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Sentence First, Verdict Afterward: Race in the Academic Imagination

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*White people find it extremely hard to live in an environment that they don't control.—
Mayor Coleman A. Young*¹

Robin Morgan once wrote, “I haven’t the faintest notion what possible revolutionary role white heterosexual men could fulfill; since they are the very embodiment of reactionary-vested-interest-power.” Despite any and all assurances to the contrary, this poses a significant problem for would-be white race-rebels, especially...heterosexual males. Identity politics has, in a sense, inscribed white maleness as a fundamental anathema to revolution—the object, rather than subject of social change. Although such sentiments as Morgan’s have been around for a long time, well-educated and progressive-minded white males are still fairly inexperienced at being outsiders. They have bridled at their re-inscription, by Others, as opponents to the aspirations of the radical left.

For white males in particular, whiteness studies has furnished an escape from the identity politics conundrum. Beginning in the early 1990’s, whiteness studies, a primarily white phenomenon in its own right, expanded rapidly from a small group of seminal essays and monographs into an entire academic genre, spilling riotously across disciplinary frontiers, into literary theory, anthropology, political science, economics, and philosophy. Whiteness studies elide the dilemma of personal racial identity because it appears to place a healthy critical distance between destructive whiteness, and the whites who analyze it. On an individual level at least, whiteness studies objectifies whiteness as a superpersonal quantity, allowing it to be isolated, analyzed, and attacked without calling unwanted attention to the whiteness of whiteness specialists themselves. Like

¹ John Hartigan Jr., *Racial Situations—Class Predicaments of Whiteness in Detroit* (Princeton, 1999):4

any other method of historical analysis, whiteness maintains itself by a generally accepted founding myth.² This myth rests both on the near-universal conviction within American academics that race is socially constructed, and (at least in the early days) a neo-Marxist desire that whiteness should account for the shortcomings of the old materialist exegesis.

The purpose of this essay is to provide an adequate definition of whiteness studies, and to examine both its intellectual and political content, in an effort to determine whether or not whiteness is useful in either discursive realm. Does the presence of a whiteness politics adversely affect its use as an analytical category?³

According to most practitioners of whiteness studies, whiteness is not a cohesive ethnic identity, but rather a spurious badge of racial privilege, marking certain individuals as members of a reliably superior social group. Whiteness itself is illusory—a chimerical, socially-constructed taxonomy, continually re-manufacturing itself by assuming its own apparent normativity. George Lipsitz writes, “Conscious and deliberate actions have institutionalized group identity in the United States, not just through the dissemination of cultural stories but also through systematic efforts from colonial times to the present to create a possessive investment in whiteness for European

² My use of the word ‘myth’ is not meant pejoratively. In his book, *That Noble Dream*, Peter Novick uses the concept of “founding myth” to interpret the role of objectivity in the practice of history. By way of definition, he borrows from Mircea Eliade, who characterized myth as “the recital of creation; it tells how something is accomplished, began to *be*. It...speaks only of *realities*, of what *really* happened, of what was fully manifested” describing a reality “equivalent to power.” Objectivity as myth became at once a prized didactic, epistemological, and political possession, endowed by its believers with interpretive powers equal to the task of “explaining” history. Such could also be applied, albeit to a lesser degree, to whiteness studies. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988):33.

Americans.”⁴ According to Lipsitz, in 20th century America, this “possessive investment” by whites in their own whiteness resulted in racist lending practices by banks, racialized legal codes on all levels of government, racialized property value and real estate trends, and punitive zoning laws in cities. The “possessive investment in whiteness” made itself manifest by a massive dis-investment in anything not “white.”

In terms of binaries, whiteness does equate not with Blackness or Brownness, but rather with Otherness. In the United States, both whiteness and otherness are ethnologically empty indicators, signifying nothing, and including no one. The assertion that one is “white” holds no more meaning than the assertion that one is “other.” Furthermore, whiteness can only serve as a method of self-identification because it has been artificially “naturalized.”⁵ Were it not for this artificial naturalization, there would presumably be no need for the binary between White and Other, and the divisions engendered therein would ultimately dissolve. Depending on who one asks, this dissolution would signal an end to racism, and/or the existing striations between lower, middle, and upper classes. For scholars of whiteness, true social progress demands a deliberate de-naturalization of whiteness-as-identity—stripping it of its power to socially segregate human beings, and by extension, to maintain a static class hierarchy.

