

A white, fringed sculpture of a person, possibly a doll or a mannequin, stands against a dark background of dense foliage. The sculpture is made of a material with many thin, vertical fringes or threads hanging from it, giving it a textured, almost ethereal appearance. It has a rounded head, a high collar, and a short-sleeved top. The background is a dark, dense thicket of leaves, likely ivy, which provides a stark contrast to the white sculpture.

The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness

BIRGIT BRANDER
RASMUSSEN,
ERIC KLINENBERG,
IRENE J. NEXICA,
& MATT WRAY,
EDITORS

The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness

The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness

*Edited by Birgit Brander Rasmussen,
Eric Klinenberg, Irene J. Nexica, and Matt Wray*

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Durham & London 2001

© 2001 Duke University Press
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of
America on acid-free paper ∞
Designed by Amy Ruth Buchanan
Typeset in Scala by Keystone
Typesetting, Inc.
Library of Congress Cataloging-
in-Publication Data and
additional copyright information
appear on the last printed
page of this book.

Contents

Acknowledgments vii

Introduction 1 *Birgit Brander Rasmussen, Eric Klinenberg,
Irene J. Nexica, and Matt Wray*

Universal Freckle, or How I Learned to Be White 25
Dalton Conley

“The Souls of White Folks” 43
Mab Segrest

The Mirage of an Unmarked Whiteness 72
Ruth Frankenberg

White Racial Projects 97
Howard Winant

The “Morphing” Properties of Whiteness 113
Troy Duster

“White Devils” Talk Back: What Antiracists
Can Learn from Whites in Detroit 138
John Hartigan Jr.

Transnational Configurations of Desire:
The Nation and its White Closets 167
Jasbir Kaur Puar

Perfidious Albion: Whiteness and the
International Imagination 184
Vron Ware

The New Liberalism in America:
Identity Politics in the “Vital Center” 214
Eric Lott

How Gay Stays White and What Kind
of White It Stays 234
Allan Bérubé

(E)racism: Emerging Practices
of Antiracist Organizations 266
Michael Omi

Moving from Guilt to Action: Antiracist
Organizing and the Concept of “Whiteness”
for Activism and the Academy 294
William Aal

Bibliography 311

Contributors 333

Index 337

Acknowledgments

First of all, the Editorial Collective would like to thank all those who participated in and attended the Making and Unmaking of Whiteness conference in April 1997. We also thank the many activists who contacted us before and during the conference with helpful advice and suggestions and who forwarded the conference announcement to so many people outside academia. In addition, we would like to gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the University of California Humanities Research Institute, the Department of Comparative Ethnic Studies, the UC Berkeley Office of the Dean of Social Sciences, the Graduate Assembly, the Townsend Center for the Humanities, the Department of African American Studies, and many other departments too numerous to list here. Special thanks go out to Pamela Perry, Kellie Stoddart, members of the Critical Studies in Whiteness Working Group and the many volunteers who helped us organize the conference; Margo Adair for stepping in and facilitating the last day's session with little notice; and José David Saldívar and Michael Omi, faculty sponsors for the conference.

Jillian Sandell played a key role in writing the introduction and editing this book. She was unable to continue her participation in our collective, but her influence on both the conference and this anthology remains strong. We are grateful for her contributions.

Our collective thanks also go out to Monica McCormick, Abdul JanMohamed, and Mike Davis for expressing early interest in this book project and for providing sage advice on the route from conference to anthology. And big thanks to Katie Courtland, Justin Faerber, Nancy Zibman, and to our editor Ken Wissoker for his calm patience and unflagging support of this project from the moment we signed a contract with Duke University Press to the delivery of the final manuscript.

Birgit Brander Rasmussen: I am grateful to all those who teach me in formal and informal ways. Michael Omi put the first book on whiteness in my hands. I thank him and Jose Saldivar, Saidiya Hartman, Michael Rogin, and Abdul JanMohamed for years of inspiration, encouragement, and mentorship. Ned Blackhawk has always been a great friend, colleague, and mentor. My family is a never-ending source of love and support—*dette er til jeres aere*. I would also like to acknowledge the support of the Danish Research Academy. I dedicate my efforts on this project to those in Denmark who struggle against racism in all its old and new forms.

Eric Klinenberg would like to thank Mike Rogin and Loïc Wacquant for orienting him in the fields of research on race and Kate Zaloom, Kimberly McClain DaCosta, and Rachael Stryker for encouraging him to move beyond the obstacles in the terrain.

Irene J. Nexica thanks Naeema Fox, MJC, the Spice Girls, the Oakland YMCA, Elaine Manuele, friends far and near, and hip-hop for helping maintain inspiration, integrity, balance, and good humor. Big-time gratitude goes to Susana Loza, Justin Remais, Cici Ambrosio, Priscilla Hung, Nicky Bird, and Justin Smith for their help in clarifying theory and practices.

Matt Wray would like to thank José David Saldivar, Michael Rogin, and Michael Omi for their intellectual guidance and support. He also extends warm thanks to Jill Gurvey, Sean Heron, and Bill Mosca for their friendship and affection over the years.

*Birgit Brander Rasmussen,
Eric Klinenberg, Irene J. Nexica,
and Matt Wray*

Introduction

What is Whiteness?

This book comes at a moment when questions about the status and project of whiteness studies need consideration. Is whiteness a useful category of analysis? Does it help explain or illuminate ethnoracial differentiation, division, and domination? Is whiteness a useful category for political action? What, if any, significance does it have for organizers and political officials? How does whiteness figure into various racial vocabularies? Does looking closely at whiteness help to sharpen or does it obscure the analysis of race? Does studying whiteness further marginalize the experiences of groups long left out of the historical record? In other words, is “critical whiteness studies” the Trojan horse through which the study and perspective of whites will be recentered in studies of race and ethnicity?¹

In the last several years there has been a proliferation of thinking and writing about whiteness.² A combination of factors has led to this profusion of scholarly activity, and continued publishing in the field is one sign that scholars have yet to resolve the many issues to which they helped call attention. What roles do multiculturalism, the rise of identity politics, and the “declining white majority” of certain key states and urban areas play in this scenario? Equally important, what does discomfort about the emergence of whiteness as a topic of debate signal about the nature or limits of the inquiry as it currently exists?³

One of the problems with studying whiteness is that no one who does it has an easy time determining what authors and texts should be included in the inquiry. Indeed, as an editorial collective we had many contentious and lively debates about this and were not always able to agree on what exactly constitutes an appropriate intellectual genealogy for critical whiteness studies. Furthermore, what became clear from

our heated—and sometimes uncomfortable—discussions was that as a group we did not necessarily share a unified political or intellectual goal. Instead, as one might expect with a group of graduate students with different disciplinary backgrounds and viewpoints, we found that these differences sometimes precluded consensus. While the irreconcilable nature of our differences was often discouraging to us as a collective, it also encouraged us to try to include in this book a range of (sometimes conflicting) perspectives in order to register a sense of the diversity of political and intellectual projects at work within the amorphous project we are referring to as critical whiteness studies.

