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# Where Do White People Come From? A Foucaultian Critique of Whiteness Studies

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## Where Do White People Come From?

### A Foucaultian Critique of Whiteness Studies

In the growing body of literature that makes up what has in recent years come to be called ‘Whiteness Studies,’ observations like the following are commonplace: ‘Whiteness has, at least within the modern era and within Western societies, tended to be constructed as a norm, an unchanging and unproblematic location, a position from which all other identities come to be marked by their difference’ (Bonnett, 1996, 146).<sup>1</sup> According to Whiteness theorists, the white race functions not so much as *a* race, one among many, as, at times at least, *the* race—the real human race—and, at other times, *no* race, simply the healthy, mature norm of human existence as opposed to all those other groups of people who are somehow off-white, off-track, more or less deviant. Whiteness, the racial norm in Western industrial societies, is at one and the same time the exemplar of human being and the unmarked self-same over against the racially marked other(s).<sup>2</sup>

This understanding of whiteness emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s as race scholars in the US and UK began to treat white identity as an epistemic object, in contrast to many earlier race theorists who studied non-whites primarily.<sup>3</sup> By taking whiteness as an object of study, these scholars problematized the status of the white race as an unmarked norm and exposed the racism implicit in its having that status. Thus, it seemed, these new race theorists had discovered a potentially very powerful tool for dismantling racism. Revealing the ways in which whiteness functions as a racial norm, they began to denaturalize it and thereby rob it of some of its power to order thought and practice. Their scholarship was and is, deliberately and unapologetically, deeply engaged political

activism. Feminist sociologist Ruth Frankenberg articulates this confluence of theory and practice well when she writes, 'Naming whiteness and white people helps dislodge the claims of both to rightful dominance' (Frankenberg, 1993, 234).

While readers of the work of Michel Foucault may well be struck by the deep affinities between Foucaultian genealogy, counter-memory, and counterattack on the one hand and Whiteness Studies' denaturalization of heretofore largely unquestioned racial categories on the other, surprisingly most writers in the Whiteness Studies movement seem all but unaware of Foucault's analytics of biopower and his descriptions of normalization.<sup>4</sup> Their repeated observation that whiteness functions as a norm and their close analyses of its unmarked status come not out of an awareness of Foucaultian genealogy but rather out of sociological studies of institutional racism like Omi and Winant's *The Formation of Race in America* (1994). Their work sounds like Foucault's at times, but if they are moving toward an analysis that is like his in some ways, it is from a starting point that is radically different. In this paper I will argue that, in part because of the limitations imposed by that different starting point, Whiteness Studies theorists typically miss their mark both analytically and politically. Their major problem lies in the fact that they still work within what Foucault calls a juridical conception of power, a conception that simply does not capture the ways in which power operates in modern industrialized societies, especially in relation to the so obviously bio-political phenomenon of racial oppression.

Whiteness Studies dates from the early 1990s, provoked into existence in great part by feminists of color (who challenged white feminists and other would-be progressives to examine their racism) and provided with important intellectual tools by emerging social

constructionist theories of gender and sexuality. Its inception seems in retrospect virtually inevitable. As K.E. Supriya puts it,

[T]he inquiry into construction of gender and racial identity is characterized by numerous critical essays on identity conceptualized as the construction of the identities of women and people of color. [But] there is a virtual absence of ... constructionist theories of racial identity specifically conceptualized as white.... This produces the ironic claim within Cultural Studies that while the gender and race of the 'other' are social constructions, whiteness is not constructed through culture and discourse and is even perhaps an essence. ... [This implicit but unacknowledged claim] becomes untenable in the long run on both logical and political grounds (Supriya, 1999, 129-30).

That lack of tenability could not be overlooked for long. White racial identity formation and performance simply had to become objects of study.

At the same time that analyses of racial identity formation were expanding to encompass whiteness, theories of *racism* were undergoing an important shift as well. Prior to the mid-1960s, Omi and Winant tell us, 'the problem of racial injustice and inequality was generally understood ... as a matter of prejudiced attitudes or bigotry on the one hand, and discriminatory practices on the other' (Omi & Winant, 1994, 69). In other words, racism was held to be a moral failing manifesting itself in the beliefs and actions of individuals, not an inherent feature of social, political, or economic systems. By the late 1960s, however, a large number of social critics, especially many of those active in the major social justice movements of the mid-twentieth century, had begun to

relocate racism. ‘Discrimination,’ they claimed, ‘far from manifesting itself only (or even principally) through individual actions or conscious policies, was a structural feature of U.S. society, the product of centuries of systematic exclusion, exploitation, and disregard of racially defined minorities’ (Omi & Winant, 1994, 69). They began to aim their critique not so much at blue-collar Americans and their ignorance or prejudices, as many of their predecessors had, but at the institutional homes of well-heeled civil servants and businesspeople. Anxious to protect the bureaucracies that empowered them, those people fought back with all the institutional weaponry at their disposal. Although a structural conception of racism might have afforded a much better account of the realities of race in the late twentieth century than psychological and moral accounts did, in the 1970s a neo-conservative appropriation of the rhetoric of civil rights enabled a return to the allegedly antiracist moral ideal of a color-blind society and sent institutional analyses of racism into relative obscurity. By the 1990s, after thirty years of epistemological contestation, the concept of racism had fallen into what Omi and Winant see as ‘an overall crisis of meaning...’ (Omi & Winant, 1994, 70). A psychological account of racism—at least one defining racism in terms of racist beliefs—was both conceptually and politically unhelpful. All the data showed that very few white Americans consciously believed that nonwhites were inferior to whites; few intended to discriminate against nonwhites in any way. Yet obviously racial oppression persisted, even as overtly declared white supremacy had declined markedly. In fact there were signs that some racial groups—most notably working class and impoverished African Americans—were losing ground. It would appear that, as sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has recently put it, ‘Whether actors

express ‘resentment’ or ‘hostility’ toward minorities is largely irrelevant’ (Bonilla-Silva, 2003, 8); racism can function quite well in the absence of any identifiable racists.

