

TOWARD A CLEANER WHITE(NESS): NEW RACIAL IDENTITIES¹

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Race theorists have conclusively demonstrated that racial categories linking the physical, mental, and behavioral traits of selected individuals to a hidden nature putatively shared by them as a group are without scientific basis.² However,

¹ I am grateful to my colleague and partner, Jennifer Parks, for her useful suggestions in revising this paper. I am also grateful to Naomi Zack, Steve Martinot, and Kory Schaff for providing extensive criticism of an earlier draft of the paper. The paper reflects a revision of the view I defended in *Group Rights: Reconciling Equality and Difference* (Lawrence, KA: Kansas UP, 2000), which, while properly taking note of the distinction between ethnic and racial groups in the U.S., failed to stress the conceptual equivalence of race and ethnicity in folk psychology.

² That biological descent is integral to the idea of the race concept is disputable. Biological conceptions of race are of relatively recent vintage, with some accounts dating their emergence as late as the 19th century. The extremely deterministic conception associated with the one-drop rule that emerged in the U.S. as late as the mid-19th century and became widely accepted by 1915 today mainly survives in the biologically attenuated form of hypo-descent, in which offspring of racially mixed couples are assigned the racial status of the parent bearing the most socially subordinate racial status. Thus, when the census bureau counts offspring of mixed “black” and “white” parentage as black no presumption of biological determinism is at play, because the motivation for the classification is political or customary, rather than ontological. Moreover, even when biological conceptions of race are invoked, the degree of determinism implicated may vary considerably (for instance, Nazi race criteria allowed persons of Jewish ancestry to become officially non-Jewish if their ancestors had dropped their Jewish surnames for four generations). Yet, however obvious it may be for us to think of race as designating a biological essence, the tendency among some societies—both modern and premodern—to form nonbiologically designated racial stereotypes grounded in geographical, cultural, or economic/occupational causes, points to a more primitive psychological dynamic. Combined with evidence showing that children learn to categorize people into races independently of forming biological conceptions of race, these facts strongly suggest that biological racial categorization is a subset of racial categorization, and that racial categorization is a subset of naturalizing (or essentializing) social differentiation that is common to all societies. Not only do broader conceptions of race better enable us to explain the genesis of distinctly modern, biological senses of race from premodern, nonbiological antecedents, but they help us to understand

among those who find the continued use of racial classifications in science, medicine, and law problematic and illegitimate, there are some who find racial self-ascriptions acceptable as a way of referencing a shared experience of oppression.³

the psychological durability of racial categories even in the decline of biologically informed racism. Admittedly, conceiving of them in this broad way renders them less distinct from other social categories. Perhaps what distinguishes racial categories from other social categories that are commonly conceived essentialistically, such as gender, is that the former refer to groups that are able to reproduce by themselves, as independent populations. See Lawrence Hirshfeld, *Races in the Making* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996) 197–98; and Naomi Zack, *Race and Mixed Race* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1993) 19. For arguments defending a broader definition of race see Albert Memmi, *Racism*, trans. Steve Martinot (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000) 78, 97; for arguments defending a narrow, biological definition of race, see Anthony Appiah's introduction to Memmi (viii).

³ It scarcely needs mentioning that systems of racial classification are historically specific and diverse. Some are explicitly racist in their functioning and some, such as those found in modern anthropology—are not. Racial systems can be more or less complete, well-formed, and uniform. Ideally, a racial system would contain uniformly applied, clear-cut rules for assigning every individual an unambiguous racial identity. But this is a condition that no racial system—scientific or otherwise—has ever fully satisfied. Any given racial system typically appeals to multiple and conflicting criteria of classification, ranging from somatic appearance and birth descent to cultural attribution and self-identification. Even the one-drop rule used to classify blacks in the U.S., which comes as close as any criterion for specifying a clear-cut basis for distinguishing blacks from whites, contradicts the common (African) origin of the human species and the subsequent spreading out and remixing of racial groups.

To complicate our taxonomy, one should follow Charles Mills in distinguishing between objective and subjective senses of race. Objectivism conceives race as existing independently of personal beliefs and decisions. One kind of objectivism holds that race designates a hidden essence (typically biological) that is necessarily transmitted from parent to child in the form of distinct physical (and perhaps moral-cognitive) attributes. The other kind of objectivism (also known as social constructivism) denies that race refers to any biological reality, holding instead that race designates an intersubjectively recognized, publicly institutionalized system of social norms. More precisely, objectivism of this sort holds that race designates a culturally selected way of constructing physical (and perhaps cultural) characteristics into racial types. Using evidence from modern genetics, race theorists view racial characteristics as nothing more than arbitrarily chosen sets of physical traits that statistically predominate among relatively closed breeding populations. As Dubinin notes, barely 0.012% of any person's genetic endowment accounts for racially identified physical traits—a percentage that is far less than the percentage of genetic endowment that distinguishes any two persons who happen to share the same racial traits. Given the fact that each of us is the product of a mixed genealogy dating back to the origin of the species and beyond, and given the fact that the genes that determine physical characteristics are both isolable and recombinable, racial characteristics never occur together in any pure sense, and are never passed down whole and intact from one generation to the next. Consequently, the only reality to which race might refer is an artificial system of social classifications that, like any social norm, can be criticized, resisted, reinterpreted, and overturned by active, self-aware subjects. To the degree that such resistance becomes trenchant and general, racial identification loses its objectivity and becomes subjective, i.e., subject to conscious choice. See Charles Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca: Cornell UP), ch. 3; N.P. Dubinin, "Race and Contemporary Genetics," *Race, Science, and Society*, ed. Leo Kuper (New York: Columbia UP, 1965) 61–67.

Pride in being black, for example, is typically expressed as a way of combatting racism rather than asserting reverse racism.⁴ By parity of reasoning, it has been argued by some that a positive white self-identification can also be legitimate when purged of its racist connotations.

What would it mean to talk about whiteness as a racial identity that is non-racist or antiracist? Educator and eminent race theorist Henry Giroux⁵ answers this question by appealing to Stuart Hall's conception of "new ethnicities."

The term ethnicity acknowledges the place of history, language, and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated and all knowledge is contextual . . . What is involved is the splitting of the notion of ethnicity between, on the one hand, the dominant notion which connects it to nation and "race" and, on the other hand, what I think is the beginning of a positive conception of the ethnicity of the margins, of the periphery. That is, a recognition that we all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture, without being contained by that position . . . We are all, in that sense ethnically located and our ethnic identities are crucial to our subjective sense of who we are. But this is also a recognition that this is not an ethnicity which is doomed to survive, as Englishness was, only by marginalizing, dispossessing, displacing, and forgetting other ethnicities. This precisely is the politics of ethnicity predicated on difference and diversity.⁶

In opposition to dominant constructions of ethnicity, nationality and race that appeal to "essentialist" and biological determinations (i.e., determinations that presume that all members of a specific class of persons necessarily possess some uniquely distinguishing feature), Hall urges that we view such categories simply as social constructions that serve to position any subject vis-a-vis multiple cultures and shared experiences. Because these new "identities" are contextually specific—appropriated by individuals out of their own experience—as well as open-ended, overlapping, and shifting, they cannot serve to exclude, marginalize, and dispossess specific individuals and groups. But this contextuality and open-endedness also renders them questionable as a basis for "identity politics." Stated bluntly, multicultural and antiracist politics can no longer take the form of simply affirming essential differences that were once negatively and stereotypically distorted by the dominant racial and cultural group(s). Therefore, if anything

⁴ I agree with Memmi (2000, 50, 83) that such expressions of pride can be motivated by illegitimate racial (and racist) stereotypes designating a reverse hyperbolic evaluation. However deplorable they might be, such illegitimate evaluations on the part of oppressed people are a natural reaction to negative stereotyping on the part of the oppressors, and may be morally excused to the extent that they enhance the solidarity of the oppressed and thereby indirectly promote the end of racial stereotyping in the long run.

⁵ Henry Giroux, "Rewriting the Discourse of Racial Identity: Towards a Pedagogy and Politics of Whiteness," *Harvard Educational Review* 67, no. 2 (1997) 285–313.

⁶ Stuart Hall, "Critical Dialogues," *Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996) 446–47.

legitimate still resides within the compass of identity politics, it can only be that of individual members of groups (self-chosen or otherwise) collectively fighting against these destructive stereotypes. This politics, needless to say, is far removed from positively affirming anything remotely like a definitive identity.⁷

If Hall's defense of new ethnicity inadvertently deconstructs the very notion of insular group identity, reducing the latter to the status of a loose alliance of overlapping subject-positions, it is hard to see how it can be of any use to Giroux's project of retrieving "whiteness" as an identity. As I hope to show, the concept of a white identity is, if anything, less legitimate than ethnic identity generally. At best, the latter when appropriately deconstructed might be defended as a temporary locus of overlapping solidarities for individual members of oppressed and marginalized groups. Once deconstructed, ethnicity dissolves into a plurality of cultural or experiential identifications that is utterly unlike the kind of identity (if we can call it that) designated by the term "whiteness." This is not to deny that whiteness has cultural and even ethnic connotations. But if whiteness ever approximated the status of a general cultural identity in North America—one distinct from doctrinaire white supremacist ideologies—it did so as a national identity referring exclusively to what we today might call European American ethnic identity (principally defined in relation to Anglo-Saxon culture and later extended to encompass French, Germanic, Scandinavian, Irish, Slavic, and Mediterranean ethnicities). Although this conception of white national culture still persists today in the resurgence of a new ethnic European identity that has emerged in reaction to the influx of non-European immigrants and the rising visibility of minority "identity politics" (see n. 39) it is but a surface manifestation of a deeper—and less intentional—structure of white privilege, commonly referred to as institutional racism. Such a structure of racial privilege is best conceived in noncultural and nonpsychological terms as an objective system of socially constructed exclusions that constrains culture and experience from the outside, covertly and subconsciously.

⁷ Defending a "politics of difference" against charges of promoting an insular, self-interested "identity politics," Iris Young argues that the very concept of group identity is philosophically bankrupt. What members of groups share in common, if anything, is a social positioning that is defined in relation to the social positioning of other groups. Although individuals fashion personal identities for themselves on the basis of social positions that are not of their own making, such identities do not conform to the logic of substantial or intrinsic essence but to that of dynamic and multivalent relationship. Although very little of what goes under the politics of difference involves struggles for mutual recognition and cultural identity pure and simple, Young notes that combating negative stereotypes and modes of cultural discrimination constitutes a legitimate form of politics that is only poorly captured by the expression "identity politics." See Iris Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) 99–107; and Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition: An Essay by Charles Taylor* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992).

In sum, whiteness designates a structure of privilege which conditions the acculturation of both whites and nonwhites, albeit in strikingly different ways. The attempt to save whiteness by reducing it to ethnic identity is futile, for as Walter Benn Michaels has powerfully argued, the concept of ethnic identity itself has racial (and racist) overtones.⁸ I therefore conclude that, although white persons need not feel guilty about who they are, they should not aspire to a positive ethno-racial identification in the way that blacks and other oppressed racial minorities might.