Despite the recent spate of publications, it is worth reiterating that the study of whiteness in the United States is not a new phenomenon. Intellectuals, writers, and artists of color have long studied, in Langston Hughes's memorable phrase, "the ways of White folks." As Toni Morrison noted in *Playing in the Dark*, for African Americans knowing and sensing the demands, needs, and (often unspoken) desires of whites have been essential elements of physical and cultural survival and success in a society dominated by white elites.⁴ More recently, David Roediger has published an anthology of essays and excerpts that document the histories of African American perspectives on whiteness;⁵ similar anthologies could be collected to represent the perspectives of other ethnoracial groups.

Recognizing this legacy contextualizes contemporary analyses of whiteness.⁶ As it emerges, critical whiteness studies owes an important debt to earlier work on identity and domination by groups and authors long marginalized in academic study. Increasing demands for recognition have been accompanied by some degree of institutionalization of programs designed to create multicultural educational curricula. In the United States, for example, one achievement of institutionalized academic programs such as ethnic studies or women's studies has been to challenge university communities to address the histories of subjugated people, including accounts of struggle and dissent.⁷

While the emergence of critical whiteness studies is probably a historical effect of the complicated identity politics within and outside the university, the effects it will have on social and cultural analysis remain unclear. Perhaps one of the most familiar versions of critical whiteness studies is the research into "white skin privilege"—analyses of the many ways in which whiteness both signifies and underwrites

various kinds of social, political, and economic advantages in the United States and elsewhere. An abundance of qualitative and quantitatively grounded research has documented the scope of white skin privilege and explains the social and cultural mechanisms that produce and reproduce it. In the United States, there is considerable evidence that to be white is to be the beneficiary of numerous advantages in the process of finding and keeping a job, buying a house, getting a first-rate education, staying healthy, and receiving more favorable treatment from the police and the courts.⁸ For many, if not all, scholars of critical whiteness studies, the social reality of white skin privilege is now an underlying research assumption, a point of departure for investigations into how it was established and how it is maintained.

Even so, scholarship on whiteness has taken off on a number of divergent and sometimes contradictory trajectories. Some scholars seek to document and explain the historical and emergent forms of racial stratification, making visible the relative positions and practices of both the dominant and the dominated groups. Other scholars focus on more ontological questions about being white in societies where everyday experiences and conditions are lived through race. Yet another group of analysts is interested in the symbolic meanings of whiteness and questions about how those meanings shape relations of power. Expanding their inquiries beyond a particular national setting, many of these scholars have taken up questions about how whiteness circulates as an axis of power and identity around the world. Finally, another group of writers and activists, including those known as the neo-abolitionists, argue for eliminating whiteness altogether. For them, the ultimate goal of whiteness studies must be to eliminate the conditions of its own existence. These various approaches to the study of whiteness entail distinct and sometimes conflicting political and disciplinary possibilities, some of which we will attempt to tease out in the section on definitions. First, though, we want to discuss the intellectual and political context out of which this anthology emerged.

Whiteness and the Politics of Race

Several productive tensions energized those of us involved in organizing the 1997 University of California at Berkeley conference called the Making and Unmaking of Whiteness, from which this anthology

emerged.⁹ Although the conference, the first major academic forum to assess the state of research on whiteness, quickly became a national event, the gathering was born of two distinctly local factors. First, the political and social climate in California regarding race and immigration took a reactionary and conservative turn in the early and middle 1990s. Second, an informal study group of Berkeley graduate students began to review and assess the emergence of a wide variety of writings on whiteness. To situate the articles collected here in the context in which they were initially delivered, we want to briefly discuss the debates over the politics of race in California and explain why we think such a public examination of whiteness could contribute new perspectives.

In 1994 California voters passed Proposition 187, a particularly punitive initiative aimed at “illegal immigrants.” This legislation, which denied medical and educational benefits and services to undocumented workers and their children and helped to make apparent the ethnic and racial fault lines that were dividing the state, passed by a wide margin at the ballot box. As our reading group began to take shape in early 1996, Californians became embroiled in another heated debate concerning matters of race, resources, and redistribution—this time over Proposition 209, the so-called California Civil Rights Initiative—which essentially sought to end affirmative action programs throughout all state agencies. For us, as students and teachers, the referendum hit close to home. It not only threatened to reduce the work and educational opportunities for disadvantaged and disproportionately poor African American and Latino residents; it also threatened to undermine the diversity that had made the University of California such a dynamic and exciting educational institution. As a state-run entity, the entire public higher education system in California, including our own Berkeley campus, would be forced to dismantle many of the programs designed to promote the admission and retention of qualified and historically underrepresented students if the proposition passed.¹⁰ Students from poor and largely black and Latino neighborhoods disproportionately attend high schools without the Advanced Placement (AP) classes that enable students to achieve a grade point average (GPA) higher than 4.0 (AP grades are inflated by one full grade point). Structurally unable to compete with students from high schools where AP classes make it possible to attain GPAs above 4.0, students in these schools have little chance of gaining

admission to UC campuses such as Berkeley and Los Angeles, where the average GPA of admitted students has long been above 4.0. Affirmative action helped to correct for this and other structural inequities in the educational system.

As the participants in the Critical Studies in Whiteness reading group looked closely at the debate in California surrounding Proposition 209, we noticed that there was little space in the political rhetoric of the campaign for discussing the impact of white privileges and the interests that George Lipsitz has called “the possessive investment in whiteness.”¹¹ Through its appropriation of the term “civil rights,” Proposition 209 deceptively drew upon the moral language of the collectivism of the African American struggle for civil rights, even though its actual content was one of stark individualism. The language of the Proposition 209 campaign relied heavily on notions of “merit,” as advocates of the bill called for a “level playing field,” demanded “color-blindness” in admissions and hiring decisions, and charged that “reverse discrimination” had narrowed the opportunity structures available to whites while simultaneously degrading people of color. This language is resonant with other strains in U.S. political rhetoric used by pro-Proposition 209 forces to appeal to the white males who had voted for Proposition 187 in such large numbers.¹² Proponents of Proposition 209 drew on the moral language of the African American struggle for social justice even as they violated its core principles concerning the promotion of equal opportunities. One of the ironies of the political debate was that ultimately both sides of the issue would quote the same passages from Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream” speech as ideological support for their positions.

According to conservative leaders such as Ward Connerly, who became the major spokesperson for the bill, white women and people of color who stood to gain from affirmative action programs were actually victims of another kind. Connerly and his allies argued that affirmative action programs injured their intended beneficiaries because the policies placed them in educational and vocational environments for which they were not adequately prepared, thereby setting them up for failure. Moreover, proponents of Proposition 209 argued that policies giving special preferences to white women and underrepresented people of color made it impossible for members of these groups to respect themselves or feel confident with their abilities and accomplishments. The stigma of being an “affirmative action baby,”

Connerly and his comrades claimed, overrode whatever benefits the policy offered.

