteness, concerned with abolishing, deconstructing and rethinking white identities. By illuminating these different positions I aim to demonstrate that sociologists can no longer afford to ignore whiteness but should see it as a mutually constitutive aspect of their investigations into race. Extending the gaze to whiteness enables us to observe the many shades of difference that lie within this category – that some people are ‘whiter’ than others, some are not white enough and many are inescapably cast beneath the shadow of whiteness. The paper concludes with some reflections on the future direction of critical whiteness studies, weather it can be sustained and where it needs to go next in order to develop. Nevertheless, critical whiteness studies offer a radical intervention into race thinking and holds out the possibility to challenge and subvert the idea of whiteness as a universal norm.

‘Abolishing whiteness’: the power of historical materialism

The desire to dismantle whiteness is most deeply felt within the work of Marxist labour historians. This body of writers regard whiteness as an unearned social privilege that has allowed a stratum of people unequal access to financial resources, educational opportunities, health care, property rights and so forth. In identifying whiteness as a political project new labour historians are concerned not only with revealing the historical making of whiteness but in challenging its social reproduction.

By far the most expansive and theoretically astute work to emerge on the subject derives from the research of American labour historian David Roediger. In The Wages of Whiteness (1992) we discover how the identities of the American working-class come to be forged on the anvil of race politics. Whiteness is transformed into a form of race ‘currency’ used to ‘pay off’ working-class employees by ‘opening people to settling for the fiction that they are “white workers”’ (Roediger, 1994:8). New immigrants heralding from Southern and Eastern Europe, Catholics, Jews, rural peasants, the Irish and most other working-class subjects had seldom been deemed
‘white’. By dividing the workforce along the colour-line, these newly-minted ‘white workers’—many of whom had previously been subjected to religious and race discrimination—now sought solace in the fact that while they were ‘slaves to capital’ they could still lay claim to becoming white citizens: ‘honest’, ‘reliable’, ‘respectable’, the ‘first hired, last fired’. This new ethnic articulation was to see ‘Whiteness, maleness and pride in craft joined in the fashioning of an identity’ (p.162). In this way whiteness came to acquire an exchange-value in the labour market operating as a centripetal force in American society. As fellow labour historian Theodore Allen proclaims, whiteness is not a peripheral component of the US past but ‘the overriding jetstream that has governed the flow of American history’ (1994:22).

What Roediger offers is an elaborated approach to power that is at pains to avoid the pitfalls of ‘vulgar Marxism’ and simplistic assertions that white skin privilege is a mere ‘epiphenomenon’ of the economic base, experienced only through class relations. He is careful not to dismiss racism as simply residing within the ‘superstructure’¹ and goes as far to claim that such reductionism is ‘damaging’ (1994:8), not least, I would contend, because it ignores human agency. Roediger maintains,

‘no answer to the “white problem” can ignore the explanatory power of historical materialism, but neither does Marxism, as presently theorised, consistently help us focus on the central issue of why so many workers define themselves as white’ (1992:6).

A key strength of historical materialism is that it is capable of exploring large-scale changes over time and providing us with valuable insights into the broader landscape of race and class. This approach enables us to see whiteness as a peculiar social category that was made meaningful at a particular historical juncture. The focus on immigration, class and ethnicity provides insight into such conundrums as How the Irish Became White (Ignatiev, 1995), and allows us to understand what Theodore Allen (1992) terms The Invention of the White Race, the eponymous title of his important volume in the area.

A further feature of work in this vein is the attempt to redress inequalities through a politics of social justice. As the title of Roediger’s acclaimed volume Towards the Abolition of Whiteness (1994) intimates, whiteness, like slavery, should be eradicated in the modern era. This theme is poignantly taken up by a splinter group of radical writers working for the journal Race Traitor. Their motto is plain enough, and etched into every edition: ‘Treason to whiteness is loyalty for humanity’. The editors are refreshingly outspoken in their abolitionist zeal – Race Traitor aims to abolish the white club, to break it apart, to explode it ... to blow apart the social formation known as the white race, so that no one is “white”’ (Garvey & Ignatiev, 1997:347-348). This begs an inevitable question. If whiteness is the product of powerful social forces that have become embedded over time how might we challenge, resist and overturn white hegemony?