Scholars interested in studying whiteness thus found themselves with a two-fold problematic. They wanted an account of white identity (its formation, function, and maintenance) that would set it alongside other racial identities—as one racial identity among many rather than as the norm—and at the same time they needed an account of racism or racial oppression that would locate it first of all within networks of institutionalized power rather than individual hearts and minds. They needed a way to talk about how systems of power produce racialized subjectivities, in particular how they create white subjectivities, and how those white subjectivities function as anchors and relay points for the exercise of racist power that they may neither condone nor even recognize. Additionally, many of them hoped that pursuit of this problematic would help to alter racial subjectivity and the racial status quo.

Foucault’s work on subjectivization is obviously applicable here, and his work on the development of biopower over the last two centuries is invaluable. Foucault, too, had searched for a way to understand how subjectivities of various kinds are formed within networks of power; he too had tried ‘to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework’ (Foucault, 1980, 117), an analysis of a type he came to call *genealogy*, ‘a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects, etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history’ (Foucault, 1980, 117). If Foucault had wanted to understand the formation of white subjectivity, he would have

done a genealogy of whiteness. He would have looked for a point in the historical archive before whiteness made its appearance as a subject position, and he would have tried ‘to identify the accidents, the minute deviations—or conversely, the complete reversals—the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to’ white subjectivity, realizing that any such genealogical account of what has claimed the status of the ahistorical, the natural, or the norm ‘has value as a critique’ (Foucault, 1977, 146). In other words, Foucault would have done something akin to what US historians Alexander Saxton, Theodore Allen, David Roediger, Noel Ignatiev, and Grace Hale have done. He would have produced what he might have called a counter-memory, a story about the creation of white racial subjectivity that placed it within the shifting networks of power relations that assembled and deployed it.

The major difference between what Foucault might have done versus what Whiteness Studies historians have been doing over the last decade is that he would have analyzed white subjectivity in light of the questions that his other work had taught him to raise about power. As he puts it himself in an interview in 1978:

In my studies of madness or the prison, it seemed to me that the question at the center of everything was: what was power? And to be more specific: how is it exercised, what exactly happens when someone exercises power over another? It seemed to me then that sexuality, in so far as it is, in every society, and in ours in particular, heavily regulated, was a good area to test what the mechanisms of power actually were. Especially as the analyses that were current during the 1960s defined power in terms of prohibition; power, it was said, is what prohibits, what prevents people from doing

something. It seemed to me that power was something much more complex than that (Foucault, 1988, 101-2).

The conception of power still pervasive in the 1960s (and later) grew out of feudalism and the notion of sovereignty that developed within it (Foucault, 2003, 25-26). A sovereign exercises power by setting limits, up to and including imposing a limit to life. This notion of setting limits was imported into classical liberal theory as the concept of right attributed to the individual, whose right to life, e.g., is in effect a limit on the action of others that legitimate government must both recognize and reinforce. The analytic problem that Foucault encountered is that this model of power as sovereign prohibition necessarily makes subjectivity prior to the exercise of power; power is the possession of a subject who chooses when, where, how and whether to use it. But if certain subjectivities are produced in networks of power, as both Foucault and Whiteness Studies theorists believe, power must not be understood simply as a given subjectivity's capacity to set a limit, to prohibit an action. Power has to be able to operate non-subjectively.

Traditional conceptions of power were, then, impediments to understanding. '[W]e have to bypass or get around the problem of sovereignty—which is central to the theory of right—and the obedience of individuals who submit to it, and to reveal the problem of domination and subjugation' (Foucault, 2003, 27). Foucault outlines five rules he tried to follow in his effort to develop a new way of thinking about power. First, he set out to study power not at its institutionalized central points but rather at its extremities; his example here is his work on the relations between inmates and prison officials. Second, he examined power's effects rather than the intent of those in control. Third, he resisted the temptation to understand power as all or nothing—as the ability of one group to

dominate others deemed powerless. Instead, he said, power ‘is never localized here or there, it is never in the hands of some, and it is never appropriated in the way that wealth or a commodity can be appropriated. Power functions. Power is exercised through networks, and individuals do not simply circulate in those networks; they are in a position to both submit to and exercise this power; they are always its relays.’ He continues:

It is ... a mistake to think of the individual as a sort of elementary nucleus, a primitive atom or some multiple, inert matter to which power is applied, or which is struck by a power that subordinates or destroys individuals. In actual fact, one of the first effects of power is that it allows bodies, gestures, discourses, and desires to be identified and constituted as something individual. The individual is not, in other words, power’s opposite number (Foucault, 2003, 29-30).

All of this is not to say that power is something democratically distributed, however. It is not a distributable *thing* at all. Since it exists in its operation, it is best studied from the bottom up, as Foucault puts it, to see how micro-level exercises of power ‘are invested, colonized, used, inflected, transformed, displaced, extended, and so on by increasingly generalized mechanisms and forms of overall domination’ (Foucault, 2003, 30). Finally, we should not assume knowledge stands opposed to power; we must be aware of their interactions and the ways in which they produce each other and provide each other with support.

