Whiteness Studies and the Multicultural Literature Classroom

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I. Introduction

It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me.
—Herman Melville, Moby-Dick (188)

White people are not white: part of the price of the white ticket is to delude themselves into believing that they are.
—James Baldwin, “The Price of the Ticket” (835)

When I began some years ago to maintain a Whiteness Studies web site, the “Select Bibliography” was rather short and easy to update. Now I feel overwhelmed, as books and articles come pouring in from across the disciplines. Thinking naively that the scholarly consensus was pervasive, Professor Krista Ratcliffe and I actually submitted a proposal to the National Endowment for the Humanities to conduct a summer institute on Whiteness Studies, encouraged by a standing-room-only response to our session (with Sandra Jones) at a convention of the National Council of Teachers of English. But the NEH, which had invited us to apply, now told us that whiteness was a “passing fad.” If only it were so, and if only the field were unnecessary. Yet its emergence and extension testify to the real intellectual, political, and pedagogical problems its practitioners address. This essay will not attempt an overview of the field, which is now impossible, but concentrate rather on an effort to incorporate Whiteness Studies into the multicultural literature classroom. What motivates such an intervention? What
forms can or should it take? At what cost does such an addition come, given the originally marginalized status of writers and communities of color? How does Whiteness Studies position or challenge students of different racial and/or ethnic ancestries? And what effect might this pedagogical innovation have on the authority or position of the instructor?

Though I cannot offer a comprehensive overview of Whiteness Studies here, it will be helpful to sketch my idea of its contents and orientation (for helpful recent anthologies see Delgado and Stefan- cic; Fine et. al; and Rothenberg). I believe that Whiteness Studies belongs to the general effort to create a “critical multiculturalism” as an alternative to the “celebratory multiculturalism” popular since the 1970s and still largely influential in our classrooms (especially K-12). Critical multiculturalism analyzes the inequalities of power that both motivate and result from practices of racial, ethnic, gender, class, or sexual discrimination; it is antiracist, dedicated to social justice and structural change, and connects ethno-racial conflict in the United States to its global contexts (see the essays collected in May). Whiteness Studies traces the economic and political history behind the invention of “whiteness,” challenges the privileges given to so-called “whites,” and analyzes the cultural practices (in art, music, literature, and popular media) that perpetuate the fiction of “whiteness.”

“Whiteness Studies” is not an attack on people, whatever their skin color. Instead, “Whiteness Studies” thinks critically about how white skin preference has operated systematically, structurally, and sometimes unconsciously as a dominant force in American—and indeed in global—society and culture. This includes how white skin preference insinuates itself into the culture of communities of color as well, where we may find everything from prejudice against darker-skinned people within the community to commercial practices of white-body imitation and surgery (nose jobs, skin creams, eye-lid alteration, etc.). The transnational character of white privilege results from the legacy of European colonial imperialism, so that Whiteness Studies may be usefully articulated with theories of globalization and postcoloniality as well.

The discourse of “whiteness” weaves an ideological fiction in which “white people” possess supposedly unique characteristics, qualities purportedly making them both a “superior race” and the
“norm” by which others are judged. “Whiteness” is also—or above all else—a legal fiction determining the distribution of wealth and power among bodies denominated by this fiction (see Lipsitz). Historically, white people are an invented “race,” made up of various Northern European ethnic groups (French, German, English, Irish, Norwegian, etc.) that form a powerful social coalition. “White” is thus a political fiction used by one social group to harm and oppress others. Indeed, the history of the invention of whiteness may strengthen arguments against the very notion of “race” itself since this history reveals that there is no such things as a “pure” race and that all human population groups are historical mixtures of different ethnicities. So Paul Gilroy, for example, titles his recent provocative book *Against Race*, arguing that ultimately we must abandon the term if we have any hope of progressive political change. Though contemporary genetic research has also done much to discredit the notion of distinct races, it would be folly to institute “color blind” policies that ignore how race still plays a distinctive role in medical as well as social reality. Thus the American Sociological Association, among others, argues that race must still be a factor in social scientific research and government policy (see also Brown, Jay, and Terrell).

“Whiteness” as an ideology derives from the historical practice of institutionalizing “white supremacy.” Beginning in at least the seventeenth century, “white” appeared as a legal term and social designator determining social and political rights. Eventually it was used widely to decide who could vote or be enslaved or be a citizen, who could attend which schools and churches, who could marry whom, and who could drink from which water fountain. These and thousands of other legal and social regulations were built upon the fiction of a superior “white” race deserving special privileges and protections. Many of these regulations were still in force well into the 1960s when the modern Civil Rights Movement fought to overturn the regime of segregation put into place after the defeat of slavery. It was only in 1967 that the Supreme Court finally overturned the last state statutes against interracial marriage. But the power of the fiction of “whiteness” continues to the present day, distorting our laws and culture in ways we still fail to recognize. Most whites continue to deny vehemently that they benefit from their skin color. Where once “white supremacy” was
a routinely publicized, accepted, and legitimated norm of socio-
political and cultural discourse, today it is a reality that dare not
speak its name.