I. WHITENESS AS RACIST LEGACY AND ANTIRACIST IDENTITY: GIROUX'S THESIS ON NEW RACIAL IDENTITY

What, or who, do white people want to be? This question, raised by David Wellman in a penetrating analysis of whiteness and affirmative action, seems to defy a response.⁹ Indeed, the question would never have arisen 40 years ago. In those days, white people took their identity for granted.¹⁰ Their whiteness, if one

⁸ For an incisive critique of all implicit conceptions of cultural identity—from cultural memory to cultural reinvention, rediscovery, and reappropriation—see Walter Benn Michaels, “Race into Culture: A Critical Genealogy of Cultural Identity,” *Identities*, ed. K. Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995) 32–62.

⁹ David Wellman, “Minstrel Shows, Affirmative Action Talk, and Angry White Men: Marking Racial Otherness in the 1990s,” *Disciplining Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*, ed. Ruth Frankenberg (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1997) 311–331.

¹⁰ There exists a vast literature on the topic of whiteness. The concept has been used to designate a variety of phenomena, from white supremacist ideologies and movements to unconscious structures of privilege and power. In every instance, what is designated by the concept is something that is dynamic and historically variable. Longitudinal studies of whiteness within the American context by Horsman, Allen, Roediger, Ware, Wellman, and Ignatiev, show that whiteness is inextricably connected to notions of class and nation. Oversimplifying their findings, one might summarize the history of whiteness accordingly: During the colonial period (and especially that part of it pertaining to Southern plantation life), whiteness denoted a distinctly aristocratic kind of breeding whose superior distinction resided in freedom from physical labor, intellectual detachment from bodily desire, and moral control over one's destiny. This sensibility was later appropriated by the white middle class and, during the 19th century, by skilled wage laborers. Key to this development was the suppression of any identification between black and white laborers, a process that first began in the late 17th century with the passage of laws preventing the mixing of slaves and indentured servants, whose contracts could be leased or sold. However unskilled and poor, white workers were encouraged to distinguish themselves as free wage earners—thereby undermining any alliance between themselves and slaves. Corresponding to this gradual materialization of whiteness was the emergence of a settler ideology that equated Anglo-Saxon lineage with the pioneering spirit. The republican vision of a nation of independent farmers (the Jeffersonian dream) fueled expansion into the wilderness, thereby calling forth a new ideology mandating the “civilizing” subjugation of those “mongrel races” of indigenous and Spanish descent who did not live by the precepts of the Norman Yoke Doctrine, which equated full humanity with enclosure (privatization) and tillage

can call it that, was all but invisible to them. Their place in the world—as self-ascribed bearers of Western civilization, the Protestant work ethic, and decency—was unquestioned and secure. But all that has changed now. As younger whites increasingly confront the challenges of affirmative action, multiculturalism, and identity politics, they also confront the question of their own shifting identity.

Today, white people—above all, white men¹¹—have been put on the defensive. What they have taken for granted as the fruits of hard work and virtue is now

of the land. The doctrine of “manifest destiny” thus represented another manifestation of an emerging white sensibility. As Roediger shows, the anxiety of male white workers facing conditions of exploitation and dehumanization typically conferred upon blacks (and later immigrants) led them to embrace racist myths and stereotypes that assured them of their own sense of self-worth (hence the popularity of minstrel shows, which depicted blacks as lazy, hedonistic, and childlike). This anxiety also explains the enormous symbolic importance of minstrel shows in constituting a unified white identity. These shows, which depicted blacks in wild, pastoral, or other preindustrial settings, reflected white (especially Irish and German) sexual yearning and nostalgia for a natural freedom, coupled with an opposite disdain, stemming from the internalization of an industrial (white, Anglo-Saxon) work ethic. Frankenberg has taken this analysis a step further by exploring the gendered tropes that have underwritten the historical construction of a distinctly American white sensibility: “White Woman is frail, vulnerable, delicate, sexually pure . . . White Man is strong, dominant arbiter of truth, and self-designated protector of white womankind, defender of nation/territory . . . Man of Color . . . is sexually rapacious, sometimes seductive, usually predatory, especially toward White Woman . . . and Woman of Color is also sexually eager, seductress, willing and able consort, especially for the White Man of this tropological family, personally unhygienic, overly fertile, but also usable for breeding, when this is beneficial to White Man, and for tending white children and adults, again when beneficial to White Man or White Woman.” See Ruth Frankenberg (1997) 11–12 and *White Woman: Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993); Theodore Allen, *The Invention of the White Race, vol. 1: Racial Oppression and Social Control* (London: Verso, 1994); Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1981); Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (London: Routledge, 1995); David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991); David Saxton, *The Rise and the Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth Century America* (London: Verso, 1990); Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism, and History* (London: Verso, 1992); David Wellman, *Portraits of White Racism*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1973/93).

¹¹ Since women were primarily confined to the domestic economy and were excluded, until late in the 20th century, from full access to civil society, they do not appear as the main subjects around which studies of whiteness have focused. In other words, since whiteness took shape principally as a system of economic and political privileges during the 19th century, it was sustained by myths and ideologies that took white men rather than white women as the active agents of a white republic; a white settler destiny, or a free, white labor force. Be that as it may, white women did contribute to the construction of whiteness—often in surprising ways. While women’s rights activists like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton initially linked the oppression of women and the oppression of slaves, they later resisted the idea that emancipated blacks should be enfranchised ahead of white women (Southern suffragettes argued that, by enfranchising white women, whites could counteract the power bestowed on blacks by the Fifteenth Amendment). Again, one-time

decried by others as the undeserved advantages of privilege born of racism and the correlative evils of sexism and class domination. Seeing their economic and political dominance challenged by forces over which they have no control—loss of jobs to foreign competition, depreciation of marketable skills and qualifications, and decline in wages, salaries, and benefits due to downsizing, the opening up of competitive labor markets, and so on—they feel more insecure than ever about their place in the world.¹²

Having been placed on the defensive, whites become defensive. White supremacism is one manifestation of this reaction. A less overtly racist (and sometimes nonracist) reaction is “principled” opposition to policies, such as immigration and affirmative action, that supposedly violate the rights of American workers in general and, more specifically, the rights of white men. Here the construction of white man as victim is premised—curiously enough—on denying the “wages of whiteness,” as David Roediger refers to it, alluding to W.E.B. Du Bois’s famous remark in *Black Reconstruction* about how low-paid white workers were compensated by a “public and psychological wage.”¹³ However much working class white men suffered from racial divisions that facilitated the depression of their wages (by enabling their replacement with lower-paid blacks), they also

Socialist party member, feminist, and birth-control advocate Margaret Sanger later enlisted in the American Birth Control League’s eugenic program to decrease the population of blacks and other “unfit” types and thereby prevent them from overwhelming the superior race of white Europeans “through careless breeding.” Finally, white mothers, who are often charged with responsibility for maintaining family genealogies, have played no small role in pressing their offspring to marry into the right (white) families. Needless to say, white women today are often quite willing to take advantage of the perks of “whiteness” (as Marilyn Frye puts it) in competing with blacks and other minorities for scarce jobs. See Frankenberg (1993); Ware (1992); Angela Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981); Marilyn Frye, *Willful Virgin: Essays in Feminism 1976–1992* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1992); and Linda Alcoff, “Racism,” *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Alison Jaggar and Iris Marion Young (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1998) 475–84.

¹² Phil Cohen talks about a new, postmodern form of white supremacism that has emerged alongside a new “post-Fordist” mode of global capitalism. Whereas older forms of white identity still embraced the remnants of an aristocratic privileging of the mental over the physical, the new, postmodern forms reverse this sensibility. Targeting immigrants and racial minorities that have gained access to better paying (if unstable) high-tech jobs in the computer and service industries (where performance rather than appearance counts), blue-collar white supremacists have reinvested with a new sense of masculinity and individualism jobs in mining, steel, and construction that were once regarded as dirty, dangerous, dehumanizing and generally the proper labor of nonwhites and minorities. The “uniform” adopted by London’s East End skinheads—shaved head, Doc Martens boots, T-shirt, jeans, and suspenders—and their attachment to local and national soccer teams thus articulates a new territorial and masculine version of proletarian whiteness. See Phil Cohen, “Laboring under Whiteness,” in Frankenberg (1997) 244–82.

¹³ Roediger (1991): 12; W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in the United States, 1860–1880* (New York, 1977 [1935]) 700–1.

benefited from them in countless ways—social, political, and psychological. Whiteness eventually became their salvation, the very bond of racially exclusive trade unions that promoted higher wages at the expense of blacks who could have been embraced as oppressed brothers rather than shunned as competitors. Because whites disingenuously deny or remain insensitive to this history—of the actual extent of present discrimination, the institutional effect of past discrimination, and of the cumulative assets that have disproportionately accrued to generations of whites through wage discrimination—what is intended as an affirmative action aimed at “leveling the playing field” appears to them as nothing more than reverse discrimination. Maintaining this deception, however, requires entering into bad faith and, even worse, caricaturing minority beneficiaries as “unqualified” on the face of it; thereby fabricating a new kind of minstrel show replete with comic stereotypes.¹⁴

But these defensive and reactionary reconstructions of victimization do not exhaust all the possible answers to the question about what it means to be white. When junior high and high school students form European American social clubs in response to the emergence of ethnic clubs composed mainly of persons of Asian, African, and Latino ancestry, they ostensibly do so not to proclaim their victimization but to celebrate their European culture and identity. Likewise, when practitioners of “diversity awareness” seek to train educators, workers, and managers to become conscious of how “white” culture should be privileged no more than any other, they seem to be offering their mainly white clients the prospect of reconstructing their white identity critically and positively.¹⁵ Finally, and perhaps most ironically, the decline of what K. Anthony Appiah has referred to as *extrinsic* racism, or the idea that different races correspond to different levels of moral, cognitive, and aesthetic achievement and worth, has been accompanied by an increase in *intrinsic* racism, or the idea that racial difference alone carries moral weight.¹⁶ As Naomi Zack argues, the fear that many white families entertain regarding the painful lives that children designated as racially black endure

¹⁴ See Roediger (1991); Saxton (1990); and Wellman (1997).

¹⁵ Frankenberg (1997, 18) cites the following passage, contained in a handout distributed by the Center for the Study of White American Culture, Incorporated (245 West 4th Avenue, Roselle, NJ 07203), as exemplifying the difficulty of generating an “anti-racist practice of whiteness” that doesn’t implicitly collude in a white backlash: “Some of our issues [as white Americans] are unique. While minority cultures have struggled to obtain power, white Americans must struggle to share the power we have. While minority cultures have struggled to retain their autonomy, white Americans must struggle to make our culture exist without dominating other cultures. We need to develop a public discussion of issues that apply uniquely to us as white Americans in a multicultural America.”