⁴ George Lipsitz. “The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: Racialized Social Democracy and the “White” Problem in American Studies.” *American Quarterly*, Volume 47, Issue 3 (Sep., 1995), 369-387. For a more on institutional white supremacy from a critical legal perspective, see Martha R. Mahoney’s “Segregation, Whiteness, and Transformation,” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 143 (1995): 1659-84, Derrick Bell, “Property Rights in Whiteness—Their Legal Legacy, Their Economic Costs,” *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*, ed. Richard Delgado (Philadelphia, 1995): 75-83, and Ian F. Haney Lopez, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

⁵ Perhaps one of the most consequential aspects of whiteness regards the process by which whiteness is continually “naturalized.” This term appears in David R. Roediger’s seminal work, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, and ostensibly refers to the normative and self-generating privilege of whites in the United States. David R. Roediger. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London, UK, 1991), 6.

In 1991, David Roediger published his first monograph on whiteness, entitled *The Wages of Whiteness*. Having worked almost entirely within a Marxist framework until this book, Roediger's purpose in writing was to chastise other Marxists for privileging class at the expense of race. Taking both title and inspiration from W.E.B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction*, Roediger tries to measure the agency of the white working class in the construction of race. "This book," Roediger writes, "will argue that working class formation and the systematic development of a sense of whiteness went hand in hand for the US white working class."⁶ Although this argument has since been discredited as an adequate systematic interpretation of white labor practices in the late 19th century, Roediger's book and argument became seminal because of his use of the term 'whiteness.' Quoting from Du Bois, Roediger writes:

They [whites] were given public deference...because they were white. They were admitted freely, with all classes of white people, to public functions [and] public parks... The police were drawn from their ranks and courts, dependent on their votes, treated them with leniency... Their votes selected public officials and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment... White schoolhouses were the best in the community, and conspicuously placed, and cost anywhere from twice to ten times as much as colored schools.⁷

The "wages of whiteness" maintained the gulf between white and black workers, creating exploitative class relationships on the basis of race. Thanks largely to Roediger's popularization, Du Bois's conception of whiteness as a social status divisively conferred upon certain members of the working class from above has made it possible to study whiteness as a free-floating, worldly 'substance', existing over and above the whites who benefit from it.

⁶ Ibid: 8

⁷ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in the United States, 1860-1880*, (New York, 1977): 727.

Some whiteness scholars have interpreted the substance of whiteness as a form of property. In her massive essay entitled “Whiteness as Property,” Cheryl Harris demonstrates that whiteness and property have become so intertwined that whiteness itself can now be understood as a legal form of property, owned exclusively by whites. The legacy of slavery, in which Blacks were themselves considered the property of whites, created a tradition in which “established whiteness [is a] prerequisite to the exercise of enforceable property rights”.⁸

Saidiya Hartman elaborates on Harris’s conception of whiteness as property in her book, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*. Her discussion specifically interrogates “the property of enjoyment,” for which excerpts from *Blacks Law Dictionary*. Legally, ‘enjoyment’ means “to have, possess, and use with satisfaction; to occupy or have the benefit of...the exercise of a right, privilege or incorporeal hereditament. Comfort, consolation, ease, happiness, pleasure and satisfaction.”⁹ Hartman asserts that the ‘hereditament’ of whiteness includes the expectation that Black people should create “delight”, as well as wealth for whites. Traditions such as blackface minstrelsy can be read as violent attempts to experience “pleasure in terror”: a symbolic reappropriation and commodification of Blackness, purposefully reminiscent of chattel slavery.

In 1995, Noel Ignatiev published his first monograph of whiteness, *How the Irish Became White*. According to Ignatiev, the first significant wave of Irish immigration in the early-to-mid 19th century experienced a reception similar to that of free Blacks.