Whiteness Studies exposes this silence and this fiction, making
visible the history and practices of white supremacy as found in
social life, the law, literature, music, politics, and every other
realm of "civilization." Thus Whiteness Studies can be part of the
general effort to eradicate prejudice, bigotry, discrimination, and
racism. Such a liberation project will be strengthened by decon-
structing the notion of a "white race," delegitimating the privileges
given to whites, and criticizing the cultural preference given to
images of whiteness. Whiteness Studies owes a great debt to the
work done by generations of African American writers and think-
ers, as well as to critics from many other ethno-racial groups (see
Roediger). Whiteness Studies is no substitute for area studies,
ethnic studies, or postcolonial studies, but a necessary complement
to them. There is always the danger that Whiteness Studies will be
misunderstood as just a gimmick for keeping the focus on white
people, or as another attempt to put white people back in the
position of privilege, or another way of avoiding the challenges
presented by non-white perspectives. Teachers working to include
Whiteness Studies in their courses should be aware of these
dangers and take steps to avoid them as much as possible. Empha-
sizing critiques of whiteness, in literature and other areas, by
people of color is one effective way to continue centering
whiteness even as we focus on it.

**The Syllabus: Starting with Whiteness**

In the year 2000, my colleague Sandra Jones and I began team-
teaching the "Introduction to Ethnic Minority Literature" class; she
is African American and I am white, a difference that often made a
difference. Sandra and I had just begun a new initiative at our
university called the Cultures and Communities Program; a version
of this class would eventually become the core course on "Multi-
cultural America." We wanted to provide first and second year
college students with an introduction to issues of race and ethnicity
in the United States, chiefly through the study of literature, history,
and visual culture. That entailed covering numerous ethno-racial
groups in a comparative fashion and along an historical timeline. To provide the history, we chose Ronald Takaki’s *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, which begins with Shakespeare’s Caliban and the "racialization of savagery" during the Colonial period and then proceeds through chapters focused on the experiences of specific groups—primarily those of African, Mexican, Chinese, Japanese, Irish, Jewish, and Native ancestry. Takaki’s narrative proceeds chronologically from the seventeenth to the late twentieth centuries, but does so in chapters with an individual focus on the struggles of these groups for identity, land, wealth, and power. On our syllabus we follow this chronicle week by week, aligning short stories and novels with the Takaki chapters to explore the literary work of these groups as a response to their historical experience. For this we have used various anthologies, particularly Wesley Brown and Amy Ling’s *Imagining America* and Barbara Rico and Sandra Mano’s *American Mosaic*.

After our first semester, Sandra and I and our instructional team made one decisive change. We reorganized the syllabus to begin with a unit on whiteness, sometimes called the “Raising Our Consciousness about Racism, Bigotry, and Discrimination” unit (see Brown, Jay, and Terrell). Though Milwaukee is a “majority minority” city, the university’s student body is mainly white, drawn from the surrounding suburbs and towns and increasingly from outlying areas all over the state of Wisconsin. Thus we found it impossible to deal honestly with our subject without first addressing the problematic racial and ethnic situation of our city, our university, and our class. Students needed ways of understanding their place in the story of multiculturalism, globally and locally. “Effective multicultural education,” argues Jones, “must help white students and students of color alike understand where they are positioned, where they fit, in these changing times. Confusion around *this* question is often the major source of resistance to multicultural teaching and learning, especially among white students.”

As a class we acknowledge that different students have a diverse, and sometimes difficult, relation to the materials we study, depending on their ethno-racial background. Most of our students, whether white or of color, come from segregated communities. Many of our white students report that there were no people of
color where they grew up. Moving to Milwaukee and enrolling at the university constitutes their first initiation (beyond the media, movies, and TV) into multicultural America, though many also express dismay at the lack of diversity on campus and the persistence of segregation. For our students of color, the transition is from high school classrooms with few or no white faces to college classrooms overwhelmingly white in enrollment. They naturally wonder whether and how they belong, feeling isolated and marginalized. Though they bring with them a wealth of experience and cultural/social knowledge from which other students as well as faculty can benefit, these students are not always seen as resources for knowledge, for they are too often stereotyped as “lacking” skills or as having “deficits” of one kind or another. In between we have white students who attended racially mixed high schools and have many friends across the color line, and students of color who attended nearly all-white high schools in the suburbs. Given these disparities, it is a challenge to figure out a pedagogical approach to race and culture that addresses every student’s needs as well as the imperative to communicate productively across differences.