Focus-group testing revealed that although white voters generally favored some form of “affirmative action,” they opposed “racial preferences.” Pro–Proposition 209 campaigners promoted (and many journalists quickly adopted) the latter term as a purportedly neutral, shorthand term for the complexities of extant affirmative action programs. Without a coherent framework for establishing the consequences of ethnoracially organized inequalities that created better life chances for most of California’s white population, advocates for 209 could argue that working- and middle-class white men were in fact the victims of an unfair system of preferences. As Cheryl Harris has argued, because of this skillful discursive legerdemain, public debate over the proposition was framed as a question of whether or not individual (code for white) rights should be subordinate to group (code for people of color) rights.¹³

Interestingly, given this “white-as victim” theme, the social and political power of whiteness was repeatedly used as a threat in this campaign. The image of “angry white men”—the men supposedly left behind as women and people of color advanced—was called upon in many debates over affirmative action and made occasional appearances in campaign advertisements and journalistic stories. This figure was both a sign of the putative loser of affirmative action programs and an implicit suggestion that white men around the state were seething with outrage, perhaps even preparing to use violence to defend their interests. Identifying men who were angry and increasingly unhappy, the term signified and promoted a white backlash against civil rights gains of the 1960s. It served as an effective means of configuring people of color (and, to a lesser extent, white women) as an oppressive group and angry white men as a group who could, would, and should revolt.¹⁴

In November of 1996 Californians voted in favor of Proposition 209 by a healthy margin, effectively abolishing affirmative action programs in state agencies and institutions. In the first years that it was in effect the number of black and Latino students admitted and enrolled in the flagship University of California campuses at Berkeley and Los Angeles plummeted, particularly in the law and medical schools. Since then, Connerly and other California leaders have moved their campaign to end affirmative action programs to other states and have

made plans to enter national politics. Furthermore, several states have followed California's lead and passed legislation similar to Proposition 209. A number of state university systems have dismantled their affirmative action programs in favor of other admissions policies.¹⁵ But at the time of this writing the capacity of these programs to maintain diverse campuses remains in question.

As in California, political debates about affirmative action in other states have largely taken place without a language that juxtaposes white skin privilege against the "white-as-victim" rhetoric. Public debates rarely focused on the relationship between white ethnoracial status and access to good neighborhoods, schools, health care, and even to property and wealth. Despite the establishment in 1998 by President Clinton of a "national conversation on race," a public inquiry into the legal codes and social mechanisms that create and maintain racial inequality in the United States remains elusive, as does an open conversation about the benefits that whiteness still affords. The fundamental question of how educational institutions and employers should measure merit in a racially stratified society remains at the center of contemporary racial politics. Can research on whiteness help to balance this debate? Or is accounting for the possessive investment in whiteness and the consistent dividends it pays destined to be a merely academic undertaking?

Defining Whiteness

As these recent debates over resources and opportunities in California make clear, it is important to be critically attentive to the language used to make claims about race and race-based privilege. The shift from "affirmative action" to "racial preferences" was more than a linguistic shift, it also reinforced a political consolidation of previously disparate groups of white and conservative people of color voters. In this campaign it became clear that monolithic notions of whiteness not only oversimplified the issues and did a disservice to the ways in which race intersected with other axes of social power and inequality—they also hampered the ability of those struggling to maintain affirmative action to mount an effective political countercampaign.

Definitions of whiteness, as many contributors to this book argue, will always be dynamic and context-specific. This is why the work of explaining what happened to the groups who "became white" but who

did not profit from it is becoming a more important part of the study of whiteness. For example, the question of how whites themselves are internally differentiated, how the same white skin that has facilitated the integration, assimilation, and enrichment of some does not guarantee that others—such as poor whites and queer whites—might not also experience deprivation, stigmatization, and subjugation.¹⁶ Scholars of “multiraciality” have helped to show how race is simultaneously connected to and disconnected from bodies and narratives about bodies, especially when those bodies can “pass” for white. Moreover, scholars of sexuality and difference, such as Cherrie Moraga, have argued that lesbian or gay whiteness does not guarantee, nor does it entirely abrogate, access to white skin privilege.¹⁷

There is an inherent definitional slipperiness and instability to whiteness, just as there is with all categories of race.¹⁸ Like any other racial label, whiteness does not exist as a credible biological property. But it is a social construction with real effects that has become a powerful organizing principle around the world. It is not always clear what we mean when we refer to race or whiteness because both empirical and theoretical accounts define them inconsistently or not at all. In practice, this means that readers and audiences are left to apply their own conceptions of race to every analysis they confront. But the multiple definitions of race that people draw on—what we might identify as “folk,” “analytical,” and “bureaucratic” definitions—acquire different and sometimes contradictory meanings.¹⁹

Some popular discourses, for example, might conceive of race as a set of physical or physiological traits, perhaps rooted in a collective belief in a group-specific genetic structure. Whiteness, in this terminology, might be partially or even primarily conceived of as pale skin. In other popular discourses, race might be perceived as a set of behavioral characteristics: performing well in school or playing hockey or golf could be considered ways of “acting white.”²⁰ Acting white can also correlate to a more general assumption of social power and a sense of entitlement. Terms like “oreo,” “banana,” “apple,” and “coconut” are examples of what might be called “folk theories” of race that borrow but also depart from purely biological notions of race and attempt to name the disjunctions between skin color, lived experience, desire, and social status.²¹ To make matters even more complicated, whiteness travels across national borders in contingent ways, and the same white body can be lived differently in various locations as inter-

sections of race and gender flux. In her work on Thailand's sex trade, Annette Hamilton suggests that *farang* (foreign white-skinned) men in Thailand assume and enact those traits of masculinity that are increasingly not "at home" in the West. Specifically, even if poor and underprivileged by Western standards, *farang* men can go to Thailand and meet native women with whom they can participate in what Hamilton refers to as "the conventional Western masculinist imaginary," living out sexist—and sometimes misogynistic—versions of white masculinity in ways that make them feel paradoxically more "at home" in the East.²²

What we are referring to as folk conceptions of race rarely correspond with state-based, bureaucratic versions of race. The U.S. Census, for example, defines whites and blacks as racial groups, but American Indians and Hispanics as cultural groups. Bureaucratic racial categories constitute the legal bases for official counts and accounts of particular populations, formally classifying and sorting groups into political as well as social units. As scholars in critical race studies have shown, bureaucratic and legal categories of race have been central in organizing state policies concerning rights, resources, and citizenship, particularly in the American context.