¹ According to conventional Marxist theory the material economic base (in this case capitalism) ‘determines’ the wider societal ‘superstructure’ (law, religion, politics, education etc.).
A brief example of how privileged groups can relinquish whiteness is seen in a political response to the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), whose brutal assaults on young black and Latino men continued in the aftermath of Rodney King’s murder in 1992. As part of a strategic intervention a number of anti-racist activists openly filmed the activities of the LAPD in the metropolis using cam-corders. What became evident was that once the police realised that the ‘white eye’ of power was upon them the violent activities of the LAPD were sharply curtailed and the number of arrests of young black men decreased. Where the standard response of whites is a ‘race blindness’ that results in choosing not to see, these saboteurs demonstrate a refusal to be complicit in racism by exposing the everyday privilege of whiteness and the violence that is done in its name. As Roediger reflects in his historiography of class relations, ‘participation in authentic struggles against oppression and powerlessness could be a useful antidote to whiteness’ (1994:9). Race Traitor is filled with numerous accounts of people who have individually or collectively broken with white identification: protesting prisoners who ‘no longer saw anything in common with the Warden, not even ‘whiteness’’ (Ervin, 1994:16), white female students who discovered ‘the tremendous power of crossover culture to undermine both white solidarity and male authority’ (Free To Be Me, 1994:33) and Joel Gilbert’s fascinating account of moving from a fascist identity to a state where he felt, ‘most of the whiteness I grew up with has washed away’ (1994:10). For these radical writers, as long as there is such a thing as a ‘white race’ by which individuals can identify themselves, racial oppression will prevail. Not least for these reasons new labour historians and other radical activists are united by a will to ‘abolish’, ‘cross over’ or ‘wash away’ whiteness into oblivion. Here, whiteness is a compulsion that can be resisted, ‘It is the empty and therefore terrifying attempt to build an identity based on what one isn’t and on whom one can hold back’ (Roediger, 1994:13).

The polemic will to implode whiteness through activism is rarely to be found in more recent accounts as we shall discover where much of the Marxist energy has been quelled. However, some writers continue to foreground the relationship between class and whiteness by exploring how class operates as a cultural category. Becoming respectable, a gentrified homeowner, a breadwinner, a consumer or a ‘regular Joe’ bear all the hallmarks of this modern universal whiteness. Neighbourhood ethnographies of social class relations undertaken in post-industrial places, including former American steel towns (Weis, 2004), British coal cities (Nayak, 2003) and the Australian metropolis (Shaw, 2000) reveal how whiteness is embedded in Western modernity, forming part of a new global ‘cultural-economy’. This work does elaborate the Marxist approach to race and class, but further utilizes poststructuralist insights to view whiteness as an arbitrary cultural ‘sign’ that has been made meaningful in late-modernity. Thus Bonnett (2000:55), amongst others, has remarked upon the immaculate practice by which ‘money whiten’s and how the ‘fun, free and flexible lifestyles of neo-liberalism’ become instantaneously associated with consumerism, whiteness and the West. In popular US television hit-shows such as Friends, Ally McBeal or Sex and the City it is not that the main characters are white-skinned that is of significance, but how they come to embody ‘white’ qualities – respect, decency, fairness, beauty, an ability to hold down a job and endlessly consume – that starkly reflects the cultural achievement of whiteness. But what of those who do not make the grade? Recent studies include accounts of so-called ‘white trash’ populations in Southern America (Wray, 2006) and Northern England
(Nayak, 2006) to reveal how these communities are cast historically and culturally as ‘not-quite-white’. This late-modern ideal of whiteness then extends beyond material privilege to a discernable and broader ‘cultural attitude’ that is detectable in the racialized politics of global media (Gabriel, 1998) advertising (Nayak, 1997) and film (Dyer, 1997).

‘Deconstructing whiteness’: feminist social constructionists and the politics of representation

What is striking about much of the historical research on whiteness discussed above is that it has focused almost squarely upon labour relations. This has meant that the workplace is seen as the primary site for the making of whiteness and there has been a tendency to overlook the way that whiteness is produced and reproduced within other sites and spaces such as the family, school, legal and media apparatus. By prioritising the masculine world of work the lives of women and children have been somewhat neglected. An important contribution is then seen in feminist social research such as Vron Ware’s (1993) historical account Beyond the Pale which uses biographical methods to explore the intricate lives of British women missionaries in colonial India at the time of the British Raj. Ware explores the biographies of Annette Ackroyd, who went to India to start a school at the invitation of the Brahmo Somaj (an Indian reform movement that wanted to expand education) and Josephine Butler, who campaigned in England on behalf of Indian prostitutes servicing British troops. Each of these women held broadly feminist outlooks: as a single woman Ackroyd was defiant and daring in travelling alone to India, while Butler viewed prostitution as an economic and racialised form of labour that white British males could exploit. However, Ackroyd and Butler held ambivalent feelings towards Indian women. They also believed in ‘civilising’ the non-Western world through a muscular form of Christianity aimed at uplifting supposedly ‘primitive’ cultures. The account documents the complex intertwining of whiteness and gender to demonstrate how these women worked within and against the imperial project. Ware’s research illustrates the importance of gender relations where, ‘the construction of white femininity - that is the different ideas about what it means to be a white female - can play a pivotal role in negotiating and maintaining concepts of racial and cultural difference’ (1993:4).