So beginning with whiteness makes sense to us since it puts our immediate context on the table. White student resistances to antiracist or multicultural education are fairly familiar. They think it is not about them. They think they are being made to feel guilty. They think racism is something that happened in the past. They believe that since they are not personally racist, race has nothing to do with them. They have been taught that multiculturalism is a “celebration of differences,” analogous to a folk-fair or food court where you get to taste all the nice things “those people” create. They believe that in America anyone can make it if they just work hard and play by the rules, and thus that people who are poor or illiterate or in jail or stuck in dead-end jobs got what they deserved. They defy the authority of the black woman team-teaching the class, dismissing her perspective as “biased” or complaining that she is “out to get them” or “doesn’t listen.” They turn to the white male teacher with their complaints, on the implicit assumption that he will empathize with them. Letting these student strategies of resistance emerge haphazardly and persistently during the course of the semester damages everyone’s learning, while
confronting such resistances at the start gives us some momentum in facing and overcoming them.

The pedagogy of whiteness begins with recognizing “white privilege.” At first this term surprises our students, for it names a reality that they have been taught not to see. Reading Peggy McIntosh’s classic essay, “White Privilege and Male Privilege,” white students examine concrete examples of how they are implicated in racism regardless of whether they themselves “are a racist.” The preferences given to whiteness do not depend on what the individual feels or thinks about race: I have a better chance of getting that mortgage loan or that low price on my car or that good service at the restaurant because I am white, no matter how antiracist I may be. Analyzing white privilege can help circumvent white resistance since discussion moves from the personal to the structural, from hazy feelings about guilt to practical, objective recognitions of how society works. For students of color, the McIntosh essay expresses what they see everyday, and so validates observations these students offer that are sometimes dismissed in other classes. Indeed, having white people themselves make these observations opens the door for students of color to testify in ways that they otherwise feel might be dangerous to themselves or their academic success.

Along with the McIntosh essay, we use videos of the work of Jane Elliott, creator of the famous “blue-eyed/brown eyed” experiment, done first with elementary school students in the 1960s and now refined by Elliott into a tool for group workshops whose focus goes beyond race to sex, gender, and class. While there are a number of videos on Elliott’s work, two have been most effective for us: Blue-Eyed, a 90-minute workshop documentary that includes footage from the 1968 class and interviews with Elliott, and the shorter The Stolen Eye, a more recent video done by Elliott in Australia where her participants are whites and aboriginals. This latter video has the advantage of showing how white supremacy belongs to a global history of colonial imperialism and racism, of which the American story is only one part. The anger and pain expressed by the participants of aboriginal descent are searing, more explicit and confrontational than the behavior of the American people of color in Blue-Eyed.
Students viewing Stolen Eye debate Elliott’s technique, which is unforgiving, sarcastic, and unrelenting. Her manner is a far cry from the therapeutic, feel-good multiculturalism of many American workshops. Elliott wants her blue-eyed to really feel the pain of discrimination and inequality. So effective is she that two white males stalk out of the workshop, one elderly man angrily declaring that this woman has no right to treat a man like him this way. These two walk-outs, along with Elliott’s treatment of one of the women in the group, whom she insists on calling “Blondie” as she reduces her to tears, incite students to a dialogue on the interaction of attitudes towards gender, race, and power. Some argue that no man could get away with Elliott’s behavior, while others say that she merely acts the way powerful men always act, ways for which they are routinely rewarded or praised as strong, forceful, and authoritative. Since later in the course we focus a good deal on the different experiences of women in slavery and immigration, Elliott’s performance gives us a head start in thinking about the interrelated social construction of race, ethnicity, and gender.

Many of us are accustomed to saying or reading that race and gender are “socially constructed.” Yet what do we actually mean by this assertion, and how can we demonstrate it effectively for students? As Elliott arbitrarily divides up her workshop participants, putting collars on some to humiliate them, keeping them in hot crowded rooms without explanation, making them sit on the floor so they have to look up to her, giving them tests designed to cause them to fail, changing the rules at a whim—we watch the process of social construction before our eyes. People who came in strong and self-confident and accustomed to privilege are reduced to angry, confused, tearful, helpless individuals who lose much of their self-esteem and seem de-centered by workshop’s end. Elliott notes this change and asks her blue-eyes something like this: “If you have so much trouble accepting this kind of treatment for only a few hours, when you know it isn’t even real, how do you think people of color feel during a lifetime of such treatment?” While Elliott appears to be following the humanist pedagogical maxim that empathy, learning to walk in someone else’s shoes, is crucial to multicultural education, she works in such a way that empathy does not result in the complacent or congratulatory observation of our sameness, or that “we’re all really alike under the skin.”
Instead of that homily of celebratory multiculturalism, we get a lesson in critical multiculturalism where white identity has the experience of living without empathy in a structure of oppression.