⁸ Cheryl Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review*, 106 (June 1993): 1709-91.

⁹ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York, 1997). Eric Lott’s agenda-setting work, *Love and Theft*, examines the social and

Access to the wages of whiteness was routinely denied them, and eugenicists, pundits, and politicians alike speculated on the speculatively African, and therefore inferior origins of ethnic Irish people. In order to overcome the barriers thrown up by whiteness, Irishmen, instead of making common cause with free Blacks and other working class minority laborers, allowed themselves to be tricked into politically opposing them in unions, economically opposing them on factory floors, and physically opposing them in massive riots on the streets of New York. Only after the Irish had proved their reliability as whites was the status of 'white person' gradually made available to them.¹⁰

Neil Foley adds further nuance to the process of 'whitening' in his book, *The White Scourge*. In Texas cotton country, "not all whites were equally white." White sharecroppers, who because of their poverty and unglorious living arrangements, were possessed of a vulnerable form of whiteness, subject to invalidation should they slip too far down the economic ladder. "The emergence of a rural class of 'white trash'", Foley contends, "made whites conscious of themselves as a racial group and fearful that if they fell to the bottom, they would lose the racial privileges that came with being accepted for what they were *not*—black, Mexican, or foreign born."¹¹

In her sensitive and skillful history, *Making Whiteness*, Grace Elizabeth Hale critiques the dominant perception among white Americans that segregation was, and remains, a peculiarly regional problem, endemic to the American south. Integration, she

psychological aspects of blackface minstrelcy from a Marxist perspective. Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelcy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

¹⁰ Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995). For more on whiteness as social process and organization, see Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, vol. 1, *Racial Oppression and Social Control* (London: Verso, 1994), and Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (London: Verso, 1990).

¹¹ Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

argues, does not mean becoming ‘white’: “A newly imagined integration would incorporate black autonomy, authority, and subjectivity, even as it enlarges the spaces and possibilities of both American and African American identities. A newly imagined integration would not tolerate economic, gender, or sexual inequality.”¹²

David Roediger’s second monograph on whiteness signaled yet another shift in the discursive patterns of race within the academy. In *The Wages of Whiteness*, Roediger had written that his tone was purposefully modeled after that of Du Bois’s in *Black Reconstruction*: “more tragic than angry.”¹³ In *Toward the Abolition of Whiteness*, Roediger’s tone becomes the opposite—strident and acrimonious. “If it does not involve a critique of whiteness,” he declares, “the questioning of racism often proves shallow and limited...In St. Louis, young whites calls Blacks ‘nigger’ on the ‘nonracist’ ground that they are describing behavior, not genetics.” Roediger calls for an “attack” on the “destructive ideology” of whiteness, rather than the more general abstraction of race.¹⁴

Similarly, in the mid-1990’s, Noel Ignatiev founded the magazine *Race Traitor*, adopting the motto: “Treason to whiteness is loyalty of humanity.”¹⁵ “Whiteness,” he and John Garvey aver, “is the currency of this society, and so destroying it would only take enough counterfeit whites (race traitors) to undermine the confidence of the police and other representatives of official society in their ability to differentiate between friends

¹² Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*. (New York: Vintage, 1998). Hale’s treatment of whiteness posits the concept not as the cause, but as the result of continuing segregation. In her analysis, true integration would automatically abolish the deleterious impact of whiteness, without making whites the sole engine for social progress. Interestingly, Toni Morrison, whose essay *Playing in the Dark* has been used repeatedly to provide racial authenticity to more solipsistically-inclined whiteness studies, has publicly praised this moderately dissonant work as “Brilliant and essential.”

¹³ Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*: 13.

¹⁴ David R. Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History* (London: Verso, 1994).

and enemies by means of color.” They close their manifesto with the lofty claim that “*RT* [*Race Traitor*] has definitely escaped from the academy and the traditional Left. (From its standpoint, the terms Left and Right are practically meaningless.) In only three years, *RT* has managed to introduce a new notion into the debate on race. The next task is to develop that notion into a movement.”