The theme of gender, place and whiteness is further developed in Ruth Frankenberg’s significant contributions to the area (1993; 1994; 1997). In White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness Frankenberg examines the lives of thirty white women living in Southern California, close to the Mexican border. In keeping with feminist traditions to qualitative research methodologies the study discloses how ‘the personal is political’ by examining how individuals deploy whiteness in diverse ways. The gender and sexualised dynamics of race, which are often under-explored in the class-based paradigms, create a series of insertions that cut new angles across the blank canvass of whiteness. This is seen in interviews with Frankenberg’s respondents: ‘Chris early learned the stereotype of the African American man as “rapist”’, while ‘Evelyn described a family friend as having children “sired” by a Black man, clearly reducing the man to an animal’. Such grains of detail add texture to the broader, historical brush-strokes of historical materialist accounts and reveal the power of deconstruction as a mode of analysis. However, it
remains difficult to extrapolate broader insights about whiteness from what is a highly-particular research sample comprising mainly feminist, educated and articulate adult white women drawn from women’s groups.

Although Frankenberg claims to adopt a social constructionist approach to whiteness this itself is problematic. For if race is a social construction, as most sociologists accept, then why does Frankenberg need to anchor her account solely within the lives of ‘white women’? In other words, the potential of a social constructionist approach to engage with whiteness as fluid, mutable and ever changing is curtailed when it is tethered to the weighty anchor, and seemingly fixed idea, of the white body. What the new labour historians have shown is that people who were deemed ‘not-yet-white’ in one epoch may ‘become’ white in another. While Frankenberg would no doubt be sympathetic to contingency, by basing her account upon a fixed ontology of race that links whiteness to ‘white’ bodies, we are unable to gain a deeper understanding of how the fictional markers of race are summoned to life in everyday performances, practices and ‘doings’. My contention, following Butler (1990), is that whiteness and the category ‘white women’ do not precede these enactments but, rather, they become knowable and come alive in repetitive acts, embodied and corporeal activities.

A glimpse into the complex rendering of race and gender categories can be found when Roediger discusses how workers may momentarily transcend the limits of the body if they chose to break with union activity in times of protest and cross the picket line.

‘White male workers could turn out not to have “any manhood”, if they “turned nigger” by “blackening themselves” as scabs. Conversely, class-conscious Black workers could … prove that “They are white men” … white skilled workers associated lack of manliness at work with slavery and slavery with race …’ (1994:164).

The need to rethink whiteness beyond corporeal limitations is evident in Ware’s succinct declaration, ‘It is not about being a white woman, it is about being thought of as a white woman’ (1993:xii). The slippery qualities of whiteness and how it can traverse body boundaries are illustrated in Twine’s (1996) interview-based study with sixteen University women of African decent who herald from middle-class backgrounds. These women grew up in mainly-white suburban areas and ‘argued that they had been white because they had the same material privileges and socio-economic advantages of their suburban peers. Hence, a white identity became inextricably linked to a middle-class economic position’ (p.212). The testimonies of the ‘brown skinned white girls’ (p.205) Twine refers to, illuminate the oscillating process of race signs and inform us of how gender, place and class come to situate the experience of whiteness. This is further revealed in Sunderland’s (1997) interviews with thirty middle-aged women of American and European descent who are passionate jazz fans. Sunderland is surprised to discover how a minority of these women self-identify as ‘black’ but concludes they ‘have selected to be black in an everyday context where that carries status’ (pp.50-51). The accounts of Sunderland and especially Twine suggest that studies of whiteness need not, and perhaps should not, be restricted to the analysis of those socially labelled as ‘white’. To do so risks an epistemological essentialism linking whiteness to the ‘white’ body and a political
introspection that could result in a sub-field of ‘White Studies’ from which the voices of ethnic minorities are once again excluded.

