

Whiteness and Cultural Theory: Perspectives on Research and Education

John T. Warren

With the influx of whiteness literature into the cultural studies scene, this essay attempts to locate four major trends or lines of thought within a diverse body of work. Further, the impact of this research on education is considered in order to determine how whiteness studies might inform multicultural education initiatives. Ultimately, the essay is designed to provide a conceptual frame that organizes this research while arguing that whiteness is of premier concern to educators in the efforts to promote diversity, equality, and social justice in education.

And so it went, one fascinating tale of ethnic pride after another. And then, curse the darkness, it was my turn. I began to hyperventilate. It wasn't the fear of public speaking and it wasn't the Paul Masson wine that had me gasping in a paper bag. It was my essential rootlessness in a room full of well-rooted people. What was I? Where did I stem from? What did I remember? What could I say?

I said goodnight.

(Mull and Rucker, 1985, pp. 11–12)

You forgot, Lord. You forgot how and when to be God. That's why I changed the little black girl's eyes for her and I didn't touch her; not a finger did I lay on her. But I gave her the blue, blue, two blue eyes. Cobalt blue. . . . And she will live happily ever after.

(Morrison, 1970, p. 144)

Research on whiteness has recently exploded onto the academic scene (Frankenberg, 1997a; Hill, 1997b; Wray and Newitz, 1997; Fine, Weis, Powell, and Wong, 1997). Researchers have created (discovered) a whole new site of investigation, which is designed not to gaze outward at the margins but critically examine what lies at the center of racial institutional power: whiteness. This

John T. Warren is a Doctoral Student, Department of Speech Communication, Southern Illinois University. Address correspondence to John T. Warren, Department of Speech Communication, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale IL 62901; e-mail: jtwarren@siu.edu.

research derives from the desire to examine the location of privilege granted to people simply because they appear white, rather than to theorize about those populations that are already outside of the racial center. It speaks to Stuart Hall's (1992) and other theorists' notion of positionality, which asks researchers to examine and retheorize their (our) own political and cultural identities. This research initiative also demands that cultural studies pause before focusing on the cultural margins or those cultures that do not occupy positions of social, institutional, or economic power—in a sense, an act of speaking for others—without first critically understanding the power and privilege embedded in the cultural center of whiteness (see Alcoff, 1991–1992). In this paper, I seek to sketch out several themes or ways of theorizing whiteness that emerge from this growing body of literature. As this research initiative continues to grow, educators must take note of this crucial academic effort in order to see how whiteness studies get framed and how that framing affects educational practices. Issues of whiteness will inevitably impact multicultural education programs, as the field of cultural studies turns its critical eye toward the unmarked center. In order to begin to see whiteness studies' possible ramifications to educators, it is vital to begin to consider the patterns in this research in order to raise important questions and foresee the impact on educators' daily life within schools.

I began this essay with two epigraphs that don't, on first glance, seem to pertain to my topic, in that they are not quotations from works claiming to be an examination of whiteness within traditional academic work. But I have included them because they are relatively older works (in terms of this area of study), and they can serve to frame many of the general themes within this research. The first comes from a short humor piece written by comedian Martin Mull and his colleague Allen Rucker (1985). While much of the text serves to humorously detail what "white" means in American culture, it also points to perhaps the major theme in this research, which is that whiteness is invisible or unmarked as an ethnic or racial category within this culture. In the same vein, Ruth Frankenberg (1997b) notes that whiteness is seen as "rather . . . self evident," suggesting that most white people don't even (nor need to) think about the fact of their whiteness within this culture (p. 11).

The second quotation is from Toni Morrison's (1970) beautifully written novel *The Bluest Eye*. This novel is about a little girl who desires blue eyes, a well-known cultural symbol of white beauty. The quotation is from the end of the novel, where she "receives" two blue eyes from a town figure named Soaphead Church, and serves this essay by referencing the notion of white privilege, for if the little girl just had blue eyes (read white skin) she would be beautiful. Again, a guiding theme of this research is that whiteness functions as an element of privilege, which is a relatively new way of thinking about racial oppression. Traditionally, most of the research on race and culture has been conducted by nondominant racial groups working within the paradigm of racial

oppression (Lorde, 1984; West, 1993); however, whiteness research seeks to discuss white racial identity in terms of racial privilege. In other words, what do white people have simply because they are white that is denied to people of color? Privilege, defined by Peggy McIntosh (1988) as “an invisible weightless [unearned] knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, code-books, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear and blank checks . . . which I can count on cashing in each day” (pp. 1–2), considers that which the center has at the expense of the margins. This is a radically different way of considering the impact of race within social interaction. It is for this reason that I use both of these two quotations to frame my discussion of the central themes that run throughout the literature on the social construction of whiteness research.