While it may be possible to analyze some of the scholars mentioned above in a purely historiographical manner, it would be duplicitous to regard either Roediger or Ignatiev from a purely historiographical standpoint. For these whiteness scholars, the politics of identity carries at least as much, if not more weight than does the content of their historical arguments. Perhaps not incidentally, the most overtly politically-oriented and clamorous whiteness scholars are all white men. Why?

I would argue that this political kind of whiteness, paradoxical to the claims made by the two scholars mentioned above, does not really hold as its primary objective the abolition of whiteness. These two men, in both their historical and political tracts, appear to be engaged in an exercise to reclaim their own voice on the Left through a process of personal “dehonkification.” The anti-whiteness project helps them to renew their membership within the radical intelligentsia. A vociferous attack on essentialized whiteness helps the white voice re-solidify its own status as a legitimate, leftist dissenter—which status had undergone rigorous interrogation as a result of identity politics. Considered in this light, the task of the political whiteness project appears to be two-fold: whiteness must first be ontologically confirmed as a socially decisive phenomenon (for which the discipline of history has been extremely useful). Following

¹⁵ Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey, “Toward a New Abolitionism—A *Race Traitor* Manifesto”, *the minnesota review* 47 (Spring, 1997): 111-114.

subsequently on the heels of the “discovery” of whiteness come the noisy personal repudiations of everything whiteness had been crafted to represent; which corresponds remarkably well with the criticisms that had been leveled against white leftists during the high-water years of identity politics. Both Roediger and Ignatiev style themselves as “whiteness abolitionists,” *insiders*, yet still bona fide radical intellectuals in revolt. Historically, whiteness carries weight. Politically, however, it becomes a discursive trick to gain admittance into a conversation in which there appeared to be no room for the ubiquitous white man.

To analyze the nature of the trick, it is instructive to consult Jacques Derrida, who I will quote at some length:

If Being is in effect a process of reappropriation, the “question of Being” of a new type can never be percussed without being measured against the absolutely coextensive question of the proper. Now this latter question does not permit itself to be separated from the idealizing value of the very-near, which itself receives its disconcerting powers only from the structure of hearing-oneself-speak. The *proprios* presupposed in all discourses on economy, sexuality, language, semantics, rhetoric, etc., reperccusses its absolute limit only in sonorous representation.¹⁶

There may be no better or faster way to earn re-admittance and a starting spot on the left-wing roster than to define, claim, and turn against what is perceived as making one “undesirable”. According to Derrida, the entire project of philosophy is an unfounded, but necessary expansion of discursive identity—consistently becoming “a new type” by apprehending its own limits, and choosing to describe itself, and more importantly to listen to itself as it describes itself, from a place beyond those limits. As difficult as this task has proven for philosophers, for the project of whiteness, however, there is an even

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, *The Margins of Philosophy*, tr. Alan Bass. (University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1982): xix.

more serious problem. The “very-near” for whiteness scholars is, on the whole, radical intellectualism, in which the accredited status of white people in general has been compromised. To reclaim membership in their own “very-near,” whiteness scholars have hit upon a reinvention of the *proprius*. By making the *proprius* synonymous with whiteness, they have in a sense *re-presupposed*, or perhaps even imagined, the proper domain of their own speech, allowing them to reformulate, re-criticize, and re-inscribe its own limits from a position well outside themselves.

To borrow again from Robin Morgan, instead of disavowing any connections to whiteness, or to racism, as white radical intellectuals were wont to do in the past, whiteness scholars make “reactionary-vested-interest-power” their *proprius*, magnifying their own disavowals of it to the size of stupendously revolutionary acts. The logic may resemble the following: “If I can observe myself in the act of self-definition, and I can further observe myself taking the identity I gave myself apart, piece by wretched piece, then I must not now be the person I was talking about...” But such cannot of course be the case: to dismantle one’s identity assumes the pre-existence of another antagonistic, powerful, and reliable identity beneath. The dissembling of identity concealed within activist whiteness politics suggests the possibility that its proponents never really supposed themselves to possess whiteness. This, in turn, is precisely why whiteness can be repudiated in such a facile and affected manner.