Analytic conceptions of race are likely to differ from both bureaucratic and folk notions, even though they emerge in relation to them. Most contemporary social scientists, for example, view race as a social but not a scientific fact, a mark that is sometimes written on the body but rooted in culture, not biology. Other scholars refuse to recognize race altogether, claiming that if race is not a scientific fact then it has no real meaning.²³ Definitions of whiteness, some of which are discussed below, suffer from the tendency to slip between these various conceptions of race or simply leave their theoretical foundations unstated.

While the project of refining (or rejecting) a workable concept of race is too broad and complicated to take up in this introduction, advancing the debate over definitions of whiteness is an integral part of the work that many authors in this volume do here. In the section that follows, we chart some of the ways in which researchers in critical whiteness studies have attempted to define whiteness as both a category of analysis and a mode of lived experience. There are many competing ways that whiteness can be viewed, analyzed, and critiqued, and the different points of reference offered here may help the

reader create a fuller picture of the many configurations that whiteness takes in the growing body of literature. Some of us think that the conceptions of whiteness below are useful analytical and pedagogical tools, while others find them insufficient. As an editorial collective, we have argued among ourselves about how to theorize or define whiteness and have reached no consensus on the matter. Clearly each of the definitions that we discuss below, like all theoretical perspectives, has its own intellectual and political stakes.

WHITENESS IS INVISIBLE AND UNMARKED.

The idea that whites do not recognize or acknowledge their unearned racial privileges has become one of the most cited claims of critical whiteness studies.²⁴ In this line of thinking, whiteness operates by being “invisible,” so ubiquitous and entrenched as to appear natural and normative. Here whiteness operates as the unmarked norm against which other identities are marked and racialized, the seemingly un-raced center of a racialized world. Therefore, while whiteness is invisible to whites it is hypervisible to people of color.

This assumption rests on two presuppositions. First, the “invisibility” of whiteness as a concept is predicated on an unknowing and unseeing white racial subject. Second, it posits a clear distinction between a group of white insiders who cannot recognize themselves for who they “really are” and nonwhite outsiders whose point of view affords them authentic insight. Neither of these presuppositions allows for the possibility that whites who are positioned differently in society may actually view or live whiteness quite differently. The claim also tends to privilege the viewpoint of whites, begging the important questions of how, when, and to whom whiteness becomes visible.

WHITENESS IS “EMPTY” AND WHITE IDENTITY IS ESTABLISHED THROUGH APPROPRIATION.

This is another prominent theme in recent research, one that insists that whiteness as a category of identity has no “positive” content—that it is constituted solely by absence and appropriation. This position, which is perhaps most strongly associated with the work of the neo-abolitionists,²⁵ maintains that whiteness is defined solely by what it is not. Whiteness is then best understood as a lack of cultural distinctiveness and authenticity, one that leads to attempts by whites to fill in the blanks through acts of cultural appropriation or what bell

hooks has called “eating the other.”²⁶ Similarly, Kobena Mercer has identified the tendency among white youth to perceive whiteness as empty, noting that by adopting markers of black self-empowerment such as dreadlocks or hip-hop fashion, white youth simultaneously displace whiteness and its historical connections to racial prejudice and discrimination.²⁷

There are several limitations to the claim that whiteness is empty. First, the idea that whites have no culture suggests that the power of whiteness is in no way cultural. This would seem to rule out approaches to understanding how white hegemony is built through cultural praxis as well as inquiries into the symbolic dimensions of racial domination. Second, the idea that whiteness is nothing more than appropriation rests on the twin assumptions that cultures “belong” to racial groups and that there are clear and identifiable lines that separate and demarcate racialized peoples internally and externally. Recent theories of hybridity and transculturation offer a direct challenge to these assumptions.²⁸ Finally, writings by neo-abolitionists rarely venture outside the familiar black/white dualism of U.S. racial relations, obscuring other forms of racial interaction from view. The emphasis in many of these writings on the inherently oppositional nature of “black culture” suggests an uncritical, romanticized view of blackness, one that privileges blackness as *the* authentically liberatory counterpoint to whiteness.

WHITENESS IS STRUCTURAL PRIVILEGE.

This claim is synonymous with the notion of white skin privilege we discuss above. Recent examples include one study that shows that young whites are up to four times more likely than equally qualified blacks to be given work in the service sector.²⁹ In the area of housing, Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton have shown how whiteness opens doors—quite literally—to homes in the most affluent neighborhoods in the country. Not only do real estate agents routinely select for whites when showing housing units in the best neighborhoods; banks also favor white applicants when awarding loans. Several decades of these now illegal (but still common) practices have helped to engineer patterns of spatial segregation by race and class.³⁰ Related to this is the fact that, because public schooling in the United States is funded largely through property taxes, students from wealthier white districts attend well-funded schools. Thus they are granted many more re-

sources in terms of teachers per student, books, computer access, and educational counseling, factors that are predictive of increased success in further education and greatly enhanced employment opportunities.³¹ In the health care system, benefits are also distributed unevenly among racial groups. White Americans have lower general levels of morbidity and mortality than minoritized Americans.³²

Many of these analyses, however, often fail to address the many social divisions within whiteness and among ethnoracial groups. Indeed, one of the blind spots of such research is an analysis of how class, race, and gender intersect to produce and mediate structural privilege; some of the inequalities that we recognize in terms of race—for example, levels of morbidity and mortality—are in fact better explained through differences in class and gender. Racial frames are certain ways of seeing, but also of not seeing, the nature of social division.

Claims about how whiteness functions in society sometimes obscure equally important questions about how different individuals understand, relate to, and negotiate whiteness as an identity and social position. In addition to studies of how whiteness enables forms of social control, how it affects distribution of power and resources, or how it generally operates to maintain the status quo, we must gain a better understanding of the creative and varied responses of individuals as they interact with each other and with social institutions.

WHITENESS IS VIOLENCE AND TERROR.

Bell hooks argues that one way in which whiteness has been experienced by those subordinated to its power is as an ever-present and overbearing source of dread for people of color.³³ White supremacy has been used to justify and rationalize the genocide, enslavement, lynching, and public humiliation of people of color for centuries.³⁴ Understanding whiteness primarily as violence and terror is associated with the view, discussed below, that whiteness is properly understood as the historical legacy of colonialism and imperialism.

The notion that whiteness is violence and terror challenges the idea that whiteness is invisible and unmarked. Acts of white supremacist violence stand out even to whites because they are often designed to instill terror through their visibility. Indeed, one of the central uses of white violence and terror is to make a display of white privilege and to assert the power to subjugate others.

WHITENESS IS THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION
OF EUROPEAN COLONIALISM.