While scholars and educators discuss whiteness research in terms of racial injustice and racial privilege, research on whiteness has risks. It is risky, and potentially dangerous, work to do because it can be easily misinterpreted. If it is read within the frame of ending oppressive social practices, whiteness studies can serve as an effective way of challenging white power and dominance. This work can also be read as serving oppressive forces by refocusing attention and resources back toward the center. This move characterizes the whiteness research initiative as self-serving and an effort to get credit for their white dominance (Talbot, 1997). While this is a serious concern, I will frame this effort within the professed intent exposed by the writers within this academic area in order to present what they (and I) intend from our research.

In this essay, I want to propose several different focus points on which whiteness studies research has centered in an effort to ascertain the approaches these writers are taking with this work. The first general way theorists are discussing whiteness research is as a method of social critique and a push for antiracist social practice. This research considers multiple locations and utilizes multiple methods in an effort to advocate for social change leading to the end of racism. The second general category within this research, considers the use of whiteness a lens for reading, critiquing, or deconstructing multiple kinds of texts, most specifically literary, scholarly, or cinematic sources. The third trend, while not as pervasive as the previous two, seeks to understand whiteness as a rhetorically discursive space. This trend seems to be growing as multiple authors insist on asking questions about what this location—this positionality—does and how it operates rhetorically as a privileged place of power. Finally, I want to examine how whiteness is understood as enactment. This body of research seeks to understand how race, specifically whiteness, can be understood as a performance which works to constitute and continually reconstitute itself through everyday embodiments and practices. After providing each of these sections, I will link these moves in the research more directly to educational research and practice. Here, I want to address specifically how this research

affects and impacts education and what kinds of concerns it raises for curriculum and multicultural education. I will conclude by raising questions that I think still need to be addressed within this body of literature. I hope these frames and analysis serve to chart out the directions of whiteness research, while still preserving the reality that this research initiative is still in its infancy. New ways of thinking and theorizing whiteness are constantly being created and explored, which means that new theoretical directions are always possible.

WHITENESS AS ANTIRACIST PRACTICE

This direction of research is one of the most predominant forms of research dealing with the social construction of whiteness. Most, if not all, of the literature dealing with the constitution of white identity are concerned with an anti-racist social practice. Research on whiteness tends to have some kind of activist intent aimed at social and political change (i.e., the end of racism, critical reflection of racial privilege or oppression, etc.). Several scholarly works serve to examine particular populations, political or geographic locations, or institutional perceptions of whiteness as a cultural identity in order to better understand the way race works to oppress and then, hopefully, the essays function to transform or resist that oppression. The agenda, without apology, works out of a critical theory of social critique and transformation.

One way scholars talk about whiteness within antiracist research is through their own self-reflection or awakening to privilege. For instance, McIntosh's (1988) essay on white privilege serves as a reflective account of her coming to understand her own privilege based on skin tone. She wanted to work to understand the relationship between disadvantage and privilege as interdependent, in that oppression serves to provide others with certain advantages which she characterizes as "unearned assets" (p. 1). She unpacks her privilege by listing 46 individual effects of whiteness which she is granted each day simply because of her race (pp. 5-9). David Wellman (1993) tries to distinguish between racism and white privilege, noting that racism is always the "defense of racial privilege" (p. 4). Similar to Wellman and McIntosh is Maher and Tetreault's (1997) work on whiteness in the classroom. This essay serves as an extension and reflection of a book they wrote (Maher & Tetreault, 1994) in which they analyzed "feminist classrooms" in an effort to better understand how these classroom instructors work to create antisexist education for their students. This essay continues their research by revisiting their earlier work and employing a race critique to uncover how assumptions of whiteness and racist language affected those classrooms. This essay also works to reflect back on the authors' own experience in an effort to promote an antiracist agenda. Maher and Tetreault's work provides an interesting application of whiteness research since their effort is intended to unpack specific readings of whiteness and racism

within particular classroom situations. They use the lens of whiteness to uncover and decenter assumptions of race that run through everyday classroom practice.