When we look at European history with these methodological precautions in mind, Foucault claims that what we see in the eighteenth century is the rise of a new kind of power, not focused on sovereignty and right and not primarily prohibitive. We see the

rise of disciplinary power, which is focused on cultivating individuals, altering their bearing and conduct, breaking them down into their parts and gestures and reconstituting them—as soldiers or as factory workers, e.g. This power is ubiquitous, exercised through surveillance, rituals of examination, detailed record-keeping. It is not about limitation and obedience but about enhancement of bodies' capacities. By the mid-nineteenth century, with the emergence of biology and its emphasis on life as process and development, disciplinary power becomes normalizing power, seeking to manage individuals in relation to norms of development set out by natural and human sciences (Foucault, 2003, 38). At the same time, officials begin collecting and using statistical information (through similar techniques of surveillance, examination, and record-keeping) in order to strengthen the nation's military and economy by managing its populations—that is, its human resources—effectively. These new forms of normalizing power (so-called because they identify individuals and manage populations on the basis of statistical norms) are focused not on limit, with the ultimate expression being the ability to impose death, but on intensification, with the ultimate expression being the ability to make live (Foucault, 1978, 137)—that is, to develop endlessly along projected, calculated, officially useful lines. The confluence of these two forms of normalizing power—micro-level disciplines and macro-level population management—is biopower.

Foucault held that modern racism is intimately bound up with normalization and its deployment of sexuality and criminality. At the end of *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, he clearly links race and racism to the rise of biopower through the nineteenth century. He writes:

In different ways, the preoccupation with blood and the law has for nearly two centuries haunted the administration of sexuality. Two of these interferences are noteworthy, the one for its historical importance, the other for the problems it poses. Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, the thematics of blood was sometimes called on to lend its entire historical weight toward revitalizing the type of political power that was exercised through the devices of sexuality. Racism took shape at this point (racism in its modern, 'biologizing,' statist form): it was then that a whole politics of settlement (*peuplement*), family, marriage, education, social hierarchization, and property, accompanied by a long series of permanent interventions at the level of the body, conduct health, and everyday life, received their color and their justification from the mythical concern with protecting the purity of the blood and ensuring the triumph of the race (Foucault, 1978, 149).

Modern racism, Foucault here asserts, is a product of biopower's appropriation and adaptation of an older discourse of blood. It makes its appearance in the nineteenth century as a way of justifying and extending sexual surveillance among other things, and it gains virulence through the twentieth. Modern racism—and the racial identities it constructs and deploys—are fairly recent phenomena then. If we are to understand them fully, they must be studied in relation to the networks of power that generated them. What this means is that race—including white subjectivity and racism, the primary objects of Whiteness Studies' attention—can only be fully understood within the context of the history of normalization and biopolitical development and in conjunction with the

*dispositif de sexualité*. Trying to understand race apart from that context is like trying to understand a region's cuisine with no knowledge of its climate, terrain, economy, or agricultural technologies.

Of course there were racial identities and racisms prior to the nineteenth century. In work only recently published and translated into English, Foucault traces race discourses as far back as the early seventeenth century; however, he argues, those early discourses did not mobilize a concept of race like the one that has been operative in the twentieth century (Foucault, 2003). The earliest concepts of race were neither biological nor even morphological; race was a matter of lineage, language, and tradition, correlated perhaps with religion and character. To be a member of the Saxon race was to speak and live like a Saxon (as opposed to a Norman). He describes a gradual mutation of the idea of race as it was adapted for use in a variety of political contexts in Europe. In the eighteenth century race became a morphological concept; by the end of that century, to be a member of a particular race one merely had to have a certain physical appearance—only loosely linked to lineage or bloodline. Not until the nineteenth century, however, did race become a truly biological concept. Once it did, to be a member of a race was to be the biological offspring of other members of that race, to have the blood of that race flowing through one's veins or, in the twentieth century, to have genes unique to that race—some of which might cause certain morphological characteristics and dispositions.

It is at the beginning of this third historical transformation that race is first defined in terms of development, first conceived in relation to norms, and thus is able to be annexed to regimes of biopower. Had this shift not occurred, any talk of whiteness or any other racial category as a 'norm' would make no sense. But it is important to see what sense it

does make and how it came to make sense, not just to assert that such norms exist, and that will require presentation of some historical material, to which I now turn.<sup>5</sup>

The transition of race from a morphological to a developmental, biological category began around the turn of the nineteenth century. Active in that transition, though not clearly foreseeing it, were the ambitious members of the *Société des Observateurs de l'Homme*, founded in 1799. These mostly young French scientists wanted to lay to rest the questions that plagued morphological theories of race by observing and cataloguing all the races of the globe based on comparative studies of anatomy, social customs, and language (Stocking, 1968, 16). Like the natural historians who preceded them, they were interested not just in classifying different races but also in coming to some understanding of why there were differences. Why had races come into existence in the first place?<sup>6</sup> The young scientists believed that the differences that allowed classification of races reflected differences in the degree to which various groups were civilized, and they imagined that their table of classification would eventually lay out not just those differences but also a continuum of civilization. In 1800 they sent a contingent of their members to Africa, Tasmania, and Australia to observe aboriginal peoples, both to classify them and to determine where each group ranked in civility in relation to other groups.<sup>7</sup>

Others furthered the classificatory work that the *Société* began. Since distinguishing one race from another was a tricky business—geographical location alone was not reliable after two hundred years of colonization and slave trade—anatomical measures of various sorts were proposed. Skin color and hair texture were obvious candidates and were certainly thought significant, but they were difficult to quantify. Most scientists preferred to use head-form to establish racial identity and difference; it not only could be

measured reasonably accurately but also allowed for comparisons between living (or recently deceased) and pre-historic people (Stepan, 1982, 9-10). Also popular was the nasal index, a measure of width versus length of the nose bridge (Snyder, 1962, 14-17).