¹⁶ K. Anthony Appiah, “Racisms,” *Anatomy of Racism*, ed. David Theo Goldberg (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990) 5–6.

still constrains them to deny or exclude any racial mixing—especially with blacks—among their own members.¹⁷

The above examples reflect a continuing obsession with racial purity, if not a white backlash, moderately disguised as a multicultural make-over of a distinctly racist form of understanding and practice. Despite this fact, Giroux speculates that a positive, antiracist construction of white identity as a kind of ethnicity represents a viable alternative to defensive or self-abnegating constructions. His stance marks an important alternative to the view espoused by Ignatiev, bell hooks, and Roediger, who urge whites to reject any positive identification with their whiteness.¹⁸ Viewed as a distorted understanding of social reality and as an objective structure of privilege and exclusion, whiteness is perceived by these critics as something to be betrayed, deconstructed, and abolished. Renouncing one's whiteness or asserting one's racial hybridity by identifying with subaltern minorities, as do "wiggers" (white youth who adopt the black youth culture of hip-hop),¹⁹ seems to these critics to be a more constructive way of dealing with their whiteness than simply withdrawing into a self-destructive paralysis of white guilt. Indeed, as Pamela Caughie forcefully argues, these newer, *metaphorical* acts, where whites pass *as* black, exemplify a new and ethically progressive "minstrelsy" that is both like and unlike the older, *literal* form of blacks passing *for* white; for although both play on the *performative* nature of racial identity as something that must always be assumed—consciously or unconsciously—rather than being merely accepted as given, the former (metaphorical) passing does not affirm but rather deconstructs a binary racial logic. White teachers like Caughie who teach from a black perspective no less than white blues artists actively problematize their whiteness whenever they assume the voice of blacks.²⁰ This

¹⁷ Zack (1993): 31.

¹⁸ See Roediger (1991) and Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness* (London: Verso, 1994); bell hooks, "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination," in Frankenberg (1997) 165–79; and Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey, *Race Traitor* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

¹⁹ Tommy Lott, in "Du Bois on the Invention of Race," (reprinted in *Social Justice in a Diverse Society*, ed. Rita C. Manning and René Trujillo [Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1996], 109, n. 51) cites the example of the white rap group Young Black Teenagers "who explain their appropriation of this title (along with such tunes as 'Proud to be Black' and 'Daddy Kalled Me Niga Cause I liked to Rhyme') as an expression of their having grown up in a predominantly black youth culture in New York City."

²⁰ P. Caughie, *Passing and Pedagogy: The Dynamics of Responsibility* (Urbana, IL: The U of Illinois P, 1999). In discussing pop rock singer Michele Shocked's original idea to appear in blackface for the cover design of her album, *Arkansas Traveler*, Sandra Bernhard's impersonation of black female performers in her film *Without You I am Nothing*, and a group of Irish working-class musicians who identify themselves as the blacks of Dublin in the 1991 film *The Commitments*, Caughie has this to say about whites passing metaphorically as blacks: "Blackface is neither disguise nor simply impersonation but a performance that signifies the racially mixed origins of the music. The

“passing as” is not peculiar to racial identity but applies to class, gender, and virtually all features of role identity as enacted and performed (to borrow Judy Butler’s phrase).

Despite gesturing toward a postmodern solution to the problem of racial identity, Giroux resists the kind of deconstructive performance that Caughie recommends. He questions whether whites could legitimately renounce their whiteness and pass as black on the grounds that doing so merely conceals a ubiquitous system of privilege and racial socialization. The new minstrels in blackface that Caughie finds politically progressive appear, on Giroux’s account, to have co-opted the cultural achievements of blacks without having lived the authentic life of racial oppression that inspired their creation. The implication that racial identity is given by a definite origin or descent (or genealogy of experience), however, appears to evoke, once again, the very binary logic of racial thinking—white/black—and its underlying binary logic of metaphysical thinking—reality/appearance (real/mimed)—that Giroux ostensibly rejects.

Accepting without question the idea that “race will neither disappear, be wished out of existence, or become somehow irrelevant in the United States,” Giroux urges “whites . . . to learn to live with their Whiteness by rearticulating it in terms that help them to formulate what it means to develop viable political coalitions and social movements.” They must learn, in other words, “to engage in a critical pedagogy of self-formation that allows them to cross racial lines not in order to become Black”—that is, to “speak as” and “speak for” the “other” that Caughie’s pedagogy of passing would require them to do—“but to forge multi-racial coalitions based on a critical engagement with rather than a denial of [their] ‘Whiteness’.” Ultimately, “[b]y rearticulating Whiteness as more than a form of domination, White students can construct narratives of Whiteness that both challenge and, hopefully, provide a basis for transforming the dominant relationships between racial identity and citizenship, a relationship formed by an oppositional politics.”²¹

whiteness on display in these performances is every bit as much a mask, a cultural construction, as the blackness it would seem to appropriate, not the origin(al), and certainly no immaculate conception. In performing this music, there is no way to remove the mask, Shocked would seem to suggest, no matter how politically correct that gesture may seem, for the impersonation is, if not the “real thing,” then at least what performers, white and black, in this tradition must always negotiate in any effort to represent the real thing. The miscegenated history that Shocked’s blackface would seem to signify positions writers and performers alike complexly, even uncomfortably, in relation to those we identify as or with in our cultural productions. That history calls into question the belief that we can get beyond or beneath the commodified image to the real thing—a belief that always entails a disavowal of the mask, the performance itself” (16–17).

²¹ Giroux (1997): 299–300.

Giroux concedes that there are obvious obstacles to this project. Reconstructing whiteness within the register of multicultural “identity politics” threatens to reify both ethnicity and race in ways that perpetuate racism. To begin with, “identity politics” itself has sometimes been construed—even by some of its staunchest defenders—as a way in which supposedly insular, biologically determined ethnic groups fight to preserve the rightful recognition of their respective cultural identities as pure and unique. But if ethnicity is conceived this way, as racially determined, no antiracist advantage can come from reconstructing whiteness as ethnicity.

Furthermore, reconstructing whiteness as ethnicity conceals fundamental historical differences in the way in which racial groups and ethnic immigrant groups have been treated.²² Only in the last 40 years or so has “ethnicity” been widely used in a more generic sense to refer to cultural groups in general, including African-Americans and Native Americans, whose histories are vastly different from American immigrant and national groups. As racial minorities who suffered unique forms of dehumanization, African-Americans and Native Americans were only belatedly encouraged to assimilate into mainstream white society. Indeed, while European immigrant groups often lived in separate communities, their skin pigmentation made it easier for them to cross over to the “white” side of the color line; unburdened by the legacy of slavery and possessing full-fledged European ancestry, they eventually escaped the harshest effects of the American race system. By the end of World War II, Jews and Asian-Americans had also managed to cross the race barrier, despite the fact that they continued to be stereotyped in quasi-racial ways.²³ Thanks to the “one-drop rule,” persons in the United States

²² Although there are no conceptual differences between ethnicity and race when viewed from the standpoint of folk psychology, there are considerable differences between ethnic groups and racial groups within the American context. Historically, the concept of ethnicity first emerged in the writings of American sociologists during the thirties to describe the different populations that immigrated from Eastern and Southern Europe to the United States around the turn of the century—populations that we commonly associate with such hyphenate expressions as Italian-American, Polish-American, and so on. The concept was later used by historians to describe the European nationalist movements of the 19th and 20th centuries. Accordingly, this use of the concept was extended to include irredentist groups—such as the German-speaking communities living in France, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia, whose presence threatened the European balance of power during the thirties—and to other oppressed and disaffected subcultures and sub-nationalities, including today’s Tamals (Indonesia), Kurds (Turkey and Iraq), Chechens (Russia), Hutus and Tutsis (Rwanda), and Serbs, Croats, Albanians, and Bosnian Muslims (former Yugoslavia).

²³ See Manning Marable, “We Need a New and Critical Study of Race and Ethnicity,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 46, no. 25 (2000): 134–37.

were generally classified as either white or black.²⁴ Although ethnic immigrant groups were often regarded by Americans of Anglo-Saxon and Nordic descent as racially and culturally different and inferior, it was but a distinction of degree. Being not black—and therefore somewhat white—they did not suffer the extreme and qualitatively unique forms of legal oppression and discrimination suffered by Blacks. Not only did ethnic immigrants distinguish themselves from Blacks, but they even aspired to whiteness and, in due time and for the most part, were accepted this way by whites themselves.²⁵

Conflating Blacks with ethnic immigrants makes it easy to blame the former for not having succeeded like the latter. More importantly for our purposes, it obscures the way in which ethnic self-identification was and still continues to be a way of expressing white separatism and supremacy. Giroux himself notes this

²⁴ The one-drop rule continues to function in the official census counting of minorities. 2000 census forms and other documents requesting information about racial membership indiscriminately list cultural and geographical categories, such as Asian Indian, Chinese, and Native Hawaiian, alongside racial categories such as African-American/Black/Negro and White. Although the new Census 2000 forms seem to jettison older, essentialist conceptions of race and ethnic identity—persons will now be permitted to identify themselves in accordance with more than one racial category (up to six) and either Hispanic or not-Hispanic, thereby generating 126 combinations—the very fact that those who identify themselves as both “white” and “non-white” in accordance with one or more minority categories will still be counted as “minorities” shows that the old one-drop rule has not been jettisoned. Interestingly, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and other major civil rights organizations advocated retaining separate racial and ethnic categories using this rule—against the inclusion of a “multiracial” or “mixed race” category. Persons declaring themselves multiracial, they feared, would not have been counted as minorities, and this, in turn, would have led to a reduction in funding for civil rights enforcement and social benefits targeting minorities as well as in a reduction of minority-designated legislative districts. Although a preliminary study conducted by the Census Bureau showed that very few respondents select more than one racial category once Latinos are *not* identified as a distinct racial group, the fact that children of interracial families have grown from fewer than one and a half million in 1970 to about two million in 1990 (not counting mixed couplings involving Latinos) suggests that persons’ preferences for some kind of multiracial self-identification will increase. Disregarding the treatment of Hispanics as a separate ethnic group rather than as a racial group (a policy first implemented in 1972), the method of counting proposed by the Clinton administration and favored by the NAACP will continue to reinforce the old racial (and racist) asymmetry that views being “white” as a privileged—pure, undiluted, and untainted—racial identification in comparison to other racial identifications. Besides potentially inflating the number of minority totals beyond the number of people who actually exist—people might be counted more than once for each race they select—the new census form is sure to generate competition between different minorities seeking to claim higher numbers for themselves.

²⁵ See Ignatiev (1995). Despite the many refinements introduced into the global system of race classification, which was strikingly dichotomous (European/non-European; white/black), different sub-categories of European descent did not escape stigmatization as “black”—at least not entirely. Not only the Irish, but Slavs, Mediterraneans, and Jews were viewed as darker than racially superior Anglo-Saxons and Nordics.

very danger; yet he seems less vigilant in guarding against another danger: Whiteness qua ethnicity again renders whiteness qua racial privilege invisible.

In a multicultural politics of identity, it might seem that whiteness would assume its rightful place as a culture deserving as much respect as any other. But this is not the sort of multicultural politics Giroux has in mind. What he seeks is a way of framing “attachments and identifications” (including those associated with whiteness) that suspends blanket judgments regarding their goodness or badness, racial innocence or racist complicity.²⁶ With a nod toward Foucauldian genealogy and postmodern deconstruction, he wants to affirm both sides of this dichotomy. As he puts it: “While it is imperative that a critical analysis of Whiteness address its historical legacy and existing complicity with racist exclusion and oppression, it is equally crucial that such a work distinguish between Whiteness as a racial identity that is nonracist or antiracist and those aspects of Whiteness that are racist.”²⁷ The question remains whether this can be done.