Allan Johnson’s *Privilege, Power and Difference* extends McIntosh’s essay, revising her famous list of privileges with examples from sexual and class preferences. Johnson defines “privilege” as an extra value or “asset” that makes difference in turn “a liability” (24). Privilege is given to groups, not to individuals, based on one’s perceived identity. Such privilege brings with it “unearned entitlements” and “conferred dominance.” Johnson’s lucid exposition of privilege helps students work through its social construction logically, unmasking familiar social relations to reveal their oppressive character. Like McIntosh and Elliott, Johnson is a critical, rather than a celebratory, multiculturalist and is not afraid to offer a Marxist interpretation of social oppression. Words like “diversity,” “tolerance,” and “appreciating difference,” he argues, are evasive terms, as is the commonplace notion that “people are naturally afraid of what they don’t know” (16). Actually, people, and most students, are naturally curious creatures. The “problem is our ideas about what we don’t know.”

Antiracist education, then, entails deconstructing what we take to be common sense; this criticism of commonplace assumptions inevitably elicits resistance. “The idea that we’re going to get out of this by somehow getting to a place where we’re kinder and more sensitive to one another ignores most of what we have to overcome,” which is structural racism and systems of oppression, not individual tendencies or prejudices (Johnson 71). Let me paraphrase Johnson’s handy summary (74-77) of the six reasons members of the dominant group “don’t get it” (or say they don’t):

1. Obliviousness/ignorance (they don’t know what’s going on)
2. Security/Complacency (they don’t have to know what’s going on)
3. Individualism (they think what’s going on is a result of individual effort and/or merit, and that inequalities are therefore deserved)
4. Benefits (they don’t want to lose what they gain because of what’s going on)
5. Prejudice (they think they know what’s going on, and it offends them)
6. Fear (they are afraid that acknowledging what's going on will bring harm or loss to them)

Working through these sections of Johnson’s analysis will, for most white students, mean looking uncomfortably in the mirror. But students also find some solace in discovering the logic of their own resistance, as well as reasons for overcoming it. The lessons are not just for white students, however; as Johnson keeps returning to other forms of privilege based on gender bias, class discrimination, and homophobia, students of color find themselves implicated as well in complex ways they will have to sort through, analyze, and overcome.

In a wonderful discussion on “Getting Off the Hook,” Johnson deconstructs a number of attitudes one often hears expressed in class (117-36). When whites, straights, or men deny that there is any racism or homophobia or sexism, “it rarely seems to occur to them that they’re in a poor position to know what they’re talking about” (118). Such expressions treat other people like children, as if we understand their lives better than they do. Strategies of resistance include denying or minimizing the problem (“Oh, you’re exaggerating”; “That’s the way it’s always been/Things have changed”); blaming the victim (“She was just asking for it dressed like that”; “Why don’t they just get a job?”); calling the problem by a misleading or innocuous name (“It’s just the natural ‘battle of the sexes’”); the defensive claim of innocent intentions (“That’s not what I meant, you’re just oversensitive”); the assertion that one is the virtuous exception to the rule (“Some people are racists, but I’m not prejudiced against anyone”); and exasperated expressions that one is “just sick” of the subject (“Do we have to talk about this again?”). Foregrounding such language anticipates resistance by putting the most common expressions of it up on the board for analysis at the start of the semester, rather than waiting for them to interrupt discussion constantly. For the instructor of color, materials such as Johnson’s preempt the inevitable resistance white students are going to display to a class taught by a non-white person. Since this resistance is structurally motivated by social conditions, it needs to be deconstructed as such. Students should not be allowed to indulge in personal hostility toward the teacher;
such hostility is only a symptomatic, illusory expression of their fear of a loss of privilege and power.

Another helpful resource for teaching about whiteness is Gary R. Howard’s *We Can’t Teach What We Don’t Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools*. Howard’s book frames the critique of racism and whiteness within a general theory of “social dominance.” Writes Howard: “It is important to remember as we embark on this complex and sometimes uncomfortable journey into greater understanding that the ‘enemy’ is dominance itself, not White people. This distinction becomes blurred at times precisely because of the overwhelming convergence of Whiteness and dominance in Western nations” (27). What is “Social Domi-nance”? we ask our class. Look around, and you will observe that resources and opportunities in a society are unequally distributed among individuals according to group membership (race, gender, class, sexual orientation, etc.). Social institutions (schools, churches, government organizations, businesses, etc.) systematically reproduce inequalities that favor the dominant group and oppress others. Though we don’t want to minimize the sufferings it causes, racial oppression is only one form of social dominance. Other types of prejudice, bigotry, and discrimination also create structures of oppression, including sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, and Orientalism.