Perhaps one of the most influential works in whiteness research, Ruth Frankenberg's (1993) ground-breaking book, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*, dramatically marks this area of study. In this book, Frankenberg interviews 30 white women and analyzes their perception of whiteness as a racial construction of identity. She delineates four ways that these women went about "thinking through race" in their everyday lives (p. 142). First, some women practice what Frankenberg characterizes as race evasion, in which women enact a "color-blindness" and deny the impact race has on their social lives (pp. 142–149). Second, many of the women in her study acknowledge that racial differences exist but refuse to focus attention on that aspect of identity, instead focusing upon elements of identity that are similar across racial lines. Next, Frankenberg discusses several women who acknowledge the social differences between races and the need to enact social change, but who lack the understanding of what to do or how to go about that change. Finally, several women were not only "race cognizant," Frankenberg's notion of the ability to see one's own situatedness in racial oppression, but also engaged in social action to alter the power relationships present in their communities (p. 160). In all, Frankenberg advances a compelling discussion of how race and racial oppression are enacted and constituted through social interaction. Her book seeks to advance an antiracist practice, claiming that those who can understand their implication in oppressive racial systems of power and work to enact antiracist agendas are leading the way toward a better social world. Frankenberg's book is closely related to the work of Phil Cohen (1997), who works to uncover and locate assumptions of whiteness. His work explicitly seeks to understand whiteness in the context of Britain's laboring class by examining whiteness and class within a psychoanalytic framework. His work, like Frankenberg's, is aimed at developing an antiracist social practice through an effort to seek and understand the connection between class and racial oppression.

Several authors examine whiteness within an antiracist frame work directly through the institutional location of the classroom. This is a particularly important direction of research for critical educators aiming to construct more equitable and just classroom relations and educational opportunities. Maher and Tetreault (1997) examine the classroom as a site for racial oppression and white privilege. Adding to their work is a new book by Alice McIntyre (1997) titled *Making Meaning of Whiteness: Exploring Racial Identity with White Teachers*. This book is an adaptation of her dissertation work, in which she interviewed and conducted several focus groups/seminars with a group of white students enrolled in teacher education programs. Her work, promoting antiracist education through critical analysis of whiteness, includes the notion of "white talk,"

which is talk by white students that serves to somehow remove personal responsibility for any personal involvement in the system of racism (p. 45). Also, the study examines the participants' own narratives of how they understand their whiteness, including several descriptors of how they work through what McIntyre calls the "dilemma of whiteness" (p. 79). Each of these works promotes an understanding of whiteness in the context of institutional education, both discussing how teachers are implicated in the goal of antiracist educative practices.

Wray and Newitz's (1997) collection provides several authors discussing how class and whiteness affect the conversation concerning the goal of an antiracist America. Doug Henwood (1997), for example, works within an economic frame to erase myths about poverty statistics, noting that while numerically whites make up a majority of the poor, percentile statistics present people of color as far outnumbering whites. Roxanne A. Dunbar (1997) discusses the distress she experienced when she altered her class status, confessing that she felt like a class traitor. By marrying into a middle-class family, Dunbar felt as if she had abandoned her working-class roots. These, like several of the other essays, complicate the stability of whiteness as an always-already-privileged status, noting that often some whites endure experiences similar to those of nonwhites, yet always framing this work within established white privilege. The essays are intended not to deny white privilege, but to complicate the dialogue.

Finally, the work of Vron Ware and David Wellman adds to the literature on whiteness, advocating an antiracist society by examining specific locations and instances of the application of racial critique. First, Ware (1997) examines whiteness in the context of a British election which was won by a white candidate whose campaign centered on the platform of "Rights for Whites" (p. 291). The essay examines that site and makes claims about how and why this political platform enjoyed such success. Ware actively works to connect issues of gender and race, arguing that it was the white female population that helped carry the victory for the candidate, noting that the intolerance was caused, in part, by issues of "cultural mixing" and the belief that "immigrant" influences would pollute their community (p. 299). Second, Wellman (1997) offers an interesting discussion of resistance and opposition to affirmation action programs, noting that they function rhetorically in the same way as minstrel shows of the 1830s. Both, he argues, serve to affirm white privilege and dominance, while negating the "African other" (p. 312).

Each of these similar efforts serves to promote an explicitly antiracist agenda through the analysis of whiteness as a social and political construct. What links them is their desired purpose, which in turn directs their research agendas. As we move on to the other frames, we must keep in mind that this agenda is very much present in most of the research; yet what separates this research body

from the others is the explicit desire to promote and apply an antiracist practice within social situations as an agent of social change.