Historians such as Edmund Morgan and Theodore Allen have argued that contemporary conceptions of race and institutionalized racial inequality in the United States are rooted in histories of colonialism and imperialism.³⁵ Notions of racial inferiority emerged to justify a social structure organized around subjugation and exploitation and was then elaborated by biologicistic theories of inherent differences in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Other scholars, informed by a transnational and postcolonial perspective, have developed these ideas to suggest that notions of race and class that informed each other as social divisions inside Europe were transposed to and transformed by colonialism.³⁶

Recent work by M. Jacqui Alexander, Chandra Mohanty, and Robert Young, among others, has problematized this discussion further by tracing the dynamic whereby scholarship itself reproduces the privileged status of whiteness instituted by colonialism. Some postcolonial scholars have argued that Western theory and discourse itself has been an example and instantiation of whiteness as colonialism.³⁷ Yet others, such as Aijaz Ahmad, claim that this position reduces colonialism to a metaphor and as a consequence empties the term of its political significance and utility.³⁸

CRITICAL WHITENESS STUDIES IS AN ANTIRACIST PRACTICE.

This theme dominates a great deal of the activist-oriented literature on whiteness and runs through much of the academic scholarship as well.³⁹ Whiteness, it is argued, serves as a foundation for racial domination and inequality. Through careful study of how white privilege has been historically constructed, we may find ways to dismantle it or abolish it altogether, thereby destroying the entire system of racial stratification.

Much of this literature dodges, however, the questions of what exactly constitutes antiracism. As William Aal and Allan Bérubé argue, antiracist practice is often undermined by the desire of white people to remain comfortable. If the imperative in a process is comfort rather than transformation, the process fails to address the question of who has the power to decide just what comfort is and what assumptions and structures it rests on. As we organized our conference and researched this book, it became clear to us that many people are pro-

foundly uncomfortable with whiteness studies—but that discomfort stems from very different reasons.⁴⁰

These themes at work in the research on whiteness—and there are others we have not discussed—make for an often confusing mix of theoretical starting points and research agendas. As we have said, the confusion is compounded when writers fail to make clear their theoretical assumptions about race and their definitions of whiteness. As new interest in researching white identity has grown, so have the many different ways of constructing whiteness as an object of knowledge and analysis. These various constructions of whiteness are sometimes in conflict and, when they are uncritically conjoined, can produce theoretical tensions and undermine effective political action.

The Essays

In bringing together the essays for this anthology, we faced a number of dilemmas. As a practical matter, we simply could not include all the fine essays from the conference; with over thirty-five participants, the resulting anthology would have been better suited as a doorstep than a useful classroom text. Thus, we had to be selective. Also, there were few activists and independent scholars at the conference. We first became aware of this as a problem after sending out announcements via email to a wide audience. Feedback from people doing critical whiteness studies outside the academy made it clear that they were excited to participate, and we were excited to have their participation. In our view, if critical whiteness studies remains separate from antiracist practice, it will likely produce scholarship that is divorced from any consideration of its political significance. While we had hoped to bring academics and activists into dialogue about the ways that public silences about white skin privilege and whiteness work to effectively maintain the benefits of whiteness, we were unprepared to meet and mediate the often divergent needs of activists, community leaders, and organizers.⁴¹ We have featured more activist voices in this volume and have tried to critically address more activist-oriented concerns as well.

We begin with a personal narrative by sociologist Dalton Conley, followed by essays from activist-writer Mab Segrest and cultural critic

Ruth Frankenberg. All three essays explore how the idea of whiteness as an invisible social norm negatively affects the lives of those who inhabit places of racial privilege. In "Universal Freckle, or How I Learned to Be White," Conley describes the unusual education in race he received growing up as a white minority in the projects on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Weaving insights gleaned from his childhood experiences with those he has made in his analytical studies of race and inequality, Conley narrates his own natural experiment to trace the meanings and consequences of becoming white and middle-class.

In her essay, "'The Souls of White Folks,'" Segrest suggests that white people do pay a terrible spiritual price for living in a system of white supremacy. Looking into her own and other southern family histories, Segrest locates personal pain and addiction in a larger political context of exploitation and suggests that, in order to be effective, individual and collective therapy must be connected to activist practice. Finally, in "The Mirage of an Unmarked Whiteness," Frankenberg departs from her earlier, influential argument that whiteness is an unmarked category and instead claims that whiteness is by no means invisible to everyone. Those who insist on not seeing whiteness, Frankenberg argues, suffer from a kind of spiritual and social blindness.

A second set of essays by social scientists interrogates whiteness as a critical term for social analysis. In his essay, "White Racial Projects," Howard Winant introduces the term "global racial projects" and discusses the historical transformations of white identity politics in the latter half of the twentieth century. Winant deliberates on the status of whiteness as both identity and analytical concept and argues that only through a comparative sociological approach can we hope to understand the nature of whiteness. In "The 'Morphing' Properties of Whiteness," Troy Duster explores the vicissitudes of shifting racial and class identity, noting that whiteness can and often does exist in multiple states. Employing the metaphor of H₂O, he explains how whiteness can manifest itself as vapor, water, or ice, and he explores the kinds of theoretical and methodological quandaries this can create for researchers. Anthropologist John Hartigan Jr.'s essay draws on ethnographic fieldwork in Detroit, Michigan, to challenge the idea of whiteness as a monolithic or uniform site of social privilege. Hartigan's essay, "Interrogating the Souls of White Folks in Detroit: Notes

from the Field on the Concept of Whiteness,” describes his research among poor “hillbilly” whites in the urban core of a predominantly African American city.

The idea that whiteness as an identity can function to emblemize national belonging and help secure citizenship is central to the essays by cultural theorists Jasbir Kaur Puar, Vron Ware, and Eric Lott. As Puar argues in her essay, “Transnational Configurations of Desire,” for many women of color, especially immigrants, “coming out” as a lesbian in the United States often means identifying with white culture and identifying with a certain identity of privilege. Puar unpacks the processes of racial and sexual identification and disidentification that accompany these crossings. In “Perfidious Albion,” Vron Ware comments upon the efforts by a newly centrist Labour Party to realign “Englishness” and “Britishness” with whiteness and analyzes their mixed successes in this regard. Her critique of the racial politics of “Blairism” and her discussion of postwar immigration to the United Kingdom reveal how whiteness plays a central role in binding white subjects to the state. “The New Liberalism in America: Identity Politics in the ‘Vital Center,’” Eric Lott’s wide-ranging essay on cultural politics, explores the new political center in the United States. Citing a crisis in “white liberal boomer” masculinity, Lott takes to task many of the most prominent advocates for the new politics, noting that their rhetoric is designed to combat black nationalism through a renewed emphasis on the necessity of foregrounding class analysis over race.