One of the more contentious issues distinguishing ‘deconstruction’ from ‘abolitionist’ perspectives concerns the purpose and motivation behind critical whiteness studies. This is signalled when *Race Traitor* abolitionists assert that the opposite of ‘construction’ is not ‘deconstruction’, as social constructionists maintain, but ‘destruction’. As Roediger further contends, ‘Powerful as it is, the insight that race is socially constructed does not magically inform us with strategies for overcoming race-class oppression’ (1994:5). Such remarks form a glaring example of the revolutionary tendencies of Marxist agents and their bid to overthrow white hegemony. For these radical polemicists there is a fear that critical whiteness studies could lose its impetus and become a site for intellectual indulgence and theoretical postulation, what one Marxist critic decries as ‘the new flashy toy in the academic nursery’ (Fekete, 1998:102). The development of a subfield called ‘White Studies’ could, then, be highly problematic especially if power relations, antiracist politics and a legacy of white racisms are too quickly glossed over, deconstructed or imploded.

I would argue that abolitionist and deconstructionist tendencies are not mutually exclusive and that the challenge to whiteness can occur through different means, in different spaces and for differing effect. However, the wary sentiment of abolitionists is not entirely unfounded. The last decade has seen an explosion of work on whiteness most noticeably in the form of ‘Readers’ and edited collections. Some brief examples include the collection of essays in *Off-White* (Fine et al., 1997), the interdisciplinary text *Whiteness: A Critical Reader* (Hill, 1997), Frankenberg’s (1997) edited volume on race and place *Displacing Whiteness*, Ware and Back’s (2002) collaboration *Out of Whiteness* exploring whiteness in the Britain and the US, and a series of essays on white identity and language entitled, *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity* (Nakayama & Martin, 1999). Language, or more precisely discourse, has been a focus for many of the deconstructionist analyses of whiteness. Nakayama and Krizek put forward a discursive case for regarding whiteness as ‘a strategic rhetoric’, that enables them to ‘take everyday discourse as a starting point in the process of marking the territory of whiteness and the power relations it generates’ (1995:296). In reviewing the plethora of academic editions above, it appears the popularity of whiteness studies as ‘novel’, avant-garde or outré has surely passed. The shift from materialism to deconstructionism has enabled cultural studies analyses of whiteness in consumption (Jackson, 1998), film (Dyer, 1997), advertising (Nayak, 1997) and law (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997) to proliferate. Alongside this body of work has also arisen a clutch of introspective studies, drawing on auto/biographical material, story-telling and anecdotal evidence, including the volume *Names We Call Home* (Thompson & Tyagi, 1996) and Jane Lazarre’s memoir of a white mother raising black sons, *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness*. A tendency in some of the autobiographical accounts of whiteness is that writers are frequently either at pains to demonstrate how their lives are not atypically white or that they too are victims which can lead to ‘guilt and me-too-ism’ (Dyer, 1993:141) to expiate anxieties. Thus, where auto/biography has been an important method utilized by feminist and black scholars to shed light upon marginalised experiences, narratives of whiteness by white people can engender the accusation, ‘so what’? The irony of this situation has been missed by the editors of *Off White* who show concern that
‘whiteness could surface as the new intellectual fetish’ in one breath, and in the next, declare that their own volume, ‘should be the last book on whiteness’ (Fine et.al., 1997:xii). Demanding the final word on the subject of whiteness - which effectively silences others while claiming to represent them - can resonate with the echo of imperial authority as authors rush to colonize niche areas. When such issues of censorship arise, the inevitable question remains just whose version of whiteness is being legitimated, who can speak for whom and who is excluded? Nicole Ward Jouve’s book White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue (1991) and Hazel Carby’s (1982) provocative essay ‘White Woman Listen!’ are illustrative of the tensions inherent when white feminists fail to recognise their privileged place in race relations or claim to speak for all women (hooks, 1992). An alternative approach is afforded in another collection (Roediger, 1998), this time showcasing the varied debates on whiteness held by black writers which demonstrates that while whites may have only recently become aware of themselves as ‘white’, whiteness has long been a source of pain, fear and, lest we forget, humour amongst black people. Black feminist writers such as bell hooks (1992) claim black people may have an intimate and ‘special knowledge’ of whiteness historically gleaned from their marginalised status and subordinated position to it. This enables minority groups to ‘see’ the borders of whiteness, its points of exclusion and the privileges it affords. As Paur (1995) discovers in a small-scale study of second-generation Sikh young women in Britain, participants may also develop ‘oppositionally active’ (p.27) identifications through a familiarity with whiteness that enables them to parody cultural representations of identity. These skilful respondents ‘learn not about whiteness but about the different constructions of whiteness and their points of intersection’ (p.28).