Differences among human groups were never simply differences, of course. The project was to rank human groups according to the degree of civilization they exhibited. As developmental thinking extended through nineteenth century science, these supposed differences in degree of civilization became differences in level of development.<sup>8</sup>

Anatomical classification remained important, for unless one could clearly distinguish between Tasmanians and Frenchmen, one could go no further in one's research. But the real issue was not simple difference. European and North American scientists assumed that Europeans too had once lived like sub-Saharan Africans and Australians and Native Americans. After all, technology had advanced in Europe a great deal in recent memory, and with each technological improvement there were changes in Europeans' way of life. It made sense to think that there had been a time before Europeans practiced agriculture or even animal husbandry, before they had the governments and economic systems that prevailed in more modern times, even before they had the morals and manners that civilized people inevitably have. How had that development from such a primitive state occurred? What was it about Europeans that had made that development possible? And what about all these primitive peoples who still existed? Were they progressing too, or was something wrong with them?<sup>9</sup>

As these questions came to the fore, they pulled the anthropological study of race away from the old paradigm of natural history, with its emphasis on morphology and classification, and toward a biological paradigm with an emphasis on process and

function. If each racial group represented a certain stage attained in the development toward the ideal of civilization and if the order of those stages could be delineated, then perhaps the entire progression from absolute primitivity to absolute civility could be traced and questions about the pre-history of European peoples could be answered. Thus, through this process, a race became not simply a specifiable group of people, more or less civilized; it became a reified stage in a developmental process, either intermediate and transitory or arrested and deviant.

This change in the meaning of the term *race* in both French and English from morphological difference to developmental deviation was clearly enabled by and reflected in the work of both natural historians and early biologists. Despite his resistance to developmental thinking, Cuvier contributed to it by conflating the notion of racial type with the old racial notion of lineage. In *The Animal Kingdom*, he groups together beings according to their morphological similarities, thus apparently positing static types as many natural historians did, but some of these types comprise beings that also have common lineages (Banton, 1987, 51-2). Cuvier's work went no further in the direction of developmental thinking since he feared it would lead to the heresy of evolutionism, but his rival Geoffroy, who believed that God has only one (or a very few) architectural designs which he varies to produce different species, was interested in just that possibility (Appel, 1987). Geoffroy clearly understood types as arrested stages of development. This is evident in his deep interest in teratology, the study of monsters. Just as species might be stages of the development of one divine organic architectural design, he thought, deformed individuals might be the results of arrested or disrupted development within one species. We see the same thinking a little later on the other side of the Atlantic with

teratologist William Ripley, whose collections of deformed farm animals still delight children at family vacation spots all over the US today. A devoted student of race, Ripley too believed that racial types represent arrested stages of development on one continuum from primitivity to modernity.

Thus did allegedly superior and inferior human types—races—become biological facts in the nineteenth century. By mid-century, the process of transformation in race discourse from morphology to development was complete. We can mark that completion with the work of anatomist Robert Knox, who held that Saxons were the only people on earth who were not retarded; all other groups exhibited some form of developmental arrest. From Knox's time forward, the variations characteristic of human types were taken to be deviations from norms. With Darwin's work, especially his descriptions of the evolution of human groups in *The Descent of Man*, a firm biological foundation was put in place beneath the idea that some human sub-groups—that is, some races—are less 'fit,' less well adjusted to modern civilization, than others (Darwin, 1996, 246).

It was a short leap from the idea that some human groups are arrested in their development to the idea that some groups are 'developing' in reverse. The name for that reversal was *degeneration*, a term borrowed from the old metaphysical theory of a Great Chain of Being. In its new incarnation, degeneration was no longer the name for a state of being but rather the name of a process, the opposite of normal development. Since degeneracy was believed heritable, steps had to be taken to control those who exhibited any symptoms of it. Laws were enacted to prohibit degenerates from marrying; those judged likely to propagate outside of marriage (the criminal, feeble-minded, and insane) were sterilized. Because race was a mark of abnormality, racial populations might well

harbor not only individuals whose development was arrested but also true degenerates. Indeed, scientists found plenty of symptoms of degeneracy in those whose race indicated its likelihood. Medical researchers ‘confirmed,’ using data from the eighth, ninth, and tenth US census, that the Negro race was dying out as a result of its members’ ‘physical degeneracy.’ Insanity and perversion, two prominent signs of degeneracy, reportedly increased among Negroes by 1000% between 1860 and 1890 (Gilman, 1983, 39).<sup>10</sup> Degeneracy also produced an increase in criminal behavior; therefore, while awaiting the inevitable, whites needed to be very careful to prevent the criminality of degenerate races from leading to the harm and corruption of their own.

The absorption of race as deviant development into the mechanisms of biopower, which Foucault describes in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* and ‘*Society Must Be Defended*’, set the stage for the state racisms of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Less fit, inferior races were taken to be deviant elements within national populations that had to be either controlled or eliminated so as not to threaten the health of the population as a whole. By the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, the term *race* had little or no meaning beyond that which it took from developmental discourses. Within discourses and practices of normalization, race became a special kind of abnormality. It is here, in this transformation of race from morphological to developmental category, that we see the rise of whiteness as the norm of health and functionality, with red, black, yellow, and brown peoples construed as less well developed or evolved, nearer nature and savagery, and requiring careful monitoring and management lest they endanger the productive white population and its reproductively ensured future.

It is true then that, as the Whiteness Studies theorists so often say, whiteness is a norm. But the assertion by itself, no matter how often repeated, does very little to further analysis. Placing race—and of course whiteness—in the context of the development of biopower gives a much clearer picture of what it means to say whiteness is a norm and indicates some important directions for further study. Once that context is supplied, the work of historians like Allen, Roediger, and Saxton can help explain why it is whiteness, (rather than Saxonness, for example), that functions as the racial norm in the US.

Like Whiteness Studies theorists, Foucault meant for his work to have political effects, to disrupt power formations and make new configurations possible. Looking back on the publication of *Discipline and Punish*, he had this to say to an interviewer:

When the book came out, different readers—in particular, correctional officers, social workers, and so on—delivered this peculiar judgment: ‘The book is paralyzing. It may contain some correct observations, but even so it has clear limits, because it impedes us; it prevents us from going on with our activity.’ My reply is that this very reaction proves that the work was successful, that it functioned just as I intended. It shows that people read it as an experience that changed them, that prevented them from always being the same or from having the same relation with things, with others, that they had before reading it (Foucault, 2000, 245-6).