READING WHITENESS IN LITERATURE, CINEMA, AND SCHOLARSHIP

Several authors work to apply their research and understanding of whiteness to certain kinds of texts in order to better see how race is operationalized within that given work. Applying race critiques or cultural readings to literature and cinema is not a new notion, given the many literary critics who have examined literature to see how non-white characters are portrayed within a give piece of work. What is different here, however, is the explicit search for whiteness as a sign of racial privilege. Whiteness, in many earlier cultural criticism writings, is left unanalyzed or is simply taken to be the norm upon which the nonwhite other is judged. This is detailed in Richard Dyer's (1988) essay "White," when he states that whiteness is seen in these mediums as a "natural, inevitable, [and] ordinary way of being human" (p. 44). This research works to see how whiteness is operationalized within certain textual sources.

The first way to consider this effort of reading whiteness into certain texts is to consider how literary scholars are working with whiteness research. In her rich book on literary identity, Toni Morrison (1993) examines the way "virtually all of American fiction [has] positioned [the reader] as white" (p. xii). This acknowledgment already begins to demonstrate the way white privilege is represented within literary works. This book examines a number of different literary texts and reads them through a lens of whiteness to see the symbolism and meaning behind the use of race in literature. Morrison's work was joined recently with Rebecca Aanerud's (1997) work, which also "seeks to unpack the constitution of whiteness as the neutral way of being human through an examination of its representations in the literature of American scholars" (pp. 37–38). Her research examines the literature of Kate Chopin, Allen Gurganus, and Joanne Brasil. In both Aanerud and Morrison's work, there is an effort to unpack whiteness as it is represented within literary texts.

A popular location of examining race and the operationalization of whiteness is film. While scholars tend to analyze film in a number of different genres (horror: Dyer, 1988; education: Giroux, 1997a, 1997b; action/westerns: Shome, 1996; popular or classic films: Muraleedharan, 1997; Hill, 1997a, Dyer, 1988; pornography: Kipnis & Reeder, 1997, Penley, 1997), these authors each seek to see the way whiteness gets played out within cinematic texts. Muraleedharan (1997) examines the popular film *Gandhi*, seeking to see how the character of Gandhi can be read as striving to become more white, relying both on cinematic illusions of whiteness and on rhetorical arguments about Gandhi's desire

to become the white ideal (docile and Christian). This is similar to Dyer's (1988) work when he reads the film *Simba* through a whiteness lens. Lastly, education and cultural studies theorist Henry A. Giroux (1997a, 1997b) examines the use of race within the film *Dangerous Minds*, arguing that whiteness serves as a mechanism of colonialization. Both of Giroux's works nicely function to uncover assumptions of whiteness and education within popular film, arguing that the film portrays each rather badly. Whiteness in the film serves as a mechanism to civilize the black and Latino savages, while education is represented as an ineffective process which can only reach students through bribery and teacher intervention in the students' personal lives. Both essays beg questions about methods of education and forced whiteness, both in terms of the "great white hope" teacher figure and through whiteness cultural standards, on students of color, while situating itself within the textual location of popular film. All of the theorists working with film sources are striving toward the same goal, which is the desire to understand representations of whiteness in these powerful texts.

As in popular film, several theorists are reading whiteness through the media. For instance, David R. Roediger (1997) critically examines the work of Rush Limbaugh and what he calls the "white Right" (p. 44). Roediger seeks to uncover how whiteness functions as the white gaze, arguing that the white look acts as a method of disempowering nonwhites through a history of the white supremacist gaze. His work is similar to Michael E. Staub's (1997) work studying how whiteness was represented in the Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill hearings in 1991. Staub argues that Congress specifically represented whiteness as a complete ignorance of black culture, which then allowed Thomas to serve "as the expert on anything relating to blackness" (p. 53). This framing of Thomas, as an expert of the black experience next to ignorant whiteness represented by the senators, allowed his lack of qualifications for the Supreme Court to go unchallenged by the Congress (also see Morrison, 1992).

Finally, several theorists are examining whiteness within academic scholarship. Angie Chambram-Dermersian (1997) examines a large number of different sites in which she reads whiteness as a cultural and social construct. One particular example of Chambram-Dermersian's work is a reading of Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) book *Borderlands, la Frontera*, where she argues that Anzaldúa's work seeks to identify whiteness as a loss of origin, which leads to whites' feelings of being a population without culture (p. 121). Adding to this work is Chéla Sandoval's (1997) essay, which examines how whiteness functions within the writing of Roland Barthes and Franz Fanon, as well as the implications of their scholarship on whiteness research (p. 86).