Although the deconstructionist paradigm has produced some of the most sophisticated and detailed analyses of whiteness, the political clarity and historical maturity of materialist approaches is rarely carried through. It becomes increasingly difficult to move from the particular to the general to discern clear insights on whiteness and understand how it can be abolished or reconfigured. Nevertheless feminist approaches not only bring gender and race into focus, but manage to go beyond the workplace to provide detailed accounts of whiteness in women’s lives in different times and places (Ware, 1993; Frankenberg, 1994). These accounts emphasise the everyday, multiple social contexts within which white privilege is produced and tenuously secured, for example through friendship groups, family practices, school choice and neighbourhood living decisions (Byrne, 2006). The value of poststructuralist feminist deconstruction lies in an appreciation of whiteness as a complex practice inflected by an index of inscriptions including gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, age or class. By challenging the uniformity of whiteness deconstruction provides penetrating insight into the multiplicity of ways in which power and subjectivity intersect. Thus, in their study of Irish women in Britain, Hickman and Walter remark, ‘It is all too easy for “whiteness” to be equated with a homogeneous way of life. What is necessary is research on the deconstruction of “whiteness”’ (1995:5).

‘Rethinking whiteness’: psychoanalysis, fantasy and the unconscious

While the materialist and deconstructionist frameworks provide the most recognisable approaches to whiteness a third repertoire psychoanalysis, as yet underdeveloped, is
further influencing thinking and writing in the area. A contribution of this paradigm is the recognition that white identities are both externally and internally constituted, that whiteness needs to be understood in relation to its imaginary racialized Others, and that racism cannot be explained purely at the level of the rational. Where language, text and discourse have been central to poststructuralist methods of deconstruction psychoanalytic approaches seek further to investigate the unspoken registers of race thinking. This includes race anxieties, guilt, terror, humour, verbal slippages, repetition as well as the collective acts of remembrance and forgetting that are part of the psychic landscape upon which white subjectivity is cultivated. By examining the unconscious, psychoanalysis allows us interpret how race discourses come to be lived out in the imagination and connect this to the formation of identity.

A landmark exposition of the psycho-social dynamics of whiteness is located in the work of the black French Martinique psychiatrist Frantz Fanon and his emblematic text *Black Skin, White Masks* (1986) first published in 1952. If nothing else, this remarkable book reminds us that the study of whiteness is not nearly as new as some critics have proposed. With much humour and no little precision Fanon discloses how black subjects internalise notions of white superiority as a consequence of colonial subjugation. Fanon argues that the residue of whiteness can be traced in the thoughts, feelings and behaviour of black individuals and extends into the post-colonial period. He persuasively reveals how the French colonial occupation of Algeria established an inferiority complex in black subjects that led them to evoke ‘white masks’ of self-loathing. As Fanon explains in *The Wretched of the Earth* this can result in an identity crisis.

‘Because it is a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: “In reality, who am I?”’ (1968:200).

This stark question ‘who am I’, haunts Fanon and many black compatriots unable to completely break with the notion of black inferiority. He further notes that black subjects are increasingly faced with the dilemma, ‘turn white or disappear’ (1993:71). The issue of white hostility also has the effect of disappearance in Ralph Ellison’s (1952) famous novel, *Invisible Man*, published at the same time as *Black Skin, White Masks*. Ellison’s tale begins with the following prologue:

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fibre and liquids - and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus side-shows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination - indeed, everything and anything except me (p.7).

The psychoanalytic shift that occurs in the work of Fanon and Ellison, from objectifying black subjectivity (‘bodiless heads’) to an appreciation of these images as the product of white fantasy (‘circus side-shows’) is telling. In this moment we
realise that because the black man is surrounded by figments of a white imagination, ultimately he is ‘invisible’. The effect is one that leads Fanon to declare, ‘I slip into corners, I remain silent, I strive for anonymity, for invisibility’ (1993:224), a condition which lends the question ‘who am I?’ further weight.

The title of Fanon’s eponymous account neatly side-steps the more obvious strap-line – Black Skin, White Skin – to produce a conscious and effective rupturing of the race binary. Black Skin, White Masks gestures instead towards a psychoanalytic splitting of the race ‘object’ and acts as a circuit-breaker on any foundational assumptions that whiteness is in any way tied to the white body. As the title intimates, a desire for whiteness, and all that this mystical category holds, is simultaneously a self-destructive act where ‘a Negro is forever in combat with his own image’ (1952:136). Small wonder that Fanon compares personal encounters with whites in terms of a fractured epidermal schema that evokes corporeal metaphors of psychic scarring, splitting and internal rupture. He recalls, ‘What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a haemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood?’ (1993:222). Throughout, Fanon makes use of personal anecdotes and medical metaphors to explain the tragic plight of the Negro. There is no better example of this than in his discussions of a ‘white gaze’, when he beseeches:

I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am fixed. Having readjusted their microtomes, they objectively cut away slices of my reality. I am laid bare (p.224).