Unable to continue with ‘business as usual,’ people are forced to think critically and make deliberate choices. Power relays are disrupted, which at least opens the possibility that power networks will be realigned and come to function in different ways.

Effects like this are what Whiteness Studies theorists aim for as well. They hope their work will bring white people up short, make it difficult for them to continue to function unthinkingly within a white supremacist social system, and make it possible for them to imagine and create different ways of living. Whiteness Studies is less effective at this kind of political intervention than Foucault's work is, however, and far less effective than it might yet be if it took Foucault's analytics of power and account of normalization seriously.

The problem lies, I believe, in Whiteness theorists' failure to critique the conception of power that they have inherited from traditional Western political theory. By holding onto a conception of power that insists upon the primacy of a sovereign subject and uncritically deploys economic metaphors of possession and distribution, Whiteness Studies impedes its own efforts to account for the political production of racial subjects and works against its own explicitly stated agenda, i.e., dethroning white subjectivity. I will spend the rest of this essay showing how the conception of power that Foucault critiques still operates in Whiteness Studies.

As good students of Omi and Winant, Whiteness Studies theorists believe that racism operates much of the time without the consent or even the knowledge of white subjects. But they still take white subjects to be responsible for racism; they still believe that racism originates in subjectivity, not in structures or institutions or practices. This belief is implicit in their search for a psychological account of racism's persistence. The account offered in virtually every Whiteness Studies theorist's work can be summed up in two words: White Privilege. The story goes that white people exercise power not so much by exercising their capacity to harm nonwhite people but by exercising the

privileges that hundreds of years of racism have put in place for them. They are in fact deploying racist power, but they do not see it as such because to them it seems that they are simply claiming for themselves the goods to which they are entitled, and they have a deep investment in being able to continue to do so. Across the very different social analyses that Whiteness Studies theorists put forth and across their very pronounced disagreements over political strategy, this concept of white privilege stretches; it, like the claim that whiteness functions as a norm, unites theorists who otherwise have very little in common. My contention is that wherever we see the concept of white privilege operating, we can be sure the conception of power that is also operating is the traditional juridical conception that construes power as the possession of a pre-existent subject.

No thorough overview of Whiteness Studies ever omits reference to Peggy McIntosh's article 'White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.' Although McIntosh's article is tentative and limited to description at a very basic, individualistic level, it popularized the notion that white people possess (like tools in a knapsack) something called 'white privilege.'<sup>11</sup> McIntosh lists forty-six of these 'unearned assets' (McIntosh, 1988, 1), including such disparate 'tools' as: (3) 'If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live'; (5) 'I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed'; (21) 'I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group'; (22) 'I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world's majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion'; (33) 'I am not made acutely aware that my shape, bearing, or body odor will be taken as a reflection on my race'; and (41) 'I can be sure that if I need legal or medical

help, my race will not work against me' (McIntosh, 1988, 5-9). One could spend a lot of time critiquing this list and pointing out various problems with it, but what is important here is the focus on privilege itself. McIntosh claims that racism persists because white people use tools that nonwhite people have not been given. If we want to eliminate racist exercises of power, white people have to divest themselves of those tools.

Clearly this sort of analysis can never lead to an account of the production and maintenance of white subjectivities within racist regimes of power—unless all we mean by 'white subjectivity' is a generic subject plus a knapsack full of white privileges, a knapsack that the generic subject can jettison without seriously altering its own composition. But that is surely not what the thesis of the social construction of white identity amounts to. So why do Whiteness theorists hang onto this terminology? Why does the concept of white privilege appear in virtually every Whiteness Studies book and article?

Lisa Heldke and Peg O'Connor are among the few writers who expend any effort at all trying to justify their use of the concept of white privilege. According to them, the analytic value of the term *privilege* lies in its ability to play the opposite role to *oppression*. Everyone generally agrees that there is such a thing as racial oppression and that the members of some races are oppressed, but what of the races that are not oppressed? Heldke and O'Connor write, 'Some will argue that *domination* is the companion concept of oppression; they assert that if you are not a member of a particular oppressed group, then you are automatically a dominator' (Heldke and O'Connor, 2004, 299). They dislike the term *domination*, however, because it 'presupposes that a group or an individual exercises power over another group in very obvious and overt ways'

(Heldke & O'Connor, 2004, 299); in other words, it runs counter to the apparent fact that, as analyses like Omi and Winant's make clear, racism does not operate in obvious and overt ways (at least not by the lights of most white people) and many white people are not aware of its functioning at all. Heldke and O'Connor's analysis continues:

...oppression has many different faces; it is created in all kinds of social practices, structures, and institutions. In many instances of oppression, we may not be able to point to any person or group of persons who are actively engaged in dominating the oppressed group.... We need a companion concept that has as many different faces as does oppression.

The concept of privilege will fill the bill; its multiple aspects allow us to describe and understand the roles that different 'unoppressed' groups play in the maintenance of oppressive systems (Heldke & O'Connor, 2004, 299).

In sum, within racist societies there are three kinds of people; there are oppressed people (those without much power), dominators (those with power who intend to oppress others), and people who exercise privilege (those with power who do not intend to oppress others but do so anyway). If we hang onto a conception of power that makes it the property of a pre-constituted subjectivity and do not posit that third group, we cannot explain how racism can continue to exist if most people are not avowed racists. We will need a psychological theory to explain the persistence of racism. In other words, if we hang onto a traditional juridical conception of power, we will remain stuck where race theorists were stuck thirty years ago. I contend that the pervasiveness of the term 'white

privilege' is testament to how deeply and profoundly stuck race theorists typically still are.