While the authors working on reading particular texts through a whiteness lens choose different sites and different genres of texts, all the research seeks to identify the way whiteness is operationalized and characterized within these

diverse textual locations. Again, it is important to note that many of these essays seek to promote antiracist work (i.e., Giroux, 1997a, 1997b; Dyer, 1988; Morrison, 1993; Chambram-Derneressian, 1997), but each also serves to apply that antiracist work to the site of particular physical texts which implicate whiteness as a social and cultural construct.

WHITENESS AS A RHETORICAL LOCATION

I decided to characterize this direction of research as a “location” because, more than any other form of whiteness research, this work examines the rhetorical force that this cultural, social positionality has within discourse. In other words, scholars conducting this research strive to examine the space (and effect of that social space) that whiteness carries as a political identifier of difference. These researchers seek to understand whiteness within a spatial metaphor, linking the ways “individuals and groups construct identity, administer power, and make sense of their everyday lives” (Nakayama and Krizek, 1995, p. 291). The goal of this research is not to claim an essentialized white subject. Rather, these researchers are curious about what power is embedded within the rhetorical location of whiteness, which is then temporarily granted to people when they claim (or when forced or given) that social, cultural, institutional identifier. Each of these scholars is working to understand whiteness within this frame of power and influence.

One way to examine the rhetorical power of whiteness is to consider Sandoval’s (1997) work, which depends upon the research of Roland Barthes and his notion of a “rhetoric of supremacism” (p. 88). Here the rhetorical power of whiteness is, in effect, unmasked, allowing supremacism to be, through Barthes and Fannon, transformed into what Sandoval calls a “rhetoric of love” (p. 102).

Sandoval’s work becomes illuminated when placed in relation to the work of Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek (1995), which considers whiteness a “strategic rhetoric” that needs to be exposed and made visible (p. 292). Nakayama and Krizek identify six specific strategies deployed through the rhetoric of whiteness as a discursive location. First, they argue that whiteness is tied to power through the discourse of “majority” or “dominant,” claiming that these discursive labels serve as an embedded source of rhetorical power (p. 298). Second, Nakayama and Krizek identify discourse that labels or characterizes white as the absence of color. This kind of definition by negation can be read as claims to purity, in which whites’ absence of color serves to identify them as somehow more pure than an imagined trace of nonwhite others. Third, “white” as an identification marker is a rhetorical strategy because it naturalizes race through scientific definition, which then drains whiteness from “its history and social status” by removing judgment and value to whiteness as a race (p. 300). Fourth, whiteness is often conflated with nationality, which then rhetorically

excludes nonwhite others from claims to similar nationhood. Fifth, Nakayama and Krizek found that many whites choose to deny any kind of label for themselves, which works rhetorically as an exercise of privilege. Indeed, it is quite a privilege to be able to refuse a label because it demonstrates who has the power to apply those labels in the first place. The final strategic rhetoric lies in the effort to conflate one's whiteness and a claim to European heritage. This kind of claim many times ignores the fact that very rarely do white individuals need to trace ancestry back to a "homeland" as a major part of people's daily lives. This is opposed to some other nonwhite populations, where their ancestry plays a more significant role in their identity. As Nakayama and Krizek claim at the beginning of their essay, their work seeks to "extend our understanding of positionality" through whiteness as a rhetorical location (p. 292).

Two key pieces of research appear to derive directly out of Nakayama and Krizek's research. First, Carrie Crenshaw (1997) explicitly calls her work a response to the "invitation" offered by Nakayama and Krizek's essay, examining, and ultimately advocating resistance to, the rhetorical silence of whiteness (p. 254). Her analysis is situated within the United Daughters of the Confederacy debate between Senators Jessie Helms and Carolyn Moseley Braun concerning an extension of a patent. The work discusses how, through the rhetorical analysis and later through the deployment of that analysis, Moseley Braun persuaded the Senate to end support for this organization, which is born out of blatant racist traditions. Adding to her work is Shome's (1996) analysis of *The City of Joy*, in which she seeks to understand the rhetorical strategies deployed within the context of that cinematic text.