According to “minimal difference group theory,” people form social groups around minimal perceived differences (skin color, shape of nose, clothing, language, region, fraternity or sorority, cars owned, etc.). In-groups and out-groups are based on these differences, and values of inferiority and superiority accordingly assigned. In-group and out-group distinctions become structures or systems of dominance and subordination, enforced and reproduced by rituals, customs, laws, cultural practices, media, and institutions. This assignment and arrangement of individuals into dominant and subordinate groups affects our self-perception: we perceive—or misperceive—ourselves and others from within our social positionality. Misperception occurs because of the difference between our *subjective* positionality and our *objective* positionality. Howard explains:
From the perspective of those members of society who are not White, it is quite clear, both subjectively and objectively, that Whites have been collectively allocated disproportionate amounts of power, authority, wealth, control, and dominance. However, for me as an individual White person, subjectively experiencing my own reality, I may or may not feel dominant. I may or may not perceive myself as belonging to a collective group defined by Whiteness. (29)

Hence the commonly observed phenomenon that white students do not see themselves as having a race or a culture. "I’m just a normal American," one hears from students, who can become puzzled or angry when asked to be accountable for their white social positionality.

I like to use a simple analogy, one meant to answer those who say "I (or my family) worked hard for what we have. We earned it" (you will hear some such statement frequently during discussions of affirmative action). I ask my students to imagine a foot race where all the white people get to line up fifty yards ahead of all the people of color. The race begins. The white people, who may have been training for months, indeed run fast and hard. When they win the race they believe it is because of their own effort and skill. It does no good to deny that they worked hard and are meritorious. That is their subjective understanding of their positionality, and from within their group it makes sense. But objectively they had an unfair advantage, which they may or may not have seen or known about, though it becomes increasingly difficult to explain how the white racers were so oblivious to their advantage. To admit that advantage, however, would necessitate changing the rules of the race itself, rather than addressing the case of one or two individuals, and the result would be a substantial change in the fortunes of the two groups.

The class can usually provide its own list of examples of objective dominance from their readings in Takaki: the right to vote was originally restricted to white male property owners; naturalization of immigrants for citizenship was restricted to whites; jobs and housing were closed to blacks and Jews and other non-whites; immigration quotas were set to favor Northern Europeans; admission to schools and colleges was restricted by race; the list goes on. These examples of unmerited objective dominance
speak once more to the difference between individual acts of prejudice and systems of social oppression. With this difference in mind, the class can challenge some of the typical statements of resistance: “I didn’t kill the Indians... Some of my best friends are Latinos... My aunt is a lesbian... I’ve never discriminated against anyone... My family never owned slaves.” The last example can be the start of a useful exercise if the class works to build a chart of the economic matrix for which the plantation served as center. Who did the Master buy his seeds and horses and tools from? White people, who, if they didn’t own slaves, thus still profited from its economy. Who bought the Master’s cotton at a cheap price made possible by slave labor? White people, who, if they didn’t own slaves, still profited from its economy. Who had well-paying jobs in the factories that processed the cotton or in the shipyards that built the boats that sent it overseas? White people, who often reacted violently to the prospect of allowing people of color to compete for these jobs. The wealth of all white people was artificially enlarged by the slave economy, a fact of objective dominance that may not have been subjectively realized by the whites, north and south, who nonetheless benefitted.

Building on Howard’s discussion of the “subjectivity of dominance,” one can describe its key features. First, “the assumption of rightness,” in which one’s own beliefs or truths are seen as universals rather than the product of one’s particular cultural experience. To this I add the corollary “assumption of wrongness”: if white (or male or straight) is the norm, and the West is the best, only “other” people have a “culture” that makes their viewpoint partial, local, biased, and therefore less true. Second, “the insult of colorblindness,” commonly expressed in statements like “I don’t see color, I see people and I treat everyone the same.” The declaration of colorblindness assumes that we can erase our racial categories, ignore differences, and thereby achieve an illusory state of sameness or equality (Howard 53). But assertions that race doesn’t matter turn into assertions that people of color don’t matter since the authenticity of their experiences is denied by this assertion. As Howard explains: “Colorblindness grows from a dominance-oriented perspective. Difference threatens dominance, because it upsets the belief in one’s own rightness. ‘We’re all the same’ translates as ‘We are all like me’” (53-54). I make the case to my
students that equality is not the result of ignoring differences, but of understanding their history, functions, and effects. Knowing others means learning about someone other than you. To treat someone equally is to recognize their right to difference. Equality is not sameness. Difference is not the enemy; inequality is the enemy.