II. GIROUX’S DEFENSE OF WHITENESS AS A NEW ETHNICITY: FOUR THESES

The permanency of racial identity: Giroux’s argument in support of a nonracist conception of whiteness rests on a number of questionable premises, including the following:

- (a) Racial identities are permanent (naturalist thesis).
- (b) If it is legitimate for oppressed racial and ethnic minorities to affirm their respective racial and ethnic identities, then it must be legitimate for whites to do so as well (symmetry thesis).
- (c) A legitimately affirmed racial identity must be affirmed as socially constructed, contextually positioned, fluid, heterogeneous, open-ended, and nonexclusionary (postmodern thesis).
- (d) A legitimately affirmed racial identity has the same status as a legitimately affirmed ethnic identity; it refers principally to a nexus of overlapping cultural and experiential aspects (reductionist thesis).

In my opinion, (a), (b), and (d) are highly questionable, if not false; (c) is true—it contradicts the naturalism of (a)—but is nonetheless misleading, since postmodern characterizations of subject positions render talk of “identities” highly suspect.

²⁶ Giroux (1997): 299.

²⁷ *Ibid.*: 300.

Regarding (a), Giroux offers no defense of the permanency of racial identities in the U.S. Indeed, because he acknowledges their historical specificity, it is surprising to find him affirming their permanency. In order to assess this claim, we must first distinguish the question of permanency from that of desirability. Given their dubious ontological and moral pedigree, it would be difficult to show the desirability of racial identities. Only if racial identities could be reconstructed as ethnic constructions, and only if these, in turn, could be reconstructed as new ethnicities, might it be argued that racial identities are desirable. Even then, the plausibility of the argument would depend on other questionable assumptions, for instance, that ethnic pluralism is necessary for cultural pluralism, and that cultural pluralism is necessary for human flourishing (which is intrinsically desirable).

I will return to the question of ethnicity and cultural diversity at the conclusion of my paper. Since the desirability of racial reconstructions hinges on the plausibility of (d), I will here limit my discussion to the question of permanency. Now, there are two possible ways to interpret the permanency thesis. First, it might mean that racial reconstructions are so deeply embedded in the social fabric of current American society that they are not likely to disappear soon, although they might do so eventually. Second and more strongly, it might mean that racial constructions are in some sense natural—either “hard-wired” into the brain (perhaps as the result of natural selection) or at least based upon modes of cognition that are virtually universal to all human society. The former view, defended by Pierre van den Berghe and Lucius Outlaw, holds that group solidarities based on physical and cultural differences have an anthropological basis.²⁸ Although both insist that biologically based constructions of race are historically specific, they argue that identification with specific groups secures bonds of trust necessary for cooperation and survival. Furthermore, Outlaw notes that individuals like to see their own physical and cultural likeness duplicated in their offspring—a possibility whose likelihood is increased to the degree that their mates resemble them in the relevant respects.²⁹

The evidence supporting Outlaw’s argument for the permanency of group solidarities constructed on the basis of physical and cultural similarities is weak. Even if it were true that cultural and physical similarities functioned as principal loci for group solidarities in the past, it is not necessary that they continue to do so in the future. Indeed, the insularity of racial and ethnic groups seems to be declining, due in part to the loosening of traditional prejudices and forms of insular bonding. In the United States, this factor has combined with multiracial

²⁸ Lucius Outlaw, “On Race and Philosophy,” *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 18, no. 2 (1995): 175–99 (esp. 179); and Pierre Van den Berghe, *The Ethnic Phenomenon* (Elsevier, 1981).

²⁹ Outlaw (1995): 192.

and multiethnic immigration to increase the overall percentage of interracial and interethnic couplings—itself a significant counter-indication of the sort of psychological identification alluded to by Outlaw.³⁰

The second view, defended by Lawrence Hirschfeld, accommodates the fact of interracial mixing better, partly because it makes no sociobiological claim about persons' "natural" predispositions to bond with people like themselves.³¹ Hirschfeld's claim is more modest, namely, that the propensity toward categorizing people into racial groups, although not innate or natural, builds on ways of understanding human groups that are common to virtually all human societies.³²

Race, I have repeated several times, is not a "natural" category of the mind. Human kinds are natural categories of the mind, in the sense that the mind is prepared to find them with little or no external encouragement. Moreover, I have proposed that human kinds predicated on intrinsicity are a category of the mind which human beings are prepared to hold. The notion of race is the outcome, the consequence, of this preparedness as it makes contact with contexts in which complex relations of power and authority are played out on the group level. An appreciation of this complex and contingent relationship between mind architecture and power politics follows from appreciation of the singular and recurrent ways racial cognitions develop across time and across cultural contexts.³³

According to Hirschfeld, folk psychological tendencies to form group stereotypes are propelled by a kind of cognitive economy, or unconscious simplification of expectations regarding persons. The average person in any society typically operates with relatively fixed expectations regarding gender, age, class, status, and so on. When raised in an environment in which social relations are structured by race (physical differences correlated with status and class hierarchy) children as

³⁰ It is estimated that 70–80% of American blacks have some white ancestry. While the U.S. census data for 1991 suggest that 2% of all marriages are mixed race, the same data for 2000 show that 2.4% of all respondents (about 6.8 million of the nation's 281.4 million people) claimed more than one racial descent. This response underrepresents the true extent of racial mixing, since only 4.8% of blacks and only 2.5% of whites claimed more than one race. This is further confirmed by the fact that, although 48% of Hispanics listed themselves as white, only 1.2% listed themselves as American Indian, and only 2% percent listed themselves as black (42.2% designated that they were of "some other race," with many writing in Hispanic as a race). These statistics were reported in the *Chicago Tribune's* main cover story for Tuesday, March 13, 2001.

³¹ Hirschfeld (1996): 80–81.

³² As Hirschfeld (1996, 192) notes, "[l]earning to use kinship terms (by learning who is and who is not a member of one's family), culturally appropriate forms of politesse (in knowing one's own and others' status-group membership), and even mastery of language itself (in which awareness of human collectivities based on gender, relative age, or degree of familiarity between speakers is necessary to selecting the appropriate syntactic or lexical form), all rest on an ability to distinguish and label human groups."

³³ Hirschfeld (1996): 189.

young as 3 years of age will quite readily classify persons in accordance with racial stereotypes. Hirschfeld himself repeatedly stresses the stereotypical nature of these classifications, for they presuppose that physical characteristics are immutable, distinct, and heritable in a manner that has no basis in perceived reality.³⁴

Important for our purposes is Hirschfeld's conclusion that racial thinking is a culturally conditioned opportunistic instantiation of—and therefore not equivalent to—a quasi-natural cognitive predisposition. Furthermore, however universal the cognitive predisposition underlying naturalizing folk psychology, it is a disposition that can be exposed, criticized, and resisted on philosophical and scientific grounds. To be sure, essentialist racial and ethnic identifications continue to thrive in contexts marked by racial/ethnic mixing. For example, in the U.S. most offspring of mixed white/black parentage continue to identify themselves as black, while in countries where mixing has become generalized and commonplace throughout the population, such as in Brazil, offspring racially identify themselves in more complex ways. But the evidence—from recent U.S. census data and elsewhere—suggests that essentialist ascriptions are on the wane.

In sum, neither of the two ways in which the permanency thesis is formulated supports the view that racial identities are a permanent feature of the human landscape. Moreover, there is no evidence supporting the view that people are compelled by nature to group themselves into racial and ethnic solidarities based on physical and cultural similarities. Although young children living in

³⁴ Hirschfeld's experiments with children strongly suggest that, far from producing an inductive basis for category generalization, children's perceptions of racial difference are created out of a socially conditioned, quasi-theoretical understanding of race, conceived in terms of an abstract, nonperceptible principle of immutability, heritability, and intrinsic essentiality. If so, children's conceptual awareness of group differences precedes their visual discrimination of group attributes (thus, young children often express uncertainty about what physical attributes—hair color, skin color, etc.—determine their racial categorizations [Hirschfeld, 1996, 138]). Only with regard to their relative incapacity to integrate racial concept and physical percept—and not with regard to their implicit understanding of folk principles of racial classification—do young children differ from adults. The fact that young children seem to distinguish skin color as being more intrinsic to identity than other heritable features, such as hair color and body build—even if they are unable to articulate this distinction as part of their theory (children who seem to be guided in their identifications by skin color will sometimes cite hair color or some other attribute in making their judgement)—shows that race is “theorized” by them in ways that are not reducible to simple reasoning about biology or observed similarities and dissimilarities between individuals. Indeed, As Hirschfeld argues, racial categories follow a logic that is highly “domain specific,” and quite distinctive from the cognitive logic by which animal and plant species categories are generated (that latter form of categorizing reflects a folk logic that is still much more closely tied to environmental and perceptual cues than racial thinking, despite its unscientific oversimplification and “essentializing” of natural kinds [Hirschfeld, 1996, 183–85]).

racially divided societies come to do so “naturally,” thereby perpetuating an oppressive form of racial stereotyping, they do not yet interact differently with persons classified as racially different. The disposition to discriminate against persons of other races is the product of a later and less ubiquitous form of racist acculturation.³⁵

III. RACIAL (A)SYMMETRIES: WHITE AND BLACK CONTRASTS

The second premise (b) in Giroux’s argument bears more directly on his conclusion, which in some respects actually contradicts the naturalism of the first (a). Giroux argues that, if progressive whites are to be allowed to have a white identity, then it must be an identity that is nonracist and nonessentialist. Excluded from this thesis is the possibility (evoked by hooks and Ignatiev) that whites can reject or betray their whiteness in favor of identifying themselves as black, brown, or simply nonwhite.

In one sense, Giroux’s exclusion of these options is partly correct. If racial systems are part of a publicly recognizable institutional fact, then it is not entirely up to me to determine how I am classified and identified. But then, racial systems are never so well-formed as to be fully determinate for all persons (cf n. 3). To the degree that such systems invoke conflicting criteria of racial identification, and to the degree that these criteria are ambiguous in meaning and vague in application, they become less determinate in particular cases. Perhaps not so long ago the infamous “one-drop” rule functioned in the U.S. to determine one’s racial identity in terms of a relatively simple binary scheme (black or white). But today

³⁵ It is a large question how much children’s understanding of race directly reflects adult understanding. In a society like the U.S. where ambiguities in racial identification are not tolerated (a direct outcome of the one-drop rule and its 19th-century antecedents that proved so indispensable to 19th-century slaveholders in reproducing their slave holdings), children learn that race is not mixable, and that offspring of interracial couples are unequivocally assigned race in accordance with the principle of hypo-descent (Hirschfeld, 1996, 195). However, children’s understanding of race differs from adult’s understanding in being less aware of the importance of distinctive physical attributes (cf. n. 34); and very young children are likely to view occupational status as no less intrinsic to identity than race (in one of Hirschfeld’s experiments involving 3-year olds, occupation was chosen 40% of the time in comparison to 45% for race in transitive orderings factoring in body build as a third dimension of comparison); although here we see, once again, the role of culture impacting children’s expectations, since it is men, not women, whose occupational status children regard as essential) (Hirschfeld, 106). In yet another experiment, cultural environment is shown to have an additional impact on the capacity of older children to cognize persons of mixed racial blend; whereas 75% of fifth and sixth graders attending a largely all-white school located in a largely all-white community held a version of the one-drop rule, about an equal percentage of children attending an integrated school located in an integrated community rejected it (Hirschfeld, 1996, 168–69, 178–79).

that rule has weakened somewhat,³⁶ and others based on some loose combination of factors (physical appearance, cultural habits, ancestry, etc.) have gained increasing hold. The weakening of determining criteria has not only complicated the old binary scheme by introducing new multiracial identifications, but these, in turn, have encouraged those whose racial identity is complex to view it as something that is less objectively ascribed than subjectively chosen.