Furthering Nakayama and Krizek, Ross Chambers (1997) argues that whiteness's power to exist as the unexamined lies within a specific context. He notes that "who is marked and who is not is ultimately a matter of context" (p. 188). He goes on to note that the act of examination always already situates a separation between two people; thus the ability to look is rhetorically powerful within systems of oppression that only grant the power of the gaze to particular people. In other words, the question becomes who has the power to examine in the first place and, further, how that examination serves as an act of oppression by regulating and controlling through visual surveillance. This strikes a chord with Warren Montag (1997), who argues that whiteness is rhetorically a racial universal. For Montag, the universal is that which stands as the norm; thus he attempts to discuss the oppressive system of racial oppression as a failure of people of color to be white. This framing of whiteness as a universal demonstrates the enormous power that those who can fulfill that role are granted daily.

Each of these scholars is working to discuss whiteness within the rhetorical locatedness that Nakayama and Krizek (1995) established in their earlier essay. The research direction within these studies directs us to consider how whiteness

serves as a rhetorically powerful positionality that functions discursively to accomplish a number of strategic goals.

WHITENESS AS A PERFORMATIVE ACCOMPLISHMENT

Education literature has had a troubled history with notions of performance. Many times, performance gets conflated with “pretense” or “acting.” For instance, Christine Overall (1997) discusses performance in two ways: as entertainment and as pretend. She notes, “To act is not really to be. If I am giving a performance when I teach, then, it seems, I am not really being myself” (p. 4). This way of viewing performance is not what cultural theorists are arguing for when they suggest a more performative way of understanding white identity. Rather, it is more in the vein of Elyse Lamm Pineau’s (1994) work on performative pedagogy, which moves the emphasis from product to process. In other words, a stable category, be it knowledge, education, or identity, is effectively denied. In its place, theorists promote a view of identity which is process-oriented, claiming that identity is constituted through human enactment. Performance, then, takes on the role of describing how one goes about the accomplishment of identity—how one does oneself. The literature that considers how whiteness is enacted demonstrates the power of performance-centered theory, even when the authors don’t explicitly note their use of performance. I have used the performative lens as a way to understand how these scholars/educators are thinking and writing about whiteness.

A key scholar in performative research has been Judith Butler (1990a, 1990b, 1993). Her work in considering gender an “identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” has marked how theorists see previously considered stable identities as a historically informed performances, rather than an essential function of natural sex categories (1990b, p. 270). Similar work was conducted by Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987), considering gender an embodied accomplishment, in which they characterize gender as something that one does rather than something that one is. West and her colleague Sarah Fenstermaker (1995) revisited that earlier work in order to include a number of other categories of historically identified differences. It is here that I begin to see the move to account for race, specifically for this essay the issue of whiteness, as an ongoing accomplishment of identity. They note that race is historically and socially constructed category system of identity and thus does not represent any specific or stable criteria. Racial categories, then, “change over time and place, [thus] they are, moreover, arbitrary” classifications (p. 22). This then suggests that the very construction of the racial categories is a performative accomplishment, in which, through enactment, individuals and groups of people constitute the very categories that were created in the first place. So, it is through perfor-

mance that our very understanding of race (as a system made up of arbitrary race identifiers) comes into being.

So, with this theoretical work conducted as a grounding upon which other scholars can work, we can see several scholars considering how whiteness is performed or enacted in everyday life. First, we can examine both Wellman's (1997) and Ware's (1997) essays as examples of whiteness embodied. In other words, both of these essays seek, while not explicitly, to understand how whiteness gets enacted or performed through daily political life. Complicating this notion of enactment, bell hooks (1997) discusses whiteness as representation, noting that her work seeks to unpack whiteness from a black or nonwhite positionality (p. 170). In an ethnographic study of "white Detroit," John Hartigan, Jr. (1997a, 1997b) examined whiteness juxtaposed to class struggle, noting that identity systems are not stable:

Even at the level of greatest abstraction, the nation or the globe, racial categories are rarely so rigorously delimited as to produce a consistently homogeneous content. With whiteness, gaps continually emerge between whites in different regions, in distinct families, and in various class positions. These gaps reveal distinct backgrounds of significance against which whites varyingly articulate and interpret the scope of their racialness. (1997a, p. 184)

What this suggests is that the identity category of white is culturally, historically, and situationally specific, with only an illusion of coherency or stability. Hartigan nicely frames whiteness as performative when he describes an occasion where one does or enacts an incorrect performance of white identity. He notes, "By behaving in a manner considered indecorous by Warrendale whites, these recent arrivals (white trash) are disrupting implicit understandings of what it means to be white" (Hartigan, 1997b, p. 46). Here, the power behind Hartigan's work is the ability to note where and how whites do "white" incorrectly; thus what is given (their whiteness) is questioned. At stake is their identity as white, allowing us to see how race, at least in part, is an accomplishment of doing race.