We close with a trio of essays that seek to situate and analyze various efforts at antiracist organizing. In “How Gay Stays White,” independent community historian Allan Bérubé traces the difficulties and quandaries of being antiracist in a racist society. Bérubé explores the convergence of racial and gender privilege with the identity politics of sexual minorities and offers a detailed postmortem of the racial politics of gay opposition to the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” campaign against gays in the military. In “(E)racism,” sociologist Michael Omi focuses on antiracist coalition work among communities of color in U.S. cities. Omi suggests that in the context of multicultural and multiracial urban settings, even where the population is primarily composed of African Americans and whites, using a black/white model of racism can limit rather than enable the kind of activist work such groups try to accomplish. This essay provides a model of the potentially synergistic conversation between critical whiteness studies and antiracist

activism. Furthermore, Omi's essay instantiates our belief that the analysis of whiteness or of white privilege does not necessarily have to recenter white people.

In "Moving from Guilt to Action: Antiracist Organizing and the Concept of 'Whiteness' for Activism and the Academy," William Aal explains the places where critical studies in whiteness have been useful or useless for his work as an antiracist organizer for the Seattle-based organization Tools for Change. Drawing on interviews with other antiracist activists, Aal discusses the limits and possibilities presented by the academic discourse on whiteness. This essay challenges readers to imagine the potential of more cooperative efforts between scholars and activist communities.

Whether critical studies of whiteness will contribute to the project of understanding or unmaking racial hierarchies ultimately depends on how members of all communities interested in redrawing or erasing the color lines—authors, readers, students, activists, and those who are a little of each—learn to work with each other. The range of articles in this anthology reflects our collective sense of how daunting it is to consider "unmaking whiteness" and represents our conviction that a diverse group of people, strategies, and actions are necessary for this kind of work. At present, there are still far more questions than answers. Our hope is that this transdisciplinary collection will move us all a little closer to understanding what it is we talk about when we talk about "whiteness."

Notes

- 1 We use the term "critical whiteness studies," rather than the term "whiteness studies," to mark the explicitly analytical nature of this inquiry. This book, as well as the intellectual project of which it is a part, does not intend to celebrate or denigrate any particular group but rather aims to analyze the processes and mechanisms that organize various forms of racial stratification.
- 2 This anthology enters an increasingly crowded field of edited collections on whiteness. Among them are Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, eds., *Critical White Studies: Looking behind the Mirror* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997); Michelle Fine et al., eds., *Off White: Readings on Race, Power, and Society* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Ruth Frankenberg, ed., *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism* (Durham:

- Duke University Press, 1997); Mike Hill, ed., *Whiteness: A Critical Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1997); Joe L. Kinchloe et al., eds., *White Reign: Deploying Whiteness in America* (New York: St. Martin's, 1998).
- 3 For a careful consideration of these and other questions, see Robyn Wiegman, "Whiteness Studies and the Paradox of Particularity," *boundary 2* 25, no. 3 (fall 1999): 115–50.
 - 4 Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness in the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).
 - 5 David Roediger, *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White* (New York: Schocken, 1998). For a provocative analysis of African American autobiography and its theorization of white identity, see Crispin Sartwell, *Act Like You Know: African-American Autobiography and White Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
 - 6 Although the recent academic attention to whiteness has been sparked mainly by books and articles with "whiteness" or "white" in their titles, numerous other texts, from many generations of scholars and writers, have looked closely at the subject and contributed to the study of how the dominant group exerts, maintains, and reproduces its position in a society organized around racial hierarchies and domination. When we limit the inquiry to those texts that announce their focus as "whiteness," we neglect and render invisible relevant work by scholars who chose not to make it the explicit center of their projects. For example, in the early 1970s Adrienne Rich wrote important essays on the need for white Western feminists to come to terms with their whiteness and to interrogate how whiteness functions in the production of feminist theory, but she did so without including the word "whiteness" in her title. See her collection of essays *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose* (New York: Norton, 1979). See also Dorothy Allison, *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class, and Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Firebrand, 1994); Elly Bulkin, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Barbara Smith, eds., *Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Firebrand, 1984); and Audre Lorde, *Sister/Outsider: Essay and Speeches* (Freedom, Calif.: Crossing Press, 1984), for examples of works by some of the many women of color, feminist, and lesbian activists and writers who were publishing critiques of whiteness long before the term "critical whiteness studies" was in circulation.
 - 7 On the other hand, Loïc Wacquant argues that a danger of "group-based" work that is generated in group-specific disciplinary structures is that it tends to succumb to what he calls the logic of the trial, in which the implicit or explicit goal of scholarly inquiry is to judge the merits of specific groups based on the normative standards of the inquirer. Wacquant cautions that such projects often lack an analytic basis and therefore do not

advance theories of racial differentiation and domination. See Loïc J. D. Wacquant, "For an Analytics of Racial Domination," *Social Theory and Political Power* 11 (1997): 221–34.

- 8 While empirical findings of scientific studies about the historical evidence for and contemporary manifestations of white privilege may not give us a complete picture of white racial identity, they begin to indicate the extent of social advantages for whites in the United States. Among the most prominent of these studies from the 1990s are Tomás Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Dalton Conley, *Being Black, Living in the Red: Race, Wealth, and Social Policy in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Ian F. Haney López, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 1996); Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Mel Oliver and Thomas Shapiro, *Black Wealth/White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality* (New York: Routledge, 1995); David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1990); and Michael Tonry, *Malign Neglect: Race, Crime, and Punishment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- 9 The organizers of the conference were seven graduate students: Birgit Brander Rasmussen (Comparative Ethnic Studies), Eric Klinenberg (Sociology), Irene Nexica (Comparative Ethnic Studies), Pamela Perry (Sociology), Jillian Sandell (English), Kellie Stoddart (Psychology), and Matt Wray (Comparative Ethnic Studies). The conference was hosted by the Department of Comparative Ethnic Studies at University of California, Berkeley, campus in April 1997 and received major funding from the University of California Humanities Research Institute. Those who presented papers or moderated at the conference were Norma Alarcón, Allan Bérubé, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, Troy Duster, Michelle Fine, Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Ruth Frankenberg, Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Cheryl Harris, John Hartigan Jr., Saidiya Hartman, Patricia Penn Hilden, Mike Hill, Aida Hurtado, Noel Ignatiev, Caren Kaplan, Josh Kun, Eric Lott, Steve Martinot, Cameron McCarthy, Walter Benn Michaels, Annalee Newitz, Michael Omi, Sam Otter, Fred Pfeil, John Powell, Jasbir Kaur Puar, David Roediger, Michael Rogin, José David Saldívar, Alexander Saxton, Nancy Scheper-Hughes, Mab Segrest, Richard Walker, David Wellman, Lois Weis, and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano.
- 10 Actually, within the University of California system (just one part of Cali-

fornia's three-tiered system of higher education) this was already a *fait accompli*. In the summer of 1995, the governing body of the University of California system, the Board of Regents, led by then-governor Pete Wilson in what was a transparent bid for Republican presidential candidacy, unilaterally eliminated affirmative action programs in hiring and admissions, despite widespread opposition from administrators, faculty, and students. Proposition 209 was designed to impact *all* state funded public agencies. See Robert Post and Michael Rogin, eds., *Race and Representation: Affirmative Action* (New York: Zone Books, 1998).