He goes on to explain how the intensity of the ‘white gaze’ freezes his movements until, ‘I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together again by another self’ (p.220). This other self, the ever-present spectre of whiteness, controls the black subject’s every thought and action from without and within leaving us with the burning question, ‘who am I?’ Moving beyond discursive frames to recognise whiteness as an interior, psycho-dynamic relation that operates within the lives of black peoples is a breathtaking finding in this work.

In large part psychoanalysis has been blind to racializing processes focusing instead upon gender, sex and sexuality. In Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race Seshadri-Cooks (2000) examines how whiteness operates as the ‘master signifier’ in a race system where race signs come to hold differing meaning and value in the symbolic order of culture. She maintains that race has no ontological basis but is the tortured result of splintered fantasies projected onto an imaginary Other. The idea of race as a fiction is seated in deep-rooted white anxieties in which ‘seeing’ difference is ultimately a means of making difference. Sheshadri-Crooks persuasively argues that the visual economy within which race is produced does not precede culture but is a part of it. As a regime of truth we are governed by the idea that ‘seeing is believing’. This is vividly illustrated in Fanon’s (1993) much discussed episode of a bus journey where a frightened white child suddenly exclaims, ‘Look Mamma, a Negro!’ We might wonder what psycho-dynamic processes collide to make the spectacle of race so utterly abhorrent and anxiety provoking. As Fanon has shown race fantasies are ambivalent, partial and split imaginaries simultaneously marked by the doubling of fear/desire. Examples of this ambivalence can be traced in white fantasies of blackness as violent, hyper-sexual, athletic and so on, images which have the unintended effect of purporting that whiteness is innocent, sexually restrained yet
constitutes a ‘lack’. However, the body is not an unshakable testimony of race being, but an imagined site of difference through which race identification can become embodied. As Rutherford ruefully reflects, ‘The white man allows the Black man one thing, his body. But it is a body filled with white fantasy and foreboding (1988:63).

The fetishization of black bodies and culture is further evident in Phil Cohen’s (1988; 1993; 1997) psychoanalytic approach to youth and cultural studies where he identifies the ‘split perceptions’ marking the terrain of race. In ethnographic observations of white British youth Cohen reflects upon the psychic dynamics of mimicry, ‘lack’ and racial envy. He records how,

white boys … secretly envy and try to emulate the black street style which at another level they experience as so invasive … But envy is an ambivalent structure of feeling; it involves the desire to possess certain idealised attributes of the Other and the desire to destroy them because they signify what is felt to be lacking (1993:90).

In many ways this is an extension of Fanon’s concept of fear/desire which is developed in other British youth ethnographies of race and class (Back, 1996; Nayak, 2003). The idea of whiteness as an absence or ‘lack’ is understood by Pajączkowska and Young (1993) as a form of displacement. They regard ‘whiteness as an absent centre’ precisely because ‘The blankness of the identity of empire covers an ambivalence which is often unconscious, and which, consequently, can most readily be perceived in the representations it creates of the colonial “other”; representations which are projections of the “split off” parts of the self’ (p.202). For Pajączkowska and Young then, it is the inability to reckon with the violence of colonial acquisition that engenders a ‘cycle whereby (white) anxiety and guilt is apparently resolved through projection and denial and disavowal of the reality of the traumatising racialization’ (p.213). These mechanisms of displacement and disavowal involve ‘the mechanics of individual, institutional and state racisms’ (ibid). They are part of what Billig (2004) terms ‘banal nationalism’, the repetitive, daily, discursive flagging of national identity which – not unlike the idea race – is only kept alive in the routine habits of language and everyday practices.

Psychoanalytic readings on whiteness reveal the doubt, confusion and uncertainty that skewer racial identities. In his contemplative book on whiteness, nationhood and English masculinity Jonathan Rutherford (1997) ruefully reflects upon the psychic costs of absenting whiteness through dis-identification, a common practice for left-wing activists during the triumphant, nationalistic Thatcherite era.

My involvement in radical politics on the left had taught me to disavow the racial exclusivity of white ethnicity, but never to analyse or try and understand it … The problem with intellectually disowning English ethnicity was that the left never got around to working out what it was, and what our own emotional connections to it were (p.5).