Also working within the framework of class and the enactment of race is Gael Sweeny (1997). Her work, centered on Elvis as a white trash icon, discusses the performance of the working-class body. She situates white trash identity as an "excessive" performance of the body, which "evades, resists, and outrages the dominant social order—mainly the Northern middle class" (p. 256). The excessive body, as an enactment of identity, demonstrates the performative nature of race. As Robert H. Vorlicky (1997) notes, "The body 'speaks' (represents) itself" (p. 250). The body situates whiteness within a performative understanding of race by framing the body as the site of identity constitution.

Another scholar who seems to consider race a performative accomplish-

ment is France Winddance Twine (1997). Twine takes the most radical performative twist to race by discussing what she call “brown-skinned white girls,” or those “girls” who have grown up in white households who, in turn, enact whiteness based on their environment (pp. 214–215). This argument is similar to Muraleedharan’s (1997) notion of Gandhi enacting cultural whiteness, but Twine goes a step further. She not only wants to grant these girls white cultural identity but also to claim that they are unaware of their own position of difference (p. 222). Here, the enactment of one’s identity as similar to one’s environment overrides any understanding of the materiality of the body. While one’s racial enactment and the materiality of the body may be a location for further research, Twine offers us a new and potentially rich site considering performative accomplishments of race.

Each of the authors above, if not explicitly, implicitly frames his or her analysis in terms of performance, where performance, as an enacting or accomplishing of one’s own race, serves as a way to understand the way race functions within our daily lives. It is through the analysis of these everyday life performances that, as Peter McLaren (1997) argues, one can choose against enacting whiteness, although “to consistently choose nonwhiteness is a difficult act of apostasy, for it implies a heightened sense of social criticism and an unwavering commitment to social justice” (p. 10). As educators, we must think about how enacted whiteness affects educators’, as well as students’, lives. The next section speaks to how to make sense of this within the pedagogical site of the classroom.

EDUCATION AND WHITENESS STUDIES

There are two key reasons that the research framed above needs to be brought into the critical eye of educators. First, when any body of literature grows in cultural studies, it has the potential to affect how multicultural education might take shape. With critical education theorists like Peter McLaren (1997), Elizabeth Ellsworth (1997), and Henry A. Giroux (1997a, 1997b) all working within and contributing to this body of literature, we can see that whiteness studies have already affected how education research is being shaped.

Multicultural education has traditionally been based on examining racial others, in an effort to expand the curriculum to include racial and ethnic minorities. In an interview, Enid Lee (1995) delineates several steps to creating a multicultural, antiracist education. While I doubt Lee would disagree with many of the scholars in whiteness studies, she frames her remarks on bringing others into the central curriculum. Whiteness studies differs from Lee’s perspective when it comes to the notion of the center. Rather than making the center bigger, including more voices and more cultures, whiteness studies demands a critical examination of the center in the hope that the center will fall apart. This move-

ment has similar goals to Lee's work but approaches the problem from a different angle.

There are several other ways I see whiteness research impacting multicultural education. Schools, through this research, should begin a concerted effort to examine the racial center. Efforts to examine the unearned privilege that comes with white skin pigment will add depth to any educational conversation that desires to understand racism. Multicultural education will be more than glances outward and will also include critical and focused attention inward toward the powerful center of racial privilege. This examination will shed light on the invisible power behind the center, which will work toward dismantling the system of racial inequality at the core. As McLaren (1997) notes, "Multicultural education should place an increasing emphasis on understanding the social construction of whiteness" (p. 8). Whiteness studies are a direction of research that educators who advocate multicultural education must take into account. This, as suggested above, will alter multicultural education as we know it, asking educators to work on multicultural initiatives from the inside—breaking down the cultural center of whiteness.