Howard’s discussion of white racial identity formation can be very helpful in giving students a map of where they have been, where they may be stuck, and where they might go. Organizing the critique of dominance into a narrative of identity development puts a more positive spin on the critical process since it replaces reiterated accusations with a coherent, recognizable plot that can have a positive outcome. The first stage is “pre-contact”: little or no multiracial experience, leaving individuals susceptible to believing positive or negative stereotypes and vulnerable to either white supremacist opinions or naïve liberal platitudes. Second, “initial contact” prompted by new experiences (friends, work, move to the city, college, the media) leads to acknowledgement that whites do have a racial identity and certain privileges; this stage brings defensiveness, anger, denial, and confusion. Third is “dis-integration of identity”: a growing knowledge of present and historical injustices and white supremacist practices causes guilt, shame, and grief, often attended by an angry repudiation of the “American Dream.” Many of our students find themselves in this stage by mid-semester, especially after reading Takaki’s chapters on slavery, the Indians, and discrimination against non-white immigrants, including the Irish and the Jews. Fourth is the “conflicted identity of connection-repudiation,” including excitement at knowledge discoveries, new personal connections with people of color, and the emotional inspiration of denouncing injustice; this stage includes the danger of becoming “wannabes,” the “wigger” or “white negro” phenomenon. Some people may skip stage four and go right to five, “reactionary defensiveness”: disintegration causes a reactionary reintegration or retrenchment through regression to previously held prejudices, racist beliefs, or denials of responsibility. Racism and inequality are then rationalized as the natural result of the inherent inferiority of the dominated group: “The guilt and anxiety of the previous stage are repressed and redirected as fear or anger toward other racial groups” (Howard
Members of the dominant group see themselves as besieged or victimized by the oppressed group, e.g., the “white male backlash” phenomenon.

In stage six, what I call “the missionary position,” the dominant or white person acknowledges their privilege and responsibility, but the attempt to abandon racism or discrimination takes the form of trying to “help” the oppressed rather than dismantle structures of power. Paternalism, condescension, and lack of self-awareness infect this stage. Stage seven, “commitment to change and social justice,” is characterized by efforts to “help others,” balanced by efforts to change oneself and challenge other members of the dominant group to join in altering the system of oppression. Alliances with non-whites can be based on mutual respect; “others” now can be seen as teachers and resources for knowledge, not as deficits or problems to be fixed. With some modification these stages can be adapted to narrate stages involving not just racial domination and subordination, but those hinged on differences of gender, class, nationality, or sexuality. Of course, this narrative of stages appears as prescriptive as it is descriptive since it leads inexorably toward a progressive vision of social justice solidarity that many will find unrealistic. I think it beneficial, nonetheless, because it offers students hope as well as criticism, and tools for moving out of positions where they may feel stuck.

Usually we conclude our unit on whiteness with a short essay assignment on the meaning of whiteness. It asks students to use the readings and videos, as well as their own experiences, to reflect critically on the social, political, and cultural functions of whiteness, with specific examples drawn from literature, history, the media, and their own lives. This essay can also be tied to other assignments, such as a cultural identity autobiography or a family-tree research poster. White students now have some grasp of their place in the story of multiculturalism, which they acknowledge to be about them as well as about others. Students of color acquire academic resources for theorizing and critiquing what they know from experience, and they perceive that they have not been positioned in the class as the only “native speakers” who know anything about racism. As we move through the rest of the semester, the work done in this opening unit usually lessens the resistances elicited by reading materials on the history of racial and ethnic
oppression in the United States. As a thesis statement, the unit on whiteness asserts that ideologies and practices of white supremacy are the foundation for understanding formations of race and ethnicity in the United States, as well as the interactions or struggles among groups categorized by such concepts.

Reading Whiteness

How does a critical pedagogy of deconstructing whiteness work in the analysis of literary texts? Again, a formidable number of scholars have begun theorizing this issue and showing us in practice what value this approach may have (for a good introduction, see Babb). Most famously, perhaps, Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* makes the case for a thoroughly revisionary reading of American literary history:

What Africanism became for, and how it functioned in, the literary imagination is of paramount interest because it may be possible to discover, through a closer look at literary ‘blackness,’ the nature—even the cause—of literary ‘whiteness.’ What is it for? What parts do the invention and development of whiteness play in the construction of what is loosely described as ‘American’? . . . What I propose here is to examine the impact of notions of racial hierarchy, racial exclusion, and racial vulnerability and availability on nonblacks who held, resisted, explored, or altered those notions. The scholarship that looks into the mind, imagination, and behavior of slaves is valuable. But equally valuable is a serious intellectual effort to see what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behavior of masters.

(9, 11-12)

Reading whiteness, then, extends across the various canons, requiring a critical defamiliarization of racial thinking in texts by people of every skin color.

Such a critical defamiliarization can take many forms: deconstructing literary blackness in works by non-blacks; exposing how whiteness constructs itself as the other to an imagined blackness (or brownness or redness); delineating the values and anxieties expressed in the imagery of whiteness seen in texts by white authors; tracing the ambiguity of the color line in texts by and about “mixed race” people, including critiques of the figures of the
"tragic mulatto" or the "half-breed"; confronting prejudices in favor of lighter skin or European features in the color politics of non-white communities; identifying texts that represent episodes or issues in the historical invention of whiteness; and, as in Morrison's book, reading how ideologies of white supremacy create structural and conceptual fissures in white-authored texts. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but it may give some sense of the possibilities.