Additionally, the abolishment of whiteness ceases to make non-genocidal sense if one questions the sanctity of the definition of race as a social construct. In a conversation reprinted in *Transition* magazine, Cornel West queries Noel Ignatiev’s abolitionist political objectives:

CW: I still think that you have to be open to the possibility that whiteness will be around, as a relatively harmless category, after the elimination of white supremacy. One reason I think whiteness is going to be around is that blackness is going to be around. That's the flip side of the thing. Because white supremacy runs so deep in modernity and American culture, because black culture has taken on a life in response to that, it's going to be difficult for blackness to be around and whiteness to be abolished. It's hard for me to imagine that kind of thing.

NI: I don't take a symmetrical approach. They have not performed symmetrical roles in the history of this country, so I wouldn't take a symmetrical approach.

CW: Oh, no. No, no. Not at all.

NI: I don't really want to talk about what blackness represents. I just can't imagine what whiteness would mean, but for privilege. It doesn't mean culture, it doesn't mean language, it doesn't mean religion—it doesn't mean any of those things that have reality. No one has yet answered the question of what a positive white identity is.¹⁷

For Ignatiev then, testing for racial legitimacy hinges on a individually-attributed “positivity” and an understanding of what qualifies as “having reality.” Yet even in America, blacks do not all speak the same language, share the same religion, or participate in the same “culture.” It is evident from the way in which both West and Ignatiev talk and theorize about race that the concept contains at least *some* essentializing qualities. Negative or positive, to become an ex-white man is to have left some *essence* behind. Behind all whiteness studies therefore, lies a transposed and unspoken impulse to preserve race, no matter how ‘anti-essential’ the concept becomes.

Can an individual, by an act of will, really abolish whiteness without becoming black? Walter Benn Michaels writes, “Race Traitor imagines that white men—perhaps (as one of its editors, Noel Ignatiev, says) “by some engagement with blackness, perhaps

¹⁷ William “Upski” Wimsatt, Cornel West, Noel Ignatiev, “I’m Ofay, You’re Ofay,” *Transition*, Volume 0, Issue 73 (1997), 176-203.

even an identification as ‘black’—can become ex-white men.”¹⁸ Implicit in the statement is the idea that a white man can ‘pass’ as black, and simultaneously carry out the mandates in the *Race Traitor* manifesto. Yet passing becomes logically impossible in the absence of a new racial identity to pass for, and old one to leave behind. Anti-essentially speaking, how is it possible to pass for something without becoming what it is you pass for? Essentially speaking, if racial identity is in some way a function of one’s physical appearance, how is it possible to pass at all?

One of George Lipsitz’s most oft-quoted contributions to whiteness studies is his assertion that whiteness “dares not speak its name, cannot speak in its own behalf, but rather advances through a color-blind language radically at odds with the distinctly racialized distribution of resources and life chances in American society.”¹⁹ Now that whites have ‘spoken’ whiteness, and can apparently unilaterally repudiate it, whites can become something new—not black necessarily, but certainly not white. But if whiteness is defined only by not being Other, what does it mean to define oneself exclusively as not being white? Nobody seems to know. Or if they do, they dare not speak its name.

The whiteness project, although originally historically useful, has been sidetracked by the counter-identity politics of its own founders. The practitioners of whiteness attempt to inscribe a silent population, among which they will *always* be able to travel freely and unmarked as Other, no matter what they do or say. Political anti-whiteness falsely assumes the discursive roles of both the inscriber and the inscribed, ostensibly in an attempt to prove that the universal and historical white inscriber is as

¹⁸ Walter Benn Michaels, “Autobiography of an Ex-White Man,” *Transition*, Volume 0, Issue 73 (1997), 122-143.

¹⁹ George Lipsitz, “Possessive Investment”: 385

vulnerable to predacious inscription as the Other. But this approach is essentially unworkable.

If whiteness studies is truly supportive of allowing the subaltern access to greater cultural narration, there comes a time in which white men should fall silent. To invariably do otherwise, as political whiteness has done, is to re-segregate the ideological Left, and to refuse recognition of the Other as being able to conduct its own conversations. The only way for whites to become 'dehonkified' is to submit to inscription by the Other.