Another factor for multicultural education that I would like to see come about through this research is a concerted effort to critically examine racism and white privilege through our classrooms. This research needs a place to make a difference, and the classroom must serve that function. Many efforts in multicultural education consist of simply providing food, dance, or music from other cultural groups as a way to understand culture. This is most exemplified in Black History Month (and other such segregated calendar designations), when society dedicates a month to African-American history so black history and black struggle can be ignored again until that time next year. This tokenism can be challenged through this research because whiteness research demands that educators and researchers stop ignoring the impact and influence of the power white center in this racist society. Whiteness studies can work against the tokenism efforts that keep marginalized groups marginalized and instead critically examine and dismantle the center through a systematic analysis of what it means to be privileged and white in this society.

The second key reason that this research is vital to educators is that it demands that we examine the unexamined assumptions concerning issues like textbooks and curriculum decisions. Issues of curriculum can be examined to unpack the whiteness assumptions embedded within them. As Giroux (1997a, 1997b) discusses in relation to the movie *Dangerous Minds*, educators can read texts (history books, curriculum, school discipline guidelines, and literature selections) and examine them to see what kind of assumptions lie within or behind them. While not every curriculum, educational site, or text may show blatant racism, this research asks that we attend to each with a critical eye that does not take for granted their neutrality. Whiteness studies begins with the

premise that there is more to unexamined whiteness than meets the eye, and this critical attention permeates issues of educational praxis as well.

CONCLUSION

While certainly any effort to put a large number of scholarly works into a system of categories tends to seem arbitrary, I have tried to provide a coherent way of understanding the current theorizing of whiteness in academic research. With the massive amount of research coming out on whiteness as a cultural and social construct, this work already finds itself in danger of being dated. As with any youthful research initiative, there will be new ways of understanding this research and new directions for future studies to take. This essay clearly suggests that this research area adds to the conversation about racial oppression and domination in a reflexive and critical manner, beginning at the site of self. It has opened up for me a whole new research agenda that offers much promise and critical social action.

There are several questions I am left with at the end of this effort that beg to be addressed. The first refers back to Talbot (1997), who is concerned with the whiteness research because while claiming to decenter whiteness, whiteness studies by definition force attention back to the center just when other voices are being offered. For the most part, I share this concern. I worry that efforts in whiteness may only serve to strengthen the solid privilege base that whiteness already enjoys. However, by ignoring the center in racial discourse, we only serve that powerful center and work to keep its power, granted partly by the very invisibility and unmarkedness it has thus far enjoyed, from ever being deconstructed. So, a central question still remains concerning the way to both examine the center critically, uncover assumptions of whiteness in everyday talk discourse and practice, and still not work to make the center stronger. As I see it, this is a major concern for whiteness studies.

A second question derives from of the research pointing to and identifying white privilege. While I think it is important to locate white privilege and question it, I am left wondering if that is enough. If I note and identify my privilege within the education system, how does that then work to deconstruct it? How does it necessarily work to make the system more equitable? Whose life improves by my acknowledgment of that fact? A direction of research I see a need for consists of theorizing multiple ways one might go about the practice of decentering whiteness. In other words, what might a decentering look like in practice? Perhaps Leslie G. Roman's (1997) work on denying racial privilege is a step toward this possibility, but I am certain that much more work on this front needs to be attempted in whiteness studies before an effective approach to decentering the power of the racial center is realized.

Finally, I am left hoping for more criticism and empirical work that exam-

ines how whiteness is manifested within different locations and sites. Performative work in whiteness studies is beginning to cover this ground, but more work in this area must be conducted. I would be interested to see more microanalytic work that seeks to uncover what whiteness looks like in everyday life. Like Hartigan's (1997a, 1997b) work, I am interested in ethnographies, ethnomethodology studies, and performance studies work, as well as other methods that work to analyze every day life in concrete and specific ways. How does one go about doing whiteness every day and how does that enactment serve white privilege? This is a key question to uncovering racism within everyday life.

I am also hopeful for the possibilities that this research opens for multicultural education. With a different focus, this education initiative might move away from the "food and festivals" multicultural programs that serve culture up with an "ethnic" dish and traditional garb. These kind of programs only render various cultures exotic and thus fail to impact the stability and power of the center. Education has the opportunity to become truly transformative, leading to a more diverse and equitable society. This is a site that offers much possibility and much hope for social change.

As I close, it seems important to me to return to the overall themes that tie all of these works together. All of the essays are interested in understanding the notion of privilege within social life, as well as working to mark the seemingly invisible space of white identity. Hopefully, this research will work to continually mark the unmarked and question unearned racial privilege as a tool of the oppressor in a racist society. These dual goals are critical for progressive educators everywhere; yet this work and research agenda has much more ground to cover. And, it seems to me, it's about time.

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