What Giroux means by racial identity is not to be confused with a classification imposed upon persons—often against their will—by an objective racial system. What he means by racial identity is rather the way in which one subjectively—and increasingly, deliberately—identifies oneself. Taken in this latter sense, racial identity is not institutionally preordained; it is perfectly possible and reasonable for white individuals to reject the classificatory scheme that determines their racial identity in public and institutional settings, by expressly identifying themselves as nonwhite. Furthermore, even if racial identity is difficult to sustain in ways that contradict socially recognized schemes of racial identification, persons who feel that they fall through the cracks of America's biracial system will insist that they have greater freedom to reject a simple racial designation in favor of identifying themselves as racially complex, or mixed.³⁷

Giroux himself seems to concede that “whiteness” is not the only “racial” identity available to white individuals. His point, however, is that it *should* be available to them, perhaps in addition to the other options proposed by hooks, Ignatiev, and others. Why? Partly because he thinks that renouncing their whiteness by identifying themselves as nonwhite imposes grave psychological risks to their sense of self-worth that could feed into a white racist backlash. The risks are especially grave for those whites who wonder where they fit in with respect to today's identity politics. To the extent that racial and ethnic minorities continue to engage in an exclusionist identity politics that positions whites as oppressors and outsiders, whites will find it difficult to identify with such minorities. Finding it difficult to identify with them, they will either retreat into a state of self-loathing and guilt—renouncing their whiteness without the comfort of optional identifications—or react against their positioning as oppressors by reasserting their whiteness in a racially insensitive (if not blatantly racist) manner.

³⁶ But traces of the one-drop rule continue to influence the way children of mixed white/black parentage identify themselves and the way in which census data are counted (cf. n. 24 & 30). As recently as 1986, the Supreme Court let stand a ruling forcing a Louisiana woman who was 1/32 African-American to be declared legally black (cited in Teresa Wiltz, “Who Defines Race?” in the *Chicago Tribune*, [Feb. 26, 1996], sec. 4, p. 1). On the Phipps case, see F. James Davis, *Who Is Black? One Nation's Definition* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1991).

³⁷ Zack (1993): 143.

Giroux's symmetry thesis thus boils down to the idea that if it is acceptable for minorities to engage in identity politics and thus acceptable for them to affirm their racial and ethnic identities in the cause of antiracism, then the same opportunity should not be denied antiracist whites. Significantly, Giroux understands this thesis as a counter-response to the kind of symmetry thesis often advanced by liberals who attack identity politics. The liberal version of the symmetry thesis states that, because racial identifications are immoral (and would not exist in an ideal world composed of individuals who recognize one another as free and equal), it is just as wrong for minorities to appeal to them as it is for whites. Thus, according to this thesis, affirmative action preferences are nothing more than "reverse discrimination."

The liberal symmetry thesis insists that the color- and difference-blind treatment of individuals that would obtain in an ideally just society be instituted now, in total disregard for the way in which the current system of white, male privilege continues to discriminate against women and nonwhites. Insisting that people be treated exactly the same way who are in fact positioned differently with respect to racial discrimination, however, is a recipe for unjust—and unequal—treatment. Giroux himself concedes as much. Hence, his symmetry thesis does not insist on sameness of treatment for whites and nonwhites across the board, but only with respect to the possibility of having a positive, antiracist racial identity.

It seems to me that Giroux fails to appreciate how deeply asymmetries in racial positioning render even his own symmetry thesis problematic. Regardless of what one thinks about the legitimacy (or lack thereof) of subjective racial identifications in an ideal world, they are (at least arguably) legitimate for nonwhites struggling to combat the current regime of white privilege. Racial identification on the part of African-Americans and other oppressed racial minorities is an important means for counteracting self-defeating racial stereotypes. It is all the more so when the racial identification in question is purged of any essentialist and deterministic connotations, as no less a defender of racial identity as Du Bois himself noted.³⁸

Even when the racial identification in question is not so enlightened, it might still reflect a legitimate response to negative racial stereotypes. Indeed, I would

³⁸ Nowhere is Du Bois's nonessentialism more apparent than in his later assertion that "the actual ties of heritage between the individuals of [American blacks] vary with the ancestors that they have in common with many others: Europeans and Semites, perhaps Mongolians, certainly Marican Indians. But the physical bond is least and the badge of color relatively unimportant save as a badge; the real essence of this kinship is its social heritage of slavery; the discrimination and insult; and this heritage binds together not simply the children of Africa, but extends through yellow Asia and into the South seas." See W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (Milwood, NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1940/1975). For a good discussion of the debate surrounding Du Bois's views regarding the conservation of race, see Lott (1996).

go so far as to say that the reverse racism advanced by some Black Nationalists is—however deplorable—partly excusable as a nonaggressive, purely defensive reaction to white racism. The white supremacist’s claim that his racism is just as defensive and excusable neglects, once again, the basic asymmetry between whites and nonwhites. White racism more often elicits aggressive behavior on the part of its adherents than does black racism; and even when it does not, the “defensive” mode in which it is expressed carries the weight of a backlash threat that is far greater than any danger posed to whites by black racism, given the overwhelming economic, social, and political domination whites currently exercise over blacks.

In sum, systemic racial asymmetries provide oppressed racial minorities with more compelling reasons (moral as well as psychological) for embracing a positive racial identity. There simply exists no equivalent motivation for whites, misplaced feelings of victimization notwithstanding. But perhaps there is a different, but no less legitimate, motivation. Leaving aside the questionable view that whites are psychologically compelled to identify racially on pain of denying some natural impulse, one might argue, following Giroux, that the emergence of a narrow kind of identity politics has made it imperative that sympathetic whites refashion their racial identity in some positive way. Without such an identity, Giroux fears, sympathetic whites will simply position themselves as the enemy; helpless to alter the fact of their privilege, they will withdraw into feelings of guilt and self-abnegation. Aside from the moral dubiousness of such feelings, which stem entirely from a social positioning that is beyond one’s control, Giroux raises the discomfiting thought of sympathetic white spectators looking at the struggle against racism from the outside, as it were, without a positive identity that might enable them to politically engage their minority brothers and sisters in antiracist struggle.

Why does Giroux think that sympathetic whites will be incapable of connecting with their minority brothers and sisters unless they do so on the basis of a positive white identity? Far from explaining why, his own pronouncements on the matter rather suggest other alternatives. If we assume that the kind of identity politics that Giroux finds acceptable is carried on under the banner of inclusive and open, rather than exclusive and closed, ethnic identities, then there is no problem with whites identifying with minorities rather than with their own whiteness—although this identification would have to be negotiated with selected members of the minority in question on a case by case basis (see below). Or—to take a different tack—perhaps all that is necessary in order for whites to engage in sympathetic antiracist struggle is a deep understanding of their racial positioning, including an understanding of the complex genealogy of the racial system in which that positioning occurs. In that case, whites can understand that the system positions them as white, without identifying with whiteness as such.

As for addressing the problem of white guilt, educators need to point out to their white students that they are not responsible for creating the system of white racial privilege. Of course, feelings of guilt should accompany racist acts and other moral boundary violations; and feelings of personal shame should accompany our failure to interrupt racists acts and perhaps also our failure to resist racial privilege by not actively supporting affirmative action and other similar policies. Beyond that, we as Americans should all feel collective shame for the enormous gap that exists between our nation's professed ideals of equal respect for all and our current laws, practices, and institutions.

I have argued that antiracist pedagogy need not (and should not) play on white students' guilt about being white. Indeed, in struggling against racism there are many positive nonracial identities whites can embrace—religious, secular humanist, and civic patriotic. However, before leaving the topic of racial symmetry, it would behoove us to look at another example of how some whites have sought to cultivate a positive racial identity through the formation of American European clubs on junior high and high school campuses. Although I suspect that the formation of many if not most American European clubs reflects a white backlash against the formation of Asian-American, Latin American, and African-American ethnic clubs,³⁹ I concede their legitimacy as a possible venue for exploring European languages and cultures. Be that as it may, there remains an important difference between these clubs and their Asian-American, Latin

³⁹ In his book *Ethnic Identity* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1990), Richard Alba notes that we are now witnessing the emergence of a new ethnic group: "one based on ancestry from anywhere on the European continent" (3). Reviewing census data, Alba shows that by 1950 European ethnicity ceased to have a significant bearing on educational attainment and socioeconomic status. The meaning of ethnicity for persons of European descent has thus been transformed into something purely symbolic: an optional identity in which one can choose to participate; a genealogical concern, or an aesthetic experience shared across ethnic lines (eating ethnic foods, attending ethnic festivals, etc.). Significantly, Alba sharply distinguishes European ethnic groups from their Asian, Latin American, and African-American counterparts. European Americans intermarry freely but marry non-Europeans much less often; and (most importantly), they define their own symbolic ethnic identity in reaction to what they perceive to be the inability of Asians, Hispanics, and African-Americans to detach their ethnic identities from educational and socioeconomic deprivation. The new ethnic mythology invented by them—which obscures significant differences among the experiences of various European immigrant groups—is summarized by Alba accordingly: "Our [European ethnic] groups too faced prejudice and discrimination; we haven't made it to the top of American society, either, as is shown by our sparse representation at elite levels; and it is not fair to change the rules in midstream" (317). In short, the new mythology that constitutes the core of an emergent symbolic European ethnic identity over generalizes one ethnic paradigm to the point where the peculiar evils of America's racial system, especially as it bears on the fates of African-Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanics, is simply ignored. Thus, although race and ethnicity are indistinguishable as perceived from the standpoint of folk psychology, in the U.S. these categories refer to distinct (if overlapping) paradigms of social order.

American, and African-American counterparts, which relates to my earlier discussion regarding the asymmetry between whites and nonwhites.

It is tempting to think of American European clubs as symmetrical with these other ethnic clubs. After all, if cultural immersion alone is what these clubs are about, and all cultures are worthy of equal respect, then what goes for one club should go for all of them. Things look more complicated, however, once we understand that the members of Asian-American, Latin American, and African-American ethnic clubs are typically members of ethnic groups that have experienced—and more importantly, continue to experience—racial discrimination.