In our class, the critical reading of whiteness plays a significant part in the interpretations of numerous texts, only a few of which I can discuss here, and then only as brief examples. After the whiteness unit we usually read Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*. As the novel opens, the protagonist, Avey Johnson, is cruising the Caribbean aboard the *Bianca Pride*, whose name suggests how Avey's investment in whiteness will be the cause of her fall. She is suddenly nauseated by consuming the culture of racist colonial imperialism: she cannot digest a dessert named "Peach Parfait à la Versailles," whose peachiness recalls the flesh color of whiteness and whose name recalls the treaty by which the European powers carved up their respective empires. Avey jumps ship. Her journey back to black identity includes a voyage of remembrance, back to the happy days in Harlem before she and her husband moved to North White Plains, and further back to visits to her Great Aunt Cuney, a Gullah griot of the Georgia Sea Islands whose tale of Ibo Landing connects Avey to her African roots. As Marshall so explicitly makes whiteness an issue in the novel, students can begin practicing the kinds of reading Morrison advocates: for example, looking at how the "literary blackness" finally arrived at by Avey requires a ritual expurgation of the whiteness she has ingested. The political economy of Avey's assimilation to whiteness is also keenly delineated by the novel and prompts students to learn something about the situation of African Americans between the early 1920s (when the Johnsons marry) and the 1940s (by which time Avey's husband has become a walking embodiment of racial self-hatred as a result of white refusals to employ him).

Early on we also read Nicholasa Mohr's trenchant tale, "The English Lesson," which depicts the politics of assimilation in an English-as-a-Second-Language classroom. Mohr's depiction of the
teacher, Mrs. Hamma, creates a vivid portrait of one white authority figure who appears disastrously unaware of her own ignorance about the students she teaches and the effect her condescension has upon them. She takes up the missionary position, “convinced that this small group of people desperately needed her services,” and projects her own white ethnic experience uncritically onto theirs: “My grandparents came here from Germany as poor immigrants, working their way up. I’m not one to forget a thing like that!” (22). She exudes what Johnson calls the “luxury of ignorance,” though Mohr’s ironic treatment makes us feel that she must have some awareness, and enjoyment, of the power she exercises over the class. Mrs. Hamma’s promotion of assimilation prompts one Dominican man to vehemently object. Ignoring Mrs. Hamma’s attempts to silence him, he declares that he has no intention of seeking American citizenship and goes on to denounce American economic exploitation of his homeland. Mohr’s depiction of the white teacher helps us reflect critically on the dynamics of our own classroom situation (and provides particularly interesting reading for students from the School of Education). The way Mohr’s story brings out the dynamics of white privilege within the problematic of assimilation and nationalism resonates in many stories that we read and helps to critically rethink commonplace notions of America as a “nation of immigrants.”

African Americans (like Chicano/as and Native Americans) fit uncomfortably into the myth of the “nation of immigrants,” and their experience includes a “Great Migration” of internal diaspora caused by white supremacist practices in the post-bellum south. In Marita Bonner’s “The Whipping,” the story begins with the description of a prison matron, an immigrant from Denmark who has successfully assimilated and risen on the ladder of upward economic mobility. She has traded in her old world identity and ethnicity for American whiteness, preserving only a few nostalgic memories and some cuisine. Bonner contrasts her fortune with that of her charge, Elizabeth, a black woman convicted of causing her own son’s death by striking him. Though Elizabeth too has migrated to Chicago, in her case from the fields of Mississippi, the matron displays no empathy or solidarity with her since part of the “price of the ticket” of whiteness includes this adoption of oblivious supremacy (see Baldwin). A white clerk at the welfare office
mistakenly thinks Elizabeth has pulled a knife during an altercation with another client: "Her books had all told her that colored women carried knives" (17). Bonner’s structural analysis of her character’s fate dramatizes the unjust power exercised by white institutions, including sharecropping, the social welfare bureaucracy, the courts, and the prisons.

The price of the ticket for European ethnics wanting to become Americans included a negotiation with the costs of white supremacy. Among the most influential and interesting turns in Whiteness Studies has been the scholarship on how the Irish and the Jews “became white” (see Ignatiev; Brodkin; Jacobson). In Mary Gordon’s “Eileen,” we explore the experience of Irish immigrants, especially the Irish maids who so predominated near the end of the nineteenth century, displacing northern blacks from domestic service (see Takaki, Ch. 6). As Jacobson has it, the Irish are “whites of a different color,” or at least off-white. Ethnic discrimination by the dominant Anglo-Saxon class combines with gender and disability discrimination to short circuit the ambitions of the women in the story. The partially crippled Nora, from whose point of view the story is told, ends up bitter and alone, her education no protection against discrimination and sexism. Eileen herself returns to Ireland after her brother’s accidental death: “She cursed the day she ever left, she cursed the day she’d listened to the lying tongues, the gold-in-the-street stories, the palaver about starting over, making good” (63). In Gordon’s story issues of gender and class complicate received myths about immigration and the American Dream, forcing us to consider how European ethnic groups such as the Irish experienced the imperatives of whiteness.