- 11 George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).
- 12 White men voted 63 to 37 percent in favor of Proposition 187. For this statistic and a thorough analysis of the Proposition 209 campaign, see Linda Chavez, *The Color Bind: California's Battle over Affirmative Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). For an engaging critique of the history of the state initiative process in California, see Peter Schrag, *Paradise Lost: California's Experience, America's Future* (New York: New Press, 1998).
- 13 See Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (June 1993): 1709–91.
- 14 At least one group, Angry White Men for Affirmative Action, led by Paul Rockwell, an Oakland librarian, sought to insert into public debate concrete examples of some of the racial and gender advantages held by white males and to expose the pro–Proposition 209 campaign's deceptive tactics. For essays on the political uses (and abuses) and social referents of the term "angry white men," see David Wellman, "Minstrel Shows, Affirmative Action Talk, and Angry White Men," in *Displacing Whiteness*, ed. Frankenberg, 211–22; and Matt Wray, "Angry White Men: Figuring Whiteness and Masculinity in Affirmative Action Debates," in *What, Then, Is White?* ed. Noel Ignatiev and Jacqueline Mimms (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).
- 15 As of 1999, California guaranteed admission to one of the University of California campuses to the top 4 percent of every graduating high school class in the state; Texas admitted the top 10 percent; and Florida, the top 20 percent. There are other variations among these policies. Texas, for example, allows all admitted students to choose the campus they will attend, whereas California does not guarantee admission to the more selective schools.
- 16 See Ross Chambers, "The Unexamined," in *Whiteness: A Critical Reader*, ed. Mike Hill (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 187–203. For analyses of how being poor can confound and complicate the benefits of being white, see Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks and Poor*

- Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); John Hartigan Jr., *Racial Situations: Class Predicaments of Whiteness in Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); and Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz, eds., *White Trash: Race and Class in America* (New York: Routledge, 1996).
- 17 Cherríe Moraga, "La Güera," in her book *Loving in the War Years* (Boston: South End Press, 1983).
 - 18 This is not because deploying whiteness as an analytic category is a recent phenomenon. Eighty years ago W. E. B. Du Bois commented on the (then) recent "discovery of personal whiteness among the world's peoples," adding with sarcasm that at the same moment that white people notice their whiteness they simultaneously celebrate it but do not really define it. "The Souls of White Folks," in W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Howe, 1920), 29–30.
 - 19 For an explanation of the confusing barter between folk, bureaucratic, and analytical conceptions of race, see Wacquant, "For an Analytics."
 - 20 See Signathia Fordham, *Blacked Out: Dilemmas of Race, Identity, and Success at Capital High* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
 - 21 These terms are used to refer to African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos, who, because of their attitudes, practices, and/or social position, are considered to be "colored" on the outside, but "white" on the inside.
 - 22 Annette Hamilton, "Primal Dream: Masculinism, Sin, and Salvation in Thailand's Sex Trade," in *Sites of Desire, Economies of Pleasure: Sexualities in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. Lenore Manderson and Margaret Jolly (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 145–65. In her work on China, Louisa Schein argues that whiteness works differently for urban or coastal Chinese than it does for inland and rural Chinese, with whiteness (associated with cities) often signifying modernity and commodity culture and "color" (associated with rural China) signifying a lost or distant national identity. See Louisa Schein, "The Consumption of Color and the Politics of White Skin in Post-Mao China," *Social Text* 41 (winter 1994): 141–64.
 - 23 See, for example, Walter Benn Michaels, "Autobiography of an Ex-White Man," in "The White Issue," *Transition* 73, 7, no. 1 (1998): 122–43.
 - 24 Richard Dyer, "White," *Screen* 29, no. 4 (autumn 1988): 44–64. See also Frankenberg's *White Women, Race Matters*, in which she explores how whiteness was an invisible or unmarked category for her white female interviewees.
 - 25 See, for example, Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey, eds., *Race Traitor* (New York: Routledge, 1996), and David Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History* (New York: Verso, 1994). For a modified neo-abolitionist argument, see Vron Ware

- and Les Back, *The Trouble with Whiteness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming).
- 26 See bell hooks, "Eating the Other," in her *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 21–39. Roediger also argues along these lines, stating that "whiteness is not merely oppressive and false, it is nothing *but* oppressive and false." *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness*, 13. See also Dyer, "White."
- 27 Kobena Mercer analyzes this facet of white signification when he describes the ways that, for some whites, whiteness is both rendered transparent and given meaning by appropriating significations that are considered nonwhite. Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 339.
- 28 See, for example, Shelly Fisher Fishkin, "Interrogating 'Whiteness,' Complicating 'Blackness': Remapping American Culture," *American Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (1995): 428–66; and José David Saldívar, *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
- 29 See Troy Duster, "Postindustrialism and Youth Unemployment: African Americans as Harbingers," in *Poverty, Inequality, and the Future of Social Policy*, ed. Katherine McFate et al. (New York: Sage, 1995).
- 30 See Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*. For articles by Massey and Denton that go beyond black/white divides, see "Residential Segregation of Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians by Socio-Economic Status and Generation," *Social Science Quarterly* 69 (1988): 797–817; and "Trends in the Residential Segregation of Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians," *American Sociological Review* 52 (1987): 802–25.
- 31 See Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (New York: Crown, 1991), and Cameron McCarthy and Warren Crichlow, eds., *Race, Identity, and Representation in Education* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
- 32 Nancy Krieger et al., "Racism, Sexism, and Social Class: Implications for Studies of Health, Disease, and Well-being," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 9 no. 6-suppl. (1993): 82–122. See also Andrew Hacker, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (New York: Scribners, 1992).
- 33 In addition to bell hooks, "Representations of Whiteness" in *Black Looks*, see Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Mab Segrest, *Memoir of a Race Traitor* (Boston: South End Press, 1994); and Michael Novick, *White Lies, White Power: The Fight against White Supremacy and Reactionary Violence* (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press, 1995).
- 34 Because of this history, those who have important insights to offer about the nature of whiteness may be reluctant to speak on the issue or become identified with critical whiteness studies. In *Black Looks*, bell hooks argues that minority scholars in the United States have hesitated to describe their

discomfort and reveal their negative associations with whiteness, partly out of a fear of disquieting their readers and partly on account of the historic ways in which people of color have learned to pretend to be comfortable and safe with encounters with whiteness. Nonetheless, she says, there is a long-standing oral tradition among African Americans of studying and theorizing about whiteness, a folk knowledge necessary to survive in a white supremacist society.