If my analysis of the asymmetry between racial identities is correct, then it follows that what might go for Asian-American, Latin American, and African-American clubs might not go for American European clubs. To begin with, members of ethnic minorities that face continued racial discrimination might be expected to have a heightened sense of their racial identity. Hence, their legitimate concerns will include issues pertaining to this identity that go well beyond issues of culture. By contrast, a similar racial awareness is inappropriate for members of American European clubs. For while all exclusive identities are misleading fictions and, for that very reason, morally questionable, they are less questionable when held by those who have suffered discrimination because of them.

It is thus understandable that members of oppressed ethnic or racial minorities might exclude others (especially members of the oppressor group) from their club, if doing so facilitates the unconstrained formation of that club's political consciousness (the same rationale is available to women who exclude men from participating in rape-awareness events, spousal abuse counselling, and other consciousness-raising group activities). No comparable freedom should attend the membership policies of American European clubs. Of course, not so long ago many ethnic Europeans faced systematic racial discrimination, but today these same groups are positioned as "white" vis-a-vis many Asian-Americans, Latin Americans, and African-Americans (cf. n. 22 & 39). Because they lack a compelling nonracist reason for engaging in identity politics, American European clubs should function simply as cultural clubs and nothing more.

IV. THE MERETRICIOUS AND NONMERETRICIOUS CONFLATION OF RACE AND ETHNICITY IN FOLK PSYCHOLOGY

As I noted above, Giroux's belief that progressive whites should be given the opportunity to refashion a positive white identity mainly stems from his concern that, without such an identity, whites will be excluded from engaging in antiracist identity politics. However, the third premise of his argument (that a legitimately affirmed racial identity must be affirmed as socially constructed, contextually

positioned, fluid, heterogeneous, open-ended, and nonexclusionary) renders this concern null and void to the degree that it undermines the very notion of distinctive (exclusive) ethnic and racial identities. Once this thesis is embraced, identity politics becomes an oxymoron; and the conflict between mutually self-contained and opposed identities becomes a dialogue between multi-positioned individuals.

More radically, however, the thesis renders any concept of racial and ethnic identity problematic. In order to avoid any misunderstanding on this point, let me begin by noting that members of groups need not expressly identify themselves as sharing a distinct racial or ethnic identity. They may simply identify themselves as persons who happen to live together, do roughly the same things, or are treated by others in a certain way. Only when groups are confronted with other groups whom they view as significantly different from themselves do they create racial or ethnic in-group/out-group distinctions. More precisely, only when groups feel threatened by other groups (or set themselves over and against them) do they feel the need to justify their way of life to themselves. From this moment on, members of groups so challenged might begin to construct—consciously if not deliberately—one ethnic/racial/national identity for themselves and another for the other.⁴⁰

There is nothing inherent in the notion of a group identity that requires its transmissibility or heritability. Members of voluntary associations share an identity

⁴⁰ Among the many who have written at length on the socially constructed nature of national, ethnic, and racial identities, Immanuel Wallerstein and Etienne Balibar (*Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* [London: Verso, 1993]) have insisted on the crucial function these categories play in sustaining neoliberal global capitalism. In their opinion, racial classifications map onto the axial division of labor in the world economy, the core-periphery antinomy; the system of nations designates the political structure wherein governments compete at the interstate level on behalf of their own people; and ethnic groups specify subgroups and minorities whose occupational differences from one another—often a source of ethnic pride—can be used to legitimate social inequalities generated by the system (71–85). For a good discussion regarding the construction of ethnic identities in America, see Alba (1990), whose work I discuss in n. 39, and Eduardo Mendieta, “Becoming Citizens, Becoming Hispanics,” *The Good Citizen*, ed. David Batstone and Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Routledge, 1999), Suzanne Oboler, *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives: Identity and the Politics of (Re)presentation in the United States* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1995); and Linda Alcoff, “Latina/o Identity Politics,” in *The Good Citizen*, who point out that the label “Hispanic” corresponds to no national-ethnic identity. As they note, “Hispanic” (“Latino(a)”) first becomes a possible locus for group identification—as distinct from an oppressive stereotype—to the extent that Latin American immigrants possessing very different national identities begin to experience overlapping forms of discrimination (linguistic, racial, or religious), and thus come to see themselves as having common political interests. The same, of course, applies to persons classified (or self-identified) as African-American or Asian-American (cf. Lisa Lowe, “Imagining Los Angeles in the Production of Multiculturalism,” *Mapping Multiculturalism*, ed. Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996).

that is transmissible only through voluntary consent (between them and between prospective members). Nonetheless, members of ethnic and racial groups typically hold that their respective racial and ethnic identities are not a matter of choice, but are determined entirely by familial descent. More precisely, the commonly accepted view is that one might lose one's ethnic identity by ceasing to consciously identify with one's inherited ethnicity, but one could never acquire an ethnic identity of any sort save the one that corresponded to one's inherited ethnicity. To be sure, this deterministic view of ethnic identity is relaxed in some cases, depending on the group in question. Many aboriginal peoples do not regard biological descent as integral to their identity (adoption of outsiders into the tribe being rather common), but Orthodox Jews are generally loath to recognize non-Orthodox Jews as fully Jewish and are hesitant to recognize adopted non-Jews into the fold. Despite this variability, members of most ethnic groups probably believe that their birth parents' possession of the corresponding identity is a necessary condition for their possession of it as well. For example, an Irish American who decided to acculturate himself into Polish culture in a way that rendered him virtually indistinguishable from one who had been brought up in that culture would *not* normally be characterized as ethnically Polish. And yet there are more problematic cases that render this presumption premature. If our Irish American had been adopted at birth by Polish immigrants and acquired his Polish acculturation that way, it would seem odd to describe him as Irish American. This oddness suggests that neither the biological nor the geographical origin of one's birth parents is essential to determining one's ethnic classification. If our Irish American eventually became aware of his birth parents, he might wish to claim an Irish American identity, and that in turn might influence how others chose to classify him. But if he claimed a Polish American identity, others would likely accede to that claim as well.

I don't wish to over generalize this case of ethnic classification and identification. If our Irish American had African ancestry, the peculiarities of the one-drop rule might incline others to classify him as black (or African-American) regardless of his own preferences to the contrary, although given the peculiar politics of identity surrounding race relations in this country, he might also come to consciously embrace that identity as an expression of solidarity with blacks.⁴¹ The interesting question is how far one's own preferences can determine how one is

⁴¹ Why this self-identification shouldn't become criterial for social classification as well escapes me, although the political implications for generalizing such a determination over all cases would have to be addressed. Allowing whites to classify themselves as black and blacks to classify themselves as white would endanger affirmative action, racial redistricting, and other group-based policies that benefit blacks (although if a significant number of whites began to identify themselves as black on census forms, more resources might be targeted to blacks).

classified by others. In the above example, it might seem that being raised by Polish American parents determines the Polish American identity of the adopted child, which in turn constrains others to classify him accordingly. But what difference should being raised Polish by ethnic Poles have to do with one's ethnic identity? What's decisive about ethnic identity is conscious identification with a particular cultural group and its language; the manner of acquiring the identification seems utterly irrelevant.⁴²

I mention this hypothetical case because, if one accepts Giroux's thesis that a positive, antiracist conception of white identity must be understood as an ethnic identity, then there is no reason in principle why any racial identity could not be as voluntarily acquired as any ethnic identity. If we balk at accepting this idea, it is because most philosophers and cultural anthropologists have thought it useful to draw a sharp conceptual boundary between race and ethnicity, with the former referring to somatic features and the latter referring to cultural traits. But this fact alone does not speak against the voluntary acquisition of racial identity. Although somatic traits have an unalterable genetic source, they themselves can be altered through cosmetic surgery, and can be altered even more quickly and easily than can cultural traits.

Giroux's argument, however, suggests a more tantalizing way of conceiving the voluntary acquisition of racial identity, namely, in its suggestion that racial identity can be reconceived ethnically. Leaving aside the dangers that this reconceptualization poses—witness, once again, the mischief caused by confusing descendants of African slaves with ethnic (immigrant) nationalities and the equally bad policy that comes with equating antiracist struggles for racial inclusion with multicultural struggles for cultural autonomy—there remains a perfectly legitimate sense in which race and ethnicity are indistinguishable.⁴³ Ethnicity is

⁴² Studies conducted by France WinddanceTwine ("Brown-Skinned White Girls: Class, Culture, and the Constitution of White Identity in Suburban Communities," in Frankenberg [1997] 214–43) involving young girls of mixed, black/white parentage growing up in predominantly affluent, white suburbs confirms that racial identity shifts in ways that are neither entirely voluntary nor externally imposed. Prior to puberty these girls were treated no differently than their peers, and were encouraged by their parents and others to identify themselves as white—or rather, as racially neutral in a homogeneous culture of middle-class consumption and group-detached individualism. Only with the onset of puberty and the experience of discriminatory dating and mating rituals did these girls begin to experience their racial difference as not fully white. For many, this experience was heightened once they began to attend colleges with sizable black student populations. There, peer pressure combined with growing awareness of racial identity politics led many of them to self-consciously identify themselves as black for the first time in their lives—much to the consternation of their parents.

⁴³ The convergence of race and ethnicity in folk psychology is already implied in the derivation of *race* from the Latin *ratio*, which means, among other things, "chronological order," or *radix*, which refers to lines of descent. Originally applied to animal breeds, the term *race* was not used

traditionally understood by folk psychology in a racial way, as consisting partly of physical traits that are passed down from birth parent to child (hence the racial depiction of Jews, Italians, Irish, and other immigrant nationalities in American folk ethnography); conversely, race is traditionally understood ethnically, as consisting partly of cultural folkways. Indeed, to recall Hirschfeld's theory of racial cognition, what is common to both ethnicity and race in American folk ethnography is the idea of a relatively permanent nature that is inherited.⁴⁴

Although this idea is false to the degree that it allows no exception to the inheritance rule and, what's worse, views not only somatic features but both culture and race as determined by something intrinsic (biology, for instance), it is not false to the extent that it captures the *common* core underlying the *cognition* of

to designate human types until the beginning of the 17th century. Hence, although race is a fairly modern concept, its ancient roots converge with notions of cultural difference, economic caste and familial descent. The nobleman's concern about guaranteeing the "purity" and legitimacy of his blood line later resonated in the 19th-century bourgeois' fear about intermingling with members of the working class (British prime minister Disraeli once characterized the middle and lower classes as "two nations" that were "bred by a different breeding") and in Jim Crow antimiscegenation laws designed to maintain racial caste. Likewise, older, hierarchical distinctions between cultural in-groups and out-groups (e.g., between those classified as "true believers" and those classified as "heathens") supported the unequal treatment of "inferior" Indians and Africans by their Christian European "superiors."

Because the Indian and African could always convert, the peculiar economic exploitation to which they were subjected—which was similar to other caste systems in its rigid occupational hierarchies and restrictions on class mobility—needed a new, distinctly racial justification that, in effect, grafted these ethnocultural and economic class hierarchies onto older hierarchies of blood descent. In turn, these hierarchies were conveniently correlated with a fourth hierarchy of physical types that could render these former hierarchies visible and thus available for legal monitoring. By the 19th century, this racial scheme—which distinguished European from non-European—was superimposed on different European subnationalities, thereby generating new ideologies of national superiority. For further discussion of the genealogy of race and racism, see Memmi (2000), Zack (1993), Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France c. 1500–c. 1800* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1995) Jean-Louis Flandrin, *Families in Former Times: Kinship, Household, and Sexuality in Early Modern Times* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1979); Ann Stoler, "Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexuality in Twentieth Century Colonial Cultures," *American Ethnologist* 16 (1989): 634–60; and Ivan Hannaford, *Race. The History of an Idea in the West* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1996).