In Anzia Yezierska’s “Soap and Water,” the author deconstructs the stereotype of the “dirty Jew” who will never be white enough. The story’s protagonist is a young Jewish woman who puts herself through college working in a laundry, washing the clothes of the more privileged white people who can afford such a service: “At the hour when they came from the theater or musicale, I came from the laundry. . . . so bathed in the sweat of exhaustion I could not think of a bath of soap and water,” a useless thought anyway since “there were no such things as bathtubs” in the house where she lived (106-107). Ironically, her laundry labor just makes her filthier in the eyes of the “agents of clean society”: “What I so
greatly feared, happened! Miss Whiteside, the dean of our college, withheld my diploma. When I came to her office, and asked her why she did not pass me, she said she could not recommend me as a teacher because of my personal appearance” (105).

Yezierska’s language expresses the symbolic power of whiteness in setting boundaries of race and class and privilege, for example, when her protagonist protests that “I felt the suppressed wrath of all the unwashed of the earth break loose within me. My eyes blazed fire. I didn’t care for myself, nor the dean, nor the whole laundered world. I had suffered the cruelty of their cleanliness and the tyranny of their culture to the breaking point” (106). Like Marshall, Yezierska makes the issue of whiteness an obvious one through her choice of words as well as her imagery. Yet the blatant references have still left the issue of whiteness in stories such as these largely unexplored by critics, at least until recently. This story fits well with a reading of Takaki’s chapter on the Jewish women who worked in the sweatshops of New York’s garment district. Gordon’s and Yezierska’s texts give fictional reality to “objective dominance” in their portrayal of the immigrant’s oppression by systems of labor built on white supremacist practices of ethnic, racial, and gender discrimination.

To study the “subjectivity of dominance” in relation to whiteness, one cannot do much better than to read D’Arcy McNickle’s story “Train Time.” This Native-authored story is set in the time when the US government pursued its ruthless policy of coaxing, coercing, and abducting Native American children into boarding schools where they would learn to assimilate to the ways of the white man. But McNickle, who was himself put in one of the boarding schools, chooses to tell the story from within the point of view of the white Major Miles, an army officer trying to get one group of children ready for the train. This narrative strategy deconstructs the Major’s consciousness from the inside. When we read that “Major Miles was a man of conscience. Whatever he did, he did earnestly,” we are meant to interpret this as Miles’s own self-perception, and as a revelation of his moral obtuseness. We feel and experience his self-congratulatory liberal progressivism and his condescension toward Native Americans. He knows what is good for them, after all.
One boy in particular, Eneas, becomes the focus of Major Miles’s missionary efforts: “He had decided that day that he would help the boy in any way possible, because he was a boy of quality. You would be shirking your duty if you failed to recognize and to help a boy of this sort” (93). Eneas lives with and assists his grandparents, elders he respects as part of a culture of ancestral obligation. The Major’s individualistic ethic, however, encourages Eneas to forget this obligation: “I’m going to help you. I’ll see that the old folks are taken care of, so you won’t have to think about them” (93). The boy objects, but the Major’s paternalism causes him to dismiss Eneas’s concerns, for he—and implicitly all Indians—belongs to the category of children: “Whether the boy understood what was good for him or not, he meant to see to it that the right thing was done” (93). The Major’s consciousness exhibits most of the features I have been discussing in regards to the self-delusions of white identity, especially the assumption of rightness, the luxury of ignorance, and the obliviousness to privilege. The Major also allows himself to think that his own personal feelings are what count, rather than his position of structural oppression.

In conclusion, I do not wish to be misunderstood. I am not advocating that courses on multicultural literature make whiteness their central focus or that white identity development replace the cultural identity crises of people of color as our main topic. But I am arguing that texts by white authors belong on the multicultural syllabus list since one cannot understand the social construction of race in the United States without analyzing its foundation in the dominant practices of white supremacy, which can frequently be exhibited through readings of white ethnic as well as canonical Anglo-Saxon authors. The reading of non-white texts can be enriched as well by asking questions about the literary constructions of color within and among them.

Finally, my case for including Whiteness Studies in the multicultural literature classroom returns once more to the figure of the student. Those of us teaching in predominantly white institutions have an obligation to assist our students in achieving critical self-consciousness, to make them better citizens as well as better readers. Those of us working with students of color may also find the tools of Whiteness Studies useful, as one would surmise given the fact that its pioneers were writers such as Du Bois, Larsen,
Ellison, Wright, Baldwin, and Morrison. Following their lead, we still have much to learn about the price of the ticket of whiteness.

Notes

This essay depends heavily on team-teaching experiences with my colleague Sandra Jones, who is the source of many of the insights and ideas explored here. Since she is busy finishing her dissertation, she did not have time to sit in front of the computer to help write this essay, but she should be credited nonetheless with much that may be valuable within it.

Works Cited