A conceptual shift is long overdue. Power must be reconceived along the lines that Foucault proposes if Whiteness Studies is to make any analytic progress. But politically, too, such a shift is imperative. Perhaps the biggest problem with the concept of white privilege is the tendency it has to lead to depictions of racism as a matter of poor or unequal distribution of social goods rather than as a vast institutionalized system of social control and, as a result, to drive those who use it to propose not transformation of social systems but various strategies of divestiture. Antiracist work becomes, for whites, a project of ridding oneself of 'unearned assets' rather than of disrupting and re-aligning networks of power.

This problem surfaces throughout Ruth Frankenberg's oft-cited study *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (1993). Frankenberg dutifully notes that most racism nowadays is not overtly attitudinal but rather institutional, embedded in accepted practices, social customs, and ways of thinking that may not be racial at all in obvious ways. Institutionalized white supremacy, persists, she thinks, because most white people just assume without thought that whiteness is the norm. As a result, racial difference is perceived automatically as deviance from the norm and is automatically devalued. But this misperception occurs below the level of conscious deliberation. It therefore informs the speech and behavior of even very liberal or progressive white people, and, because it is an assumption endemic to the dominant culture, it will continue to do so unless it is forcefully interrupted. In other words, Frankenberg's analysis follows the line I outlined above, and, predictably, this leads her to a political strategy of

divestiture. She advocates (and engages in) just such interruptions, proposing both that researchers study whiteness as a racial identity position to make visible its limits and specificities and that white people find ways continually to remind themselves that whiteness is not the norm against which all other racial identities and racialized practices and artifacts are to be apprehended (Frankenberg, 1993, 234). Her hope is that by owning whiteness as a racially marked aspect of our identities, white people will become less racist—that is, less likely to act on their skin privileges. Having begun to divest themselves of white privilege, white people will also begin to rework whiteness itself and develop anti-racist forms of white identity; ‘...by examining and naming the terrain of whiteness, it may, I think, be possible to generate or work toward antiracist forms of whiteness, or at least toward antiracist strategies for reworking the terrain of whiteness’ (Frankenberg, 1993, 7).

Frankenberg thus holds onto to a traditional conception of power and pre-existent subjectivity even while attempting to develop an analysis of subject formation within networks of power. As is typical among Whiteness Studies theorists, she understands power on the metaphor of a possession that can be used or put aside, something under subjective control rather than first of all producing subjectivities, and thus she repeatedly finds herself in a conundrum. She does acknowledge that there are limits to any person’s exercise of power; she writes, ‘Whiteness changes over time and space and is in no way a transhistorical essence. Rather, as I have argued, it is a complexly constructed product of local, regional, national, and global relations, past and present. Thus, the range of possible ways of living whiteness, for an individual white woman in a particular time and place, is delimited by the relations of racism *at that moment and in that place*’

(Frankenberg, 1993, 236). But she does not acknowledge the friction between her faith in white subjects' ability to divest themselves of white privilege, on the one hand, and the claim that white subjectivity is historically and politically produced within networks of racist power, on the other.

Two theorists who do take seriously the idea that white subjectivity is thoroughly shaped by networks of racist power are Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey, who insist that whiteness is just not amenable to transformation of the sort or to the extent that Frankenberg believes it is. If the white race is a social construct, they hold, it is nothing other than its history into the present moment, and its history is just a long saga of racist exploitation and genocide. The good news is that white subjectivity is a matter of positioning, not essence, so there is room for choice: People who occupy that position can either embrace and celebrate whiteness in all its brutality or critique, expose, dismantle, and escape it entirely. Ignatiev and Garvey are very clear about where they stand: 'The key to solving the social problems of our age is to abolish the white race,' they proclaim in their journal *Race Traitor* (Ignatiev and Garvey, 1996, 10).<sup>12</sup> If white culture has any specifiable content at all, the race traitors and their sympathizers tell us, all it really amounts to is ruthless appropriation, arrogance, and brutal dominance; if we want to serve the cause of justice, we ought not to claim an identity that for at least three centuries has meant 'rapacious overlord'; we ought to break ranks, join the other camp, and fight the white race to the death. 'Treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity' (Ignatiev and Garvey, 1996, 7).

Ignatiev and Garvey are deliberately provocative, so it is no shock that they have many critics. Naomi Zack is one of them. She begins by criticizing their choice of names.

The term ‘race traitor,’ she contends, is inappropriate. First of all, she writes, ‘the origins of this idea are malign...’ The name comes out of context that is so wracked by racism, she claims, that its terminology can have no currency anywhere else. She traces the phrase to the mid-twentieth century black civil rights movement when white supremacists denounced other whites for supporting desegregation. In that context, she asserts, the phrase was bombastic; those appending the label had no authority to judge anybody’s patriotism, and what they denounced thereby were in fact simply actions that upheld and supported federal law. ‘For this reason,’ she writes, ‘the judgment that someone is a race traitor by a white racist is overblown and somewhat bizarre, similar to denouncement by a comic book villain. Why, then, would someone who was seriously committed to racially egalitarian behavior clothe him- or herself in that mantle?’ (Zack, 1999, 79). I will offer criticisms of the ‘race traitor’ movement myself momentarily, but first I want to defend it against Zack’s suggestion that this is nothing more than silliness or fanciful play. First it is important to note that there would never have been an era of Jim Crow in the United States if the Supreme Court had not originally *upheld* the right of states and municipalities to segregate citizens by race in *Plessy v. Ferguson* and dozens of subsequent decisions; Jim Crow had the US government’s stamp of approval for sixty years. White people who spoke out against segregation during that sixty-year period were not calling for enforcement of federal law against rogue states’ righters; therefore it is false that the only time any white person got called a traitor to the race was when he or she supported enforcement of federal law. But more importantly, most of the time when people get called traitors to the white race, law is not what is at issue. Race treason has much more to do with violating the customs that create and maintain group cohesiveness

than it has to do with legality. It consists in not playing by the social rules set by the white supremacist power structure; it consists in placing black, brown, or yellow people's lives or interests or dignity above white people's claims to entitlement, often in very subtle ways. Race treason was never primarily about law. Real betrayal rarely is. Ignatiev and Garvey and their comrades are not asking anyone to commit high treason in a legal sense; they are calling on white people to commit that other kind of treason, the much more personal and intimate treason that consists of all those subtle and not-so-subtle acts of betrayal that imply a refusal to bow to the authority of the white power structure and play the racist game. Historically, they are on solid ground.