⁴⁴ Strictly speaking, if one were to designate a feature of race and ethnicity that is common to all folk ethnographies, it would be essentially rather than heritability or perhaps—as I've argued here—heritability that is capable of being modified by voluntary acts of geographical or cultural displacement. Seventeenth century French speculations about interracial contamination caused by breast feeding; 18th century worries about the racial degeneration of Europeans transplanted to the savage environment of North America (later repeated in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*); and the conversion of Jews and heathens via a miraculous (divinely mediated) transformation of their intrinsic nature all testify to the idea that naturalness of race and ethnicity is conceived in many ways, not all of which are biological (Hirschfeld, 1996, 48–50).

both race and ethnicity as *general* human categories based upon psychological *generalizations* about durable features, be they somatic or cultural. Now, if the folk psychological collapsing of ethnicity and race is legitimate in this qualified probabilistic form, then it can allow for some exceptions to the inheritance rule. And if that is so, then my hypothetical counterexample to the inheritance of ethnicity—showing that ethnicity can just as easily be a function of voluntary self-identification—could then also apply to race. Because ethnic identity (and ethnicity) is capable of being acquired rather than inherited, so is racial identity (and race). Anglo-American youth voluntarily identifying with African-American ethnic culture and voluntarily identifying themselves as black can be taken as partial confirmation of this.

If most Americans resist the idea that Anglo-Americans could be black, it is because they are beholden to the dominant understanding of race and ethnicity, which presumes that because both categories depend on inheritance rather than voluntary acculturation in order to be theorized and perceived, no single instance of racial and ethnic identity can be conceived as having been acquired in any other way. On this view, children born of Irish American parents who are adopted by Polish immigrants and acculturated into Polish culture remain Irish American, regardless of their identity. But this view is self-defeating. For by defining race and ethnicity in terms of origin, we end up with the result—given the common descent of the species out of Africa—that there is ultimately only one race (or, since races only make sense within a racial taxonomy, one species without subdivision). Attempts to avoid the implications of mono-descent by referring race and ethnicity to something other than endogenous origins—for instance, by defining them in terms of a more recent geographical locus of descent—end up denying these concepts the very intrinsic naturalness that folk psychology imputes to them.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ The pairing of commonly shared DNA signature traits with distinct ethn racial groups refutes the idea that different races and ethnicities descend from distinct and discrete geographically bounded communities. A recent case shows how different ethn racial groups scattered throughout Europe carry a common genetic signature trait traceable to a common origin in the Middle East. Dr. Daniel G. Bradley and colleagues at Trinity College in Dublin have developed evidence showing that the Irish men in Connaught are almost all descended from an ancestral population of hunter-gatherers that inhabited Ireland before the advent of agricultural peoples. The key evidence consists in an almost perfect correspondence between their ancient Irish surnames and a DNA signature that is carried on the Y chromosome, which is bequeathed unchanged from father to son. The first carriers of the ancestral DNA signature are estimated to have lived in Europe 30,000 years ago, principally congregating in Spain and then migrating northward, through Brittany, Ireland, and the west of Scotland as the glaciers retreated. Not surprisingly, the DNA signature displays a pronounced gradient across Europe, reflecting the degree of mixing between farming peoples migrating from the Near East beginning about 9,500 years ago and Europe's ancestral hunter-gatherer population. Thus, while 98% of the Connaught men carry the signature and 89% of the men in the

The postmodern condition, however, raises a deeper question about the very meaning of ethnic and racial identity when all that remains are multiple and individually elective points of identification. To appreciate the force of this question consider, once again, the way in which ethnicity is traditionally conceived in racial terms. For instance, consider the way in which white supremacists have caught on to the allure of identity politics and have begun to defend racial segregation on multicultural grounds. Despite their attempt to link whiteness to Anglo-American, European, or some other "ethnicity," it is clear that whiteness for them is essentially not a cultural phenomenon. Of course, Afrikaners living in Orania appeal to Dutch Afrikaner culture rather than race as grounds for demanding that their exclusive white community (including the contiguous strip of land that continues west along the Orange River) be declared a separate tribal homeland, on par with other tribal homelands that have been granted special cultural rights under the South African constitution. However, their resistance to a new political redistricting plan that amalgamates Orania with Hopetown and the nearby black community of Strydenburg shows that their appeal to cultural difference is disingenuous at several levels. First, many if not most of the black and colored inhabitants who live in these outlying regions speak Afrikaans and share the Afrikaner's Protestant work ethic as summarized in their new credo that "Our own labor makes us free." Yet these inhabitants continue to be harassed whenever they try to enter Orania. Second, the appeal to cultural difference is itself a racial appeal insofar as it is made on behalf of some essential, heritable identity that demarcates a rigid boundary separating in-groups from out-groups.

Interestingly, many persons who oppose the Oranians' white racism come dangerously close to buying into their logic of identity. Writing in *Race Traitor*, Christine Sleeter maintains that whiteness has come to mean "ravenous materialism, competitive individualism, and a way of living characterized by putting acquisition of possessions ahead of humanity." Although she herself concedes that "one need not be of European descent to participate in such a way of living," she still insists that "Black South Africans have difficulty learning white culture" because "it is a way of living that people of European descent constructed and sell, and one that we are persistently socialized to identify with and support."⁴⁶

Sleeter might be right that black South Africans have difficulty learning English and Dutch culture. Some black South Africans probably do resist this culture as

Basque country of Northern Spain carry it, only 2% of Turkish men carry it. This latter fact is telling, because the DNA signature in question dominates in groups whose ethnic identities are regarded as otherwise quite unrelated. *Chicago Tribune* (March 23, 2000), Sec. 1:7.

⁴⁶ This citation appears on page 22 of a version of Sleeter's article that was reprinted in *Lip* (Aug.-Sept., 1997) 18-22.

a colonial remnant. Others who want to learn it have difficulty doing so because of the residual racism of the Dutch and English. Finally, many—like most of us—simply have difficulty learning any new culture. In any case, if they are resisting it because they think that culture is not a part of their inherited identity, they might be in more agreement with the Oranians and their racial concept of culture than they would perhaps like to think. Also—ironically—in agreement with them might be Sleeter herself, who, despite her proper rejection of racial thinking, needs to explain how her own apparent equation of competitive individualism and materialism with white European culture implies that it would be wrong for black South Africans to betray their cultural identity by adopting the alien ways of the West.

We've come full circle. Perhaps the only way to erase all vestiges of racial thinking is to abandon the notion that cultures rest upon some ethnic identity or memory that gets passed down intact in some pure, uncontaminated form from generation to generation. For those who insist that they share an identity with others, we remind them that this identity can be nothing more than a loose overlapping of experiences, perspectives, beliefs, practices, and understandings. For those who insist that their identity is discovered rather than chosen, we remind them that acculturation is not something passively suffered but something remembered and as such, requires a continuous and active effort of inventive appropriation and interpretation. Finally, for those who insist that their identity is determined from without, by objective structures of classification and norms of public recognition, we remind them that determination by the other, however unavoidable, is domination when not undertaken voluntarily and mutually with the other, and like all domination, must be actively resisted.

V. WHITENESS AS CULTURE

So far I have argued that any attempt to resurrect a legitimate conception of ethnic identity must reject what is typically thought to be a necessary condition of having such an identity, namely (a) descent from one who already has the identity and (b) acculturation into a well-defined set of practices and beliefs that are impervious to individual variation. Ethnic identity, so construed, is simply shorthand for diverse, shifting subject positions, or individually tailored, contextually situated ways of appropriating from a relatively inexhaustible stock of beliefs, practices, and other modes of cultural understanding.

In his fourth thesis (d), Giroux proposes to reduce whiteness, understood as a kind of ethnic identity, to a similar stock of beliefs, practices, and modes of understanding. I argue, to the contrary, that it is misleading to think of whiteness in this way. Whiteness is not a culture, and thinking of it as such misleads us into imagining that it might be worthy of equal respect alongside other ethnic

cultures. If whiteness can be said to designate anything remotely like a culture (belief system, practice, or mode of understanding), it is one so intermeshed with a structure of domination as to be unworthy of respect and positive identification.

The concept of culture is doubtless vague. For the sake of simplicity I will take it to consist in any of the following: beliefs, practices, artifacts, languages, and modes of understanding. When Giroux speaks of whiteness as a new ethnic identity, we must understand him to mean an identity that revolves around one or more of these cultural constituents.

In what sense can whiteness be said to designate a set of beliefs? Persons classified as white do not, as a whole, share any beliefs that define them as a group. This condition, however, applies as well to persons classified as belonging to other ethnic and racial groups. Even ethnic groups that are closely identified with a religious affiliation (Jews for instance) are not characterized by uniform adherence to any defining beliefs (witness, for example, the case of Jewish atheists and Jewish born-again Christians). By contrast, peer groups often require that their members swear allegiance to specific creeds. Here, we find a sense in which whiteness does designate a group belief or attitude; namely, the belief in white superiority (or white victimization) that solidifies defensive, reactionary whites.

Perhaps Giroux might have better luck locating a nonracist concept of white culture in practices. Here again, the same difficulty that attended the equation of ethnicity with beliefs attends the equation of ethnicity and practices. Unless one defines practices very broadly to include linguistic practices, the equation fails. Even then, the capacity to speak a certain language can hardly be considered a necessary condition for identifying with an ethnic culture. Children born of Mexican immigrants and raised in English-speaking environments may speak only a little Spanish (much less than someone born of non-Spanish speaking parents who has studied the language), and yet identify strongly with other aspects of Mexican culture. Engaging in shared practices and rituals, however, is sometimes a necessary (and perhaps sufficient) condition for membership in certain peer groups. For instance, shunning minorities, uttering racist epithets, and acting on negative racial stereotypes is *de rigeur* among white racists.

Although it might be appropriate to speak of whiteness as designating the set of racist beliefs and practices held by white racists, such a limited conception of "white culture" seems far removed from what Giroux intends by whiteness, understood as an ethnic category ascribable to whites as a whole, including non-racist whites. In speaking of whiteness as an ethnic category, Giroux seems to have in mind a more elusive conception of culture: that of a mode of understanding. A mode of understanding encapsulates many things: a subconscious yet an omnipresent way of perceiving and interpreting the world; a set of taken-for-granted norms that often insinuates itself in the form of habits and reflexes rather than explicitly acknowledged rules; a tacit "know how" and practical familiarity

with things. Philosophers from Heidegger and Wittgenstein to Bourdieu and Foucault have typically conceived such a mode of understanding as a necessary condition for having any kind of experience at all. It constitutes the background set of assumptions, the framework of possible relationships, and the prior mapping of coordinates, in terms of which all our particular experiences and expectations of people and things are highlighted, foregrounded, and situated in a space of potential meaningfulness.