Rutherford explains how this collective dis-identification led to ‘a self-deception which could only be sustained by avoiding a range of awkward questions about our relationship to white English ethnicity’ (p.6) (see also Jeater, 1992). Psychoanalytic
perspectives connect subjects intimately with a colonial past which continues to haunt the present in ever mournful ways, what Gilroy (2004) denotes as a form of imperial melancholia. These approaches remind us that race stereotypes are as anxious as they are assertive and the product of enduring ‘colonial fantasies’ (Bhabha, 1990). In doing so they disclose the extraordinary effort required to sustain the myth of race which is summoned to life through tropes, metaphors and motifs. The dense proliferation of race signs produces endless simulations, monstrous Others and ultimately, ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson, 1983). Crucially psychoanalytic interpretations have the power to turn the gaze away from grotesque Others toward the enigmatic, de-racialized, white Self. In troubling white identities psychoanalytic repertoires highlight the compulsion to perform and live up to the impossible demands of the race ‘object’, a yearning that is as fraught as it is unachievable. In engaging with the unconscious it is further evident that any identifications with race as a ‘proper object’ is immediately underscored by its efficacy. Psychoanalytic devices then offer new ways for ‘undoing’ race objects and recasting the gaze from racialized Others onto whiteness, the West and the tenuous construction of the Self through these ‘imaginative geographies’ of race and nation making (Said, 1995).

*Future directions: new geographies of whiteness*

It is no doubt simplistic to condense the various accounts of whiteness by US and European scholars into anything approaching a homogenous assemblage, as illustrated in the collection *Working Through Whiteness: International Perspectives* (Levine-Rasky, 2002). Studies of the Irish will differ markedly from work on Jewish immigrants, the British working class or plantation populations in the rural American South. It is also problematic to apply the US model of whiteness based on immigration and capital accumulation to other nations. Even so, most of the studies discussed, rarely lift their gaze beyond the white glare of a Western horizon a prickly issue that is at last beginning to engender debate (Kaufman, 2006; Roediger, 2006). Indeed, the Anglo-American focus at times risks lapsing into a parochial ‘White Studies’, a peculiar irony if whites again become the sole architects of race history and ‘re-centre’ whiteness along these lines. If the field of critical whiteness studies is to achieve global impact it must avoid essentialism and become more international in outlook. Currently, there is evidence that at least some writers are trying to reconfigure white identity at a global scale and develop new geographies of whiteness befitting of the postcolonial moment.

Dikotter’s (1992, 1995) historical research in pre-modern China demonstrates how the Chinese also generated ideas about whiteness which became associated with beauty, purity, grace and delicateness. Although it is debatable whether this term functioned in anything like a racial manner it is evident that a person could, without ambiguity, be white Chinese or black Chinese. In the modern era Chinese beauty products tend to be marketed through a white aesthetic of beauty, however, the over-application of whitening creams or make-ups can be seen as vulgar where, ‘Applying too much whitener is associated with sexual promiscuity and regarded as both immoral and un-Chinese’ (Johansson, 1998:66). The complex intertwining of whiteness to national cultures is also evident in nineteenth-century Barbados, where Lambert (2001) focuses upon the plight of poor whites and former slaves from the colonial order who became freedmen. Lambert argues that both these social groups function as ‘liminal
figures’ (p.335) as they each of occupy a position of ‘in-betweenness’ and ambiguity that means their status is constantly in flux. He goes on to remark upon a broader project of ‘racial reinscription’ (p.337) which sought to recuperate poor whites within the pantheon of whiteness and relegate black freedmen to ‘slave-like marginality’ (ibid), a process that failed as it attempted to overwrite the complex and competing ways in which race signs are constantly produced, circulated, resisted, mis/recognised, consumed, adapted and so forever incomplete in their rendering. In the modern context it has been demonstrated how black British-born return migrants to Barbados can be interpreted as ‘both black and symbolically white’ (Potter and Phillips, 2006) where an English education, accent, dress and deportment afford particular opportunities that would only be open to whites. According to Potter and Phillips’s (2006) study of fifty-one ‘Bajan-Brits’, respondents were ascribed qualities of being ‘hard working’ and ‘trustworthy’ in ‘an extension of white hegemonic power … shared by Barbadians and non-Barbadians alike’ (p.919) leading to race privileges in employment, banking services and the like.