The problem is not with their choice of terms; it is with the fact that white power structures require so few gestures of fealty these days to keep themselves intact that one hardly ever gets a good opportunity to betray them. Back in the sixties being a race traitor was easy. All that was necessary was to call a black man 'sir' or make a statement like, 'I think desegregation might not result in the downfall of civilization.' A person could easily betray the white race thirty or forty times a day. But things have changed. When one studies the issues of *Race Traitor* to find examples of racially treasonous acts, one finds instead a lot of confusion among the aspiring race traitors themselves, and the confusion (predictably) revolves around their use of the metaphor of privilege. In one of their editorials, Ignatiev and Garvey explain their position this way:

The white race is like a private club, which grants privileges to certain people in return for obedience to rules. It is based on one huge assumption: that all those who look white are, whatever their complaints or reservations, fundamentally loyal to it.

What if the white skin lost its usefulness as a badge of loyalty? What if the cop, the judge, the social worker, the school teacher, and the other representatives of official society could no longer recognize a loyal person merely by looking, how would it affect their behavior? And if color no longer served as a handy guide to the dispensing of favors, so that ordinary whites began experiencing the sort of treatment to which they are normally immune, how would this affect their outlook?

The rules of the white club do not require that all members be strong advocates of white supremacy, merely that they defer to the prejudices of others. The need to maintain racial solidarity imposes a stifling conformity on whites, on any subject touching even remotely on race (Ignatiev & Garvey, 1996, 35-36).

Disloyalty is here construed as a matter of refusing the privileges granted in exchange for conformity and deference to others' prejudices. The historical examples they go on to mention include taking up arms to free slaves, participating in political action organized by blacks to protest segregation, and disobeying one's boss's directive to refuse service to black customers. Contemporary examples are less dramatic, less confrontational, less risky, and frequently also less obviously oppositional; these include making a career playing music developed by and usually associated with black artists and performers, having black friends and lovers, exposing racism in institutionalized power structures, and refusing to allow a white person's veiled racist comments to pass unremarked.

Saying white people who helped run the Underground Railroad refused their white privilege, however, is a bit like saying a prisoner on a hunger strike refused to indulge in

gluttony. The primary act in each of these historical cases does not seem to me to be the negative one of refusal; it seems to be the positive one of fighting injustice. And in the contemporary cases as well, the primary act does not seem to be one of refusal but of, for example, respecting and appreciating African-American art or respecting and loving individual black people or, again, fighting injustice.<sup>13</sup> If a person were to engage in these acts with refusal of 'white privilege' rather than respect or justice as the goal, I think we would have reason to be suspicious. When we speak out against injustice of any kind, we may lose status with some people and the opportunities those people's favor may have brought. Those are risks that we might run in pursuit of justice. But they are not welcome outcomes and certainly not the primary point of what we do.

In the rhetoric of *Race Traitor*, however, the sacrifice seems to become the goal. As David Stowe writes, 'Race treason has its limits as a workable strategy. Consider the economistic language in which it is described. Whites are exhorted to renounce the wages of whiteness, to divest from their possessive investment in whiteness, to sabotage the exchange value of racial privilege. There is an almost Buddhist tone of renunciation to these formulations' (Stowe, 1996, 77).<sup>14</sup> Beneath the calls to rebel, this is the discourse of traditional morality addressing itself to the discourse of traditional liberal economics. There is no serious analysis of the production of white subjectivity here.

I do believe the race traitors are adding something to the mix that neither McIntosh's analysis nor Frankenberg's afford, however. They are trying to get rid of not only racism or whiteness but, ultimately, race itself. In an editorial reply to a reader's letter, Ignatiev and Garvey write, '[M]ake no mistake about it: we intend to keep bashing the dead white males, and the live ones, and the females, too, until the social construct known as 'race' is

destroyed—not ‘deconstructed’ but destroyed’ (Ignatiev & Garvey, 1996, 279). It is this goal that sets them apart from McIntosh’s quest for equality and from Frankenberg’s push for racial renovation. White race treason is their suggested means to that end.

The means, though, are easily subverted to different ends if what white people really want is not a more just society but only divestiture, only innocence. The sacrificial rhetoric the race traitors often use plays right into that desire. They imply that white people can just put down their knapsacks and stop being white and that will bring racism to an end. In fact, they suggest that white people can become black. Ignatiev goes so far as to say this: ‘Politically, whiteness is the willingness to seek a comfortable place within the system of race privilege. Blackness means total, implacable, and relentless opposition to that system. To the extent so-called whites oppose the race line, repudiating their own race privileges and jeopardizing their own standing in the white race, they can be said to have washed away their whiteness and taken in some blackness’ (Ignatiev & Garvey, 1996, 289).