Ethnic cultures are often said to embody distinctive modes of understanding, typically characterized as ways of life or ways of being. Of course, once these ways of life are transposed to the postmodern register, they cease to designate perfectly uniform assumptions. As Hans-Georg Gadamer has so forcefully argued, our “horizons” of understanding are constantly open to new experiences and to fresh encounters with different horizons of understanding, whether we will it so or not. Moreover, because my horizon of experience is uniquely situated with respect to my immediate situation, my understanding of things will always be different from anyone else’s. That said, however, the fact that the situation and position I occupy has much in common with (or overlaps) others who have suffered the same experiences as I have means that my horizon of understanding will have much in common with theirs as well—so much so that we might, with appropriate qualification, talk about our sharing a common perspective or mode of understanding. In this respect, it is not stretching things to say that African-Americans growing up in a white supremacist society such as the United States share a common experience and perspective born of discrimination and oppression. As W.E.B. Du Bois remarked a century ago in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), who among black folk have not acquired a “double consciousness” of experiencing themselves and their world through the double lens of the oppressor and the oppressed?⁴⁷

If it makes sense to talk about a distinctive black perspective (suitably individualized and contextualized), then why not talk about a distinctive white perspective? If we are hesitant to do so, is it because whites as a group seem infinitely more diverse in their experience and acculturation than blacks? It might be argued that the existence of de jure and de facto segregation throughout the history of the black diaspora in North America has led to the emergence of distinctive African-American ethnic styles that have no obvious parallel in the case of whites, but this would be mistaken. Each European American ethnic group generated its own racial perspectives based upon its own racial experiences. These perspectives have gradually ceased to reflect differences in education and socioeconomic attainment between them; as European Americans assimilated, their

⁴⁷ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk in the Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1903/1997) 45.

former racial/ethnic consciousness receded. In its place has emerged a new European American identity (and sub-identities), motivated in part by an antiblack backlash, that centers around the myth that all “ethnic” groups face the same discrimination (cf. n. 39). Although this “identity” hardly designates a culture shared by all European Americans, it does designate a reactionary mode of understanding shared by many of them, as recent studies by Kinder and Sanders fully attest.⁴⁸

Because this new ethnic identity is not generally accepted by all European Americans, it cannot function as a locus of shared identity among them. Is there a mode of understanding that can? Perhaps. Complementary to the “double consciousness” informing blacks’ self-understanding is the “false consciousness” of persons who do not have to worry about being discriminated against because of their skin color, who can view the world around them as a sea of open opportunity and, because of their privileged position, can universalize this “color-blind” experience as normative for all social relations. If whiteness designates a generalized understanding, it is nothing but the obliviousness of whites to their own privilege (indeed obliviousness to race is part of the privilege).

Whites can become aware of their privilege. Becoming so, however, eliminates neither the privilege nor the obliviousness of it—at least not entirely. Like most ingrained parts of one’s being, whiteness functions subconsciously unless explicitly challenged; it need not be consciously intended. For most whites, unless they interact with nonwhites on a routine basis, the assumption of privilege is not challenged. While whites are interacting with other whites, the privilege remains largely invisible to them.

Giroux’s problem, however, concerns the peculiar dilemma faced by whites who have become aware of their privilege as an identity-shaping force. What would it mean for progressive whites to identify with their whiteness? When blacks identify with their blackness, celebrating its beauty and power, they are engaging in a self-reflexive political act: the dispelling of negative stereotypes about who they are. Nothing comparable to this happens when whites identify with their whiteness, for whites live in a world in which their beauty and power is the norm. Again, when blacks talk about their identity as an oppressed group that has been forced to internalize the depreciatory gaze of the other, there remains the potential for positive identification. Out of the experience of oppression and divided consciousness is born (as Hegel taught) a critical self-awareness and with it, an emancipatory consciousness that aspires to mutual concern and compassion with one’s fellow human beings in a world without taint of privilege. When progressive whites talk about their way of life as members of an oppressor group

⁴⁸ Donald Kinder and Lynn Sanders, *Divided by Color: Racial Politics and Democratic Ideals* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996).

that has been acculturated into privilege and obliviousness, there remains nothing for them to identify positively with. Taking advantage of their dual sense of self, they can (and should) trace the genealogy of their whiteness from the eccentric standpoints of their multiple subject positions, suitably decentered with respect to class, gender, and nationality. This is an exercise that calls for cold analysis and explanation, not warm, empathetic identification. As Ruth Frankenberg astutely notes, the “slipperiness” of whiteness with respect to those who have considered themselves or have been considered by others as “borderline white”—from “white trash” poor to European immigrants (especially from the south and east)—once again suggests that whiteness is at bottom not a cultural self-designation at all. More precisely, “although ostensibly marked by the clearly distinguishable behaviors or characteristics of self-designated selves, and of others named as such by those self-designators just mentioned, whiteness turns out on closer inspection to be more about the power to include and exclude groups and individuals more about the actual practices of those who are to be let in or kept out.”⁴⁹

If Frankenberg is right that whiteness is ultimately about the power to include and exclude potentially anyone from privilege for whatever reason, then maybe we should qualify our existential/ontological conception of whiteness as a mode of understanding. Heeding Foucault’s advice against cultural idealism in this particular instance would mean regarding whiteness as an objective yet infinitely malleable structure of exclusions embedded in language, practice, and “technologies of the self.” As a system of power relations, whiteness would still function like a mode of understanding, but it would not as such be reflected in our self-understanding so much as structure it from outside. So construed, whiteness would cease to designate anything that one could possibly identify with, except in the reactionary sense mentioned above.

VI. PRESERVING AND POLICING CULTURE: FINAL REFLECTIONS ON THE PERMANENCE OF RACE AND ETHNICITY

I would like to conclude my discussion of whiteness by touching on the moral perils that attend conceiving whiteness as an ethnicity, ethnic identity, or culture. The greatest peril is that in today’s multicultural politics of identity and recognition whiteness will be seen as meriting the same respect accorded to other ethnic cultures. (As I noted earlier, this danger manifests itself even when it is done under the banner of celebrating European ethnic pride, which is often just a euphemism for white pride.) This, of course, would entirely conceal the sinister

⁴⁹ Frankenberg (1997): 13.

aspects of whiteness that differentiate it from otherwise respectable ethnic cultures.

Unfortunately, as we have seen, the virtual indistinguishability of race and ethnicity in folk psychology poses dangers of an altogether different sort. The defense of multiculturalism and the promotion of identity politics can be prosecuted under the guise of racial (biological) thinking. And it can be done in ways that initially seem quite plausible. For instance, it might be argued that culture—an acknowledged good—only thrives in the form of diversity. It can then be argued that diverse cultures thrive only when cultivated in their integrity, that is, only when maintained by specific groups that reproduce themselves in their integrity. From that premise it follows that ethnic groups should try to maintain their biological purity by not encouraging interethnic marriage for fear that it will result in their dissolution.

Numbers count. As we have seen in the case of Native American and other aboriginal microcultures, when tribal populations are depleted, displaced, or simply assimilated, their respective cultures often die out. Sad as this may be—it represents a loss of cultural knowledge and, along with it, potentials for future learning and adaptation—I would strenuously argue against those who would save these tribes by urging eugenic solutions. To begin with, cultures, like life forms, come into existence and pass away for reasons that have nothing to do with environmental carelessness and (in the case of Native Americans) willful genocide. In and of themselves, such natural and cultural events need pose no palpable threat to the good of species or the world.

I do not wish to be understood as saying that defending cultural groups against cultural imperialism is unwarranted, but I hardly think that biological policing is an acceptable method for doing so. In any case, besides fretting over isolated instances of cultural imperialism, we should also be distressed about the emergence of a global monoculture that has been increasingly fueled by the exigencies of mass consumption and mass production inherent in a global capitalist economy.

I will leave it to those wiser than me to argue over whether today's global economy encourages uniformity or diversity. The point is that most everyone thinks that cultural diversity is a good thing. Assuming that it is, would it not likely be compromised with the disintegration of ethnic groups through interethnic coupling?⁵⁰ For example, in a fully integrated United States much that is asso-

⁵⁰ Young (2000, ch. 6) proposes a regionally based ideal of “differentiated solidarity” as an alternative preferable to current policies of forced integration, which tend to dismantle and disempower minority communities while leaving intact white neighborhoods. In her opinion, voluntary clustering based on religion, lifestyle, and language is not bad, but only the material and social inequality associated with segregation.

ciated with the ethnic culture of segregated African-American urban communities—including, for instance, the culture of spiritual overcoming that is cultivated in African-American churches—might not survive. If it did survive, it would most certainly be transfigured. Forged in the crucible of slavery and segregation, African-American spirituality might continue to flourish as a universal tradition to which all peoples might identify. To some extent, its expression of suffering, resistance, and spiritual redemption—so movingly conveyed in *Negro Spirituals*—has already achieved this status, along with Jazz and the Civil Rights Movement. Thus, cultural remnants are not necessarily drained of vitality by being detached from their ancestral carriers and mixed with “new blood.” Indeed, cultural traditions are as likely to grow as diminish in validity and authority through such mixing, as can be seen in the case of the great world religions.

In sum, there is no evidence to show that a culture once associated with a particular ethnic or racial group cannot survive the passing away of that group. In a fully just and emancipated world, people might still be attracted to people who are like themselves, although evidence that they will—based on past history—is notably unreliable, given the role that racism, ethnocentrism, and religious intolerance have played in mate selection. Integration—understood as the elimination of intergenerational communities with distinctive racial and cultural identities—might not be the only ideal. Besides integration and legal segregation, there is voluntary separatism based on positive attraction of those who think, act, talk, and (yes) look alike. Such “identity separatism” is benign, so long as it is based on attraction to those who are like oneself, rather than on hatred of those who are different from oneself. The boundaries of distinctive communities of identity should not be policed; otherwise, association and disassociation cease to be voluntary. However, all of these reflections about benign intergenerational communities of identity will be rendered moot if current patterns of migration keep pace with global economic dislocations. For in that case we can expect that persons will be marrying people who are very unlike themselves. If so, *ethnorace* might become a thing of the past.

Ingram, David. Toward a Cleaner Whiteness: New Racial Identities. *The Philosophical Forum*, 36, 3: , 2005.Â Toward a Cleaner White(ness): New Racial Identities¹ by. David Ingram. 1. Race theorists have conclusively demonstrated that racial categories linking the physical, mental, and behavioral traits of selected individuals to a hidden nature putatively shared by them as a group are without scientific basis.² However, among those who find the continued use of racial classifications in science, medicine, and law problematic and illegitimate, there are some who find racial self-ascriptions acceptable as. a way of referencing a shared experience of oppression.³ Pride in being black, for example, is ty White Americans of European ancestry can be described as having a great deal of choice in terms of their ethnic identities. The two major types of options White Americans can exercise are (1) the option of whether to claim any specific ancestry, or to just be "White" or American (Lieberson [1985] called these people "unhyphenated Whites") and (2) the choice of which of their European ancestries to choose to include in their description of their own identities.Â Black students at the university are also developing identities through interactions with others who are different from them.Â Social mobility and declining racial and ethnic sensitivity are closely associated.