- 35 See Edmund Morgan, *Slavery and Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: Norton, 1975), and Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, 2 vols. (New York: Verso, 1994–97). Morgan is one of several scholars who detail the ways European attitudes and language of class characteristics were related to or transferred to race. See also Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1968). Other scholars have argued that concepts like race existed in times and places prior to European colonialism and imperialism. See, for example, Frank Dikotter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1992).
- 36 See, for example, Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), and Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
- 37 In *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (New York: Routledge, 1995), Robert Young argues that contemporary theory, often unwittingly, repeats the patterns through which culture and race were defined in the nineteenth century. See also M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, eds., *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" *Diacritics* 15 (summer 1987): 65–81; and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "French Feminisms in an International Frame" and "French Feminisms Revisited," in her *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
- 38 See Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992).
- 39 For representative work, see Paul Kivel, *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1995); Judy Katz, *White Awareness: A Handbook for Anti-Racism Training* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978); and Segrest, *Memoir of a Race Traitor*.
- 40 See Alistair Bonnett, "Constructions of Whiteness in European and American Anti-Racism," and Michel Wieviorka, "Is it so Difficult to be Anti-Racist?" in *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multi-Cultural Identities and the*

Politics of Anti-Racism, ed. Pnina Werber and Tariq Modood (London: Zed Books, 1997).

- 41 For an attempt by the conference organizers at self-reflexive critique, see “Conference Report: The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness,” in *Bad Subjects* 33 (<http://eserver.org/bs/33/whiteness.html>). For a critique of the conference based on activist concerns, see Cynthia Kaufman’s article in the *Socialist Review* double issue “‘The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness’: A Conference Report” (autumn 1997) [incorrectly published as vol. 26, nos. 3 & 4, 1996].

Universal Freckle, or How I Learned to Be White

I am not your typical middle-class white male. I am middle-class, despite the fact that my parents had no money; I am white, but I grew up in an inner city housing project where most everyone was black or Hispanic. I enjoyed a range of privileges that were denied my neighbors but that most Americans take for granted. In fact, my childhood was like a social science experiment: Find out what being middle-class really means by raising a kid from a “good” family in a “bad” neighborhood. Define whiteness by putting a light-skinned kid in the midst of a community of color. If the exception proves the rule, I’m that exception.

Ask any African American to list the adjectives that describe him, and he will most likely put black or African American at the top of the list. Ask someone of European descent the same question, and white will be far down on the list, if at all. Not so for me. I’ve studied whiteness the way I would a foreign language. I know its grammar, its parts of speech; I know the subtleties of its idioms, its vernacular words and phrases to which the native speaker has never given a second thought. For example, I had to learn that I was supposed to look white people in the eye when I spoke to them, that it didn’t mean that I wanted to “throw down”—challenge them to a fight. I learned that snapping that someone’s mother was so poor that she put a Big Mac on layaway was not taken with good humor. There’s an old saying that you never really know your own language until you learn another. It’s the same with race. In fact, race is nothing more than a language, a set of stories we tell ourselves to get through the world, to organize our reality.

In learning this language of race, and thereby learning to be white, I was no different than European culture as a whole. Early modern conceptions of the white race—in fact of all races—stemmed from confrontation *with* and domination *of* peoples outside the European

sphere. As the story goes, scientific theories of race arose in tandem with the ascent of colonialism. In 1684, François Bernier, a French physician who had traveled widely, published an article in a Parisian journal on the subject of human differences. “The geographers up until this point,” he claimed, “have divided the world up only according to the different countries or regions.” He then suggested a novel classification scheme based on the facial lineaments and bodily conformations of the peoples of the world. Bernier proceeded to divide the world’s peoples into four categories: the Europeans, the Far Easterners, the blacks, and the Lapps. Native Americans he did not classify as a separate people or lump in any of his four groupings. Less than a century later, another Frenchman, George-Louis LeClerc Buffon, formally categorized the “races” of the world as part of a larger project of classifying all living species, published in the forty-four-volume *Histoire naturelle* (1749–1804). With the publication of these and related volumes, the modern European conception of race was born.

These early conceptions of race, however, were quite different than those commonly held today in the scientific community or by the public at large. Back then, racial differences were seen as a result of local climates and thus mutable—fluid both within and across generations. In fact, in 1787, the Reverend Mr. Samuel Stanhope Smith (president of the College of New Jersey—now Princeton University) wrote that dark skins could be considered a “universal freckle.” Early modern racial theorists such as Smith believed that, over the course of several generations in a different climate, racial attributes would gradually change to adapt to local conditions. That is, northern peoples would get progressively darker, and darker peoples would lose their pigmentation with migration.¹

Almost three centuries after Bernier carved up the world according to his schema of physical attributes, my white parents crossed over the contemporary equivalent of a racial border, moving into a nonprofit housing project on the Lower East Side of New York City. Compressed into the area of two city blocks, our housing complex had a population comparable to the town of Carbondale, Pennsylvania, where my mother had grown up before moving to New York. It was composed of mostly African American and Puerto Rican families; we were one of the few white households. What distinguished my family from our neighbors was not so much the color of our skin per se as it was how we had arrived at the buildings in which we lived out our lives. The

essential difference was that we had some degree of choice about whether to live there or not. Our black and Hispanic neighbors, for the most part, did not. This difference was a whiteness lesson that I would not learn until much later, when I was deciding as an adult where in New York to live. As for my parents, my father was a painter, my mother a writer; in short, they had no money. But still, white poor people have choices in America that minorities do not enjoy. They could have lived in a white, working-class neighborhood in the outer boroughs or in New Jersey, for example. Our neighbors were not so lucky, however, being largely unwelcome elsewhere on account of the fact that they would probably lower property values because of the linkage between race and economics in our society.

That is, white neighborhoods are consistently worth more than black neighborhoods with similar housing stock. This pattern is maintained by the fact that when a white neighborhood just begins to integrate (usually somewhere around the 10 to 20 percent minority range) many of the white residents move out, fearing that the neighborhood will “tip” from white to black, depressing their housing values. Of course, this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Property values drop since whites, who make up most of the demand for housing, sell in droves and flood the market.

Likewise, when whites move into a minority neighborhood with low housing values, prices start to climb, and these early, “pioneer” whites reap the profits. Through these waves of neighborhood succession, whites manage to squeeze dollars out of the symbolic advantage of their race. Though they were “pioneers,” there was no such luck for my parents since the projects were not part of the private market and white “gentrification” would never take place there. That said, given their ostensible other options, I have often wondered why my parents made the choices they did in 1968. Whenever I ask them, they tell stories about having to move quickly because of a vendetta against my mother on the part of a burglar she had caught and prosecuted. But I think the real answer is somewhat along the lines of the reason white kids in the suburbs now buy more rap music than any other group: the mystique of the “ghetto,”² an attraction to the other that many middle-class individuals experience today. Such is the strange political economy of race in contemporary America. It is a political economy in which whites like my sister’s husband, who grew up across the river in northern New Jersey, memorize rap lyrics and pine to be darker or at