If I felt especially cynical I might suggest that Whiteness Studies covertly seeks not so much to destabilize race and end white supremacy as to find ways of being white (or of ceasing to be white) that purify individuals of racial complicity or guilt, that the movement is more about innocence than about justice or transformation. But I do not want to be that dismissive, both because it is always risky to guess at scholars’ motives and because regardless of their motives much of the work that Whiteness Studies theorists are doing is extremely valuable and important. Rather, I think it is just inevitable that unless we place the juridical conception of power in question as Foucault did and look at racism as part of a vast system of non-subjective, non-intentional networks of

biopower, we will be pushed toward the untenable intellectual and political positions that Whiteness theorists find themselves in, calling for voluntary divestiture of ‘privileges’ or ‘unearned assets.’ We will not be able to understand how white subjectivity is constituted, much less see how we might disrupt it. We have to make historical transformations of power primary over both conscious and unconscious subjectivity in order to create an account of how racism functions in modern society. I would argue that what we need instead of avowals and exposés of whiteness as a racial identity is a genealogy of race and a network of counter-memories to begin to build alternative accounts of raced existence and possibilities of living race differently. That will require a thorough critique of traditional conceptions of power, an undertaking in which knowledge of Foucault’s work is essential.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Bonnett himself actually refers to this movement ‘provocatively, and not without irony’ as ‘White studies.’ See Bonnett, 1996, 146.

<sup>2</sup> An exhaustive list of theoretical works where this claim is made is beyond me at this point, but for some examples in addition to Bonnet see: Dyer, 1988; Levine, 1994, 11; Fuller, 1999, 70; Shome, 1999, 123; Moon, 1999, 179; and DeLuca, 1999, 224.

<sup>3</sup> One impetus for doing this work probably came from the challenges issued by African American scholars such as bell hooks, who called for just such an interrogation of whiteness in 1990 (hooks, 1990, 54). Although her book appeared almost two years after Dyer’s influential article ‘White’ in *Screen*, it is safe to say that hooks had a wider audience than Dyer did at the time and probably exercised more influence on those who began to do the work. However, most commentators now see Dyer’s work as the beginning of the Whiteness Studies movement.

<sup>4</sup> Theodore Allen is a notable exception here (1997), but, like many US historians, he seems not to have taken the analysis fully to heart and perhaps not to have understood its political dimensions very clearly. Another exception is the work of Nakayama and Krizek (1999, 91), who do refer to Foucault’s work on language and power in their article on race and rhetoric, but they have not yet fully exploited the resources that Foucault’s work offers.

<sup>5</sup> I first set out much of this historical material in an article I published in 1995, and I have subsequently added to it and reworked it in several papers. See McWhorter, 1995, and McWhorter, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Immanuel Kant made some very interesting attempts to answer the latter question in his three essays on race published between 1775 and 1788. Mark Mikkelsen has recently translated all three of these essays into English (forthcoming from Blackwell). The first of these essays, ‘Of the Different Human Races,’ is available in translation in Bernasconi and Lott, 2000, 8-22, and also in Eze, 1997b, 38-48. The 1788 essay, ‘On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy,’ is available in Bernasconi, 2001, 37-56. (This is Mikkelsen’s translation.) For commentary on these essays see Bernasconi, 2001, 11-36, and 2002; Eze, 1997a; Larrimore, 1999; and Sloane, 1979.

<sup>7</sup> Observation actually involved a great deal of interaction, which sometimes included violence. Within thirty years after being observed by Europeans, the Tasmanian people were extinct. Their demise lent credence to the *Société* members’ view that Tasmanian race occupied the lowest rung on the ladder of civilized development.

<sup>8</sup> This is clearly reflected in some of the lesser known indices of anatomical difference. For example, Serres argued that African males are both different from and more primitive than European males because the distance between the navels and penises of adult Africans is shorter relative to body length than that of Europeans (Gilman, 1983, 41; Gould, 1981, 40). It is perhaps worth noting that Serres did not compare penis length or diameter—at least not in print.

<sup>9</sup> At least as far back as Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality* (first published in 1755) we see attempts at explaining how Europeans progressed from a primitive to a civilized state (although Rousseau does not try to explain why some non-European groups did not—see Rousseau, 1984, 88ff). But these questions are still with us. For a very recent answer to it, see Diamond, 1999. Diamond does not attribute the difference in technology or institutional forms to anything inherent in the peoples themselves but rather to challenges posed by and resources available in their ecosystems—including mineral deposits and native plant and animal life.

<sup>10</sup> Because degenerates were doomed anyway, many scientists believed it was morally permissible to use them as experimental subjects, even if such use endangered their health or their very lives. In one famous case, scientists injected African-American subjects with syphilis and allowed them to become terminally ill (despite the fact that treatment for syphilis was available); scientists considered this experiment permissible because, they claimed, degenerate Negroes would have contracted syphilis anyway (Gilman, 1983, 45).

<sup>11</sup> Actually McIntosh began to talk about white privilege in a paper published by the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women the previous year (McIntosh, 1988), but it is the 1989 article that gets most attention outside Women’s Studies circles.

<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, many of Frankenberg’s white female interviewees, speaking several years before the advent of Ignatiev and Garvey’s journal *Race Traitor*, express similar thoughts; they frequently evince

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what Frankenberg describes as ‘a genuine sadness and frustration about the meaning of whiteness at this moment in history’ (Frankenberg, 1993, 203).

<sup>13</sup> I am putting the best face on these actions here. The race traitors have been heavily criticized for advocating what some see as exploitation and appropriation of black music, art, and personal style, as well as individual black people in intimate relationships. There is an interesting debate about artistic ‘cross-over’ in the pages of *Race Traitor* itself, with letters to the editor from Salim Washington and Paul Garon. See Ignatiev and Garvey, 1996, 163-175. Also, feminist Jan Clausen critiques the assumption that interracial dating and marriage necessarily undermine white supremacy. See Ignatiev and Garvey, 1996, 272-75.

<sup>14</sup> Stowe is alluding here to the title of David Roediger’s book, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, 1991, revised edition 1999.