In White Identities Bonnett (2000) considers understandings of whiteness in Japan and parts of Latin America. In particular he reveals how business, global media and advertising are transforming ideas about whiteness. This can be an unpredictable process where local ‘identities also make use of whiteness as something to aspire to, to define oneself against or, as in the case of Japan, in a more complex and tense relationship of assimilation and refusal’ (p.75). Drawing upon Amelia Simpson’s (1993) comprehensive analysis of Xuxa, an infantilised blond young woman who hosts a ‘zany’ children’s show for the Brazilian Globo television network, Bonnett shows how whiteness has become synonymous with ‘sexiness’ and full-throttle ‘American-style’ consumption. I would further contend that Bonnett’s valuable account is open to a richer complexity when we consider the role of global diasporas. Thus, the Japanese in Brazil are identified and self-identify as ‘white’, where subtle distinctions of class, education and ethnicity mark them out from Afro-Brazilians. However, these claims to whiteness are precarious and contingent where perceptions pertaining to having ‘slanted eyes’ are invoked. As with the returning ‘Bajan-Brits’ discussed above, geographies of migration stretch and re-orientate the possibilities of whiteness.

In the Antipodes there is now a burgeoning corpus of work concerning legal disputes related to Aboriginality, blood-lines, territories and land-rights. Wendy Shaw’s (2000) account of gentrification as a whitening process in the Redfern neighbourhood of Sydney is also seen to be a means of marginalising poor and indigenous communities. In other parts of Australia writers have been critical of the political deployment of whiteness by Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party, a white nationalist body that was to achieve a landslide victory in the working-class suburb of Brisbane by articulating a sense of white unease and utilizing a discourse proclaiming that whites are the new disenfranchised (Hage, 1998; Schech and Haggis, 1998; Jakubowicz, 2002). As Schech and Haggis argue, ‘Perhaps postwhiteness is a necessary requisite for postcoloniality’ (1998:627) suggesting that the decay of whiteness is formative of a post-race politics. These insights will undoubtedly become more relevant in an age where global migrations are seeing new racisms attributed to economic migrants, refugees and Eastern European asylum-seekers. At a global scale the new geo-politics of conflict has also seen a rise in religious-based discrimination particularly against Islam to the extent that being Muslim and white-
skinned may seriously undermine claims to whiteness. In this respect ‘new geographies of whiteness’ could yet become a formative and emergent paradigm for understanding the complex intersections of race, religion, ethnicity, class, sexuality and gender in global times.

Conclusion

The interest in critical studies of whiteness in history, geography, sociology, law, education, anthropology, media and cultural studies indicate a healthy trans-disciplinary appeal. In the last fifteen years whiteness has grown from its embryonic status in the sociology of race towards a more confident, if occasionally trouble-torn adolescence. However, the obsessive fascination with whiteness that led to an explosion of edited collections in the late-nineties now seems passé. The time when ‘all is whiteness’ stands out now as a brief but curious moment in American academic race history. And while various journals have run ‘special issues’ on whiteness the testimony of longevity is, ironically, when whiteness is no longer ‘special’. That is, when research on race and ethnicity no longer presumes an interrogation of Otherness.

Unsurprisingly the radical abolitionist project advocated by impassioned Marxist activists has not transpired. The necessary concessions of privilege and the appeal to a white liberal consciousness suggest a resolution of this kind is unlikely to be achievable. Nevertheless, in an increasingly multicultural, global and mediated world there are at least some signs that whiteness is not so readily taken-for-granted amongst new generations (Gallagher, 1995; Bendersky, 1995) and a sense that some whites may even regard themselves as a minority (Warren, 1995). However, a tension that the current ‘White Studies’ field needs to resist as it makes its stake for legitimacy is a tendency towards a creeping essentialism that conveys whiteness is an exclusive and reified category. This makes the ‘critical’ dimension all the more important as whiteness cannot have an equal place at the table of multiculturalism, for even if ‘whites’ as social group are globally a ‘minority’ whiteness remains hegemonic.

One of the more persuasive aspects of critical whiteness studies is that it can add depth to the less tangible and at times hazy academic ideal that race is socially constructed. Despite sociologists insistence that race is socially constituted it remains one of the stickiest and most resilient fictions to dislodge as it becomes attached to bodies, objects and practices. As the historical, deconstructionist and psycho-social work lucidly testify the social construction of race is not a philosophic platitude; it is evidenced in the making and unmaking of whiteness. Who is white, when did they become white and why, are crucial questions. They are the new tools that can help us unscrew race from its foundational wall mountings and enable us to move beyond the seemingly entrenched colour line of late-modernity.
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Biography

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