

## Little White Lies: Racialization and Whiteness

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This article emphasizes the importance of considering the history, context and epistemological bases of the use of race and racial categories in North America. Using this contextual grounding, I propose that racial categories are born of racism and not the reverse. I include some salient personal examples of the effects of the construct Whiteness in my own life experience. They are, at the same time, personal, political and cultural. Finally, some suggestions are offered for dealing with the issue of Whiteness, in particular, in feminist therapy, which seeks to uncover power differentials and the personal and political, each embedded in the other.

*...racism is so systematic and white privilege so impossible to escape, that one is, simply, trapped ... I have enjoined males of my acquaintance to set themselves against masculinity ... Likewise I can set myself against Whiteness (Frye, 1983)''*

### The Political Is Personal

Just as there is no femininity without its purported opposite, masculinity, there is no way to approach the topic of Whiteness without including its juxtaposition and opposition to Blackness (and somewhat later to other hues and colors). They are reflections in the same mirror viewed through the eyes of what I have named elsewhere (Kaschak, 1992) the indeterminate cultural observer. This abstract, but real, cultural observer retains and propagates the visually based distortions and demands, to my way of thinking, of the particular culture. It is often difficult for any given individual to resist

them, since they are largely unconscious and formed before language could represent them to the conscious mind. They are the very organizing principles of vision. These cultural eyes colonize the eye/brain combination in each of us who can see and, as my recent research (Kaschak, 2015) demonstrates, even those of us who cannot. The indeterminate observer is everywhere and nowhere at once. He is still masculine and will continue to be as long as we live in patriarchal societies. That is, he colonizes the eyes of men and women alike with his masculinist and racist values, including the value of interpersonal and international strategies of violence, war, colonization and corporate dominance. He organizes his vision by visual and physically apparent categories such as gender, race and sexual orientation. In this article, I will question not only these categories, but the very process involved, focusing on the indeterminate observer in the United States or what is named America in defiance of all the other countries that make up the Americas. The indeterminate observer believes he in nothing more than his own centrality and entitlement.

In recent years, feminist and multi-cultural scholars in the U.S. have begun to problematize the very idea of Whiteness. In this article, I want to advance that discussion. To begin, I want to use the term racialization, as I also do in my book *Shedding Light* (Kaschak, 2015), which more accurately describes these visually based cultural constructs. I have come to the conclusion, after much thought and research, that the very system of marking human beings for life as members of a racial category, racialization, is entirely a product of racism and not the reverse. Racism precedes race or racialization. Without it as a foundation, the entire edifice crumbles. What need would there be for the categories of race, but to divide and conquer? In the service of those goals, the very

concept of race was introduced in American<sup>1</sup> and European societies long ago. It is not enough and not even possible to ferret out the racism apparent or hiding in our racial system. The very idea of categorizing human beings must be rejected as racist and masculinist in its inception and its uses today.

As an ethical imperative, as well as an analysis of power distribution, an invented distinction masked as genetic or biological must be unmasked. Genetically, research has begun to demonstrate that there is simply no such thing as race (Bolnick, D.A.' 2008; Cavali-Sforza, L.L., Menozzi, P., Piazza, A. (1994); Kaplan, J. M. (2011), there is no black and white at all. One has only to use one's eyes to see that this distinction is void. Yet most of us do not see well, as the indeterminate cultural observer colonizes our very eyes, demanding that we do not see what is apparent visually. From where then did this pervasive and damaging idea come?

Various researchers (Roediger,1991) have noted that the racial designation White arose to describe European explorers, traders and settlers who came into contact with Africans and the indigenous peoples of the Americas. As the New World was developing, West African societies were already practicing slavery and, thus, already had a supply of slaves to trade with Europeans (Roy, 2001).

While both groups were regarded as heathens by "our" Christian forefathers, the colonizers felt that Native Americans did not adapt well to enslavement; in contrast,

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<sup>1</sup> To avoid linguistic awkwardness, I will refer to the U.S. as American and its residents as Americans in various places. The reader should be aware that this reference is a product and preference of the American indeterminate observer and is being used in order not to introduce confusion into the narrative. Note that all of Latin America, as well as Canada are also American. In most of Latin America, we are known as North America and are consider imperious when naming ourselves Americans.

Africans had already adapted to subjugation by African tribal chiefs. Thus, racial theories were more easily applicable to justify their enslavement (Gossett, 1963).

The first Africans landed in America in 1619. They were not enslaved and operated on a basis of equality with Whites (Bennett, 1988). These Africans in pre-racial America occupied the social status of free persons or indentured servants (Roy 2001:85). However, facing the birth of a nation and socioeconomic forces, including a worldwide demand for tobacco, cotton and sugar, 17th Century colonial leaders needed a large labor force to meet market demands. Native American populations proved too difficult to submit to enslavement, and, “. . . European Christians were reluctant to enslave other Christians [such as the Irish]” (Roy 2001).

The colonial leaders decided to “. . .base the American economic system on human slavery organized around the distribution of melanin in human skin” (Bennett, 1988). The idea of whiteness was then strengthened by the development of America’s free-labor market. White workers demanded they be entitled to a legitimate status of “freeman,” a status that combined white supremacy, an exclusively occupational trade and civil rights. To legitimate status differences, laws were enacted that imposed the status of ‘slave for life’ on enslaved Africans. By virtue of this distinction, White European indentured servants might eventually end their servitude, while Africans could not (Gossett, 1963).

Europeans, prior to the late 1600s, did not use the label, Black, to refer to any “race” of people, Africans included. Only after the racialization of slavery around 1680 did whiteness and blackness come to represent racial categories. “Just before the outbreak of the Civil War, Jefferson Davis told the United States Senate ‘One of the reconciling

features of the existence [of Negro slavery] is the fact that it raises every white man to the same general level, that it dignifies and exalts every white man by the presence of a lower race.” (Banton 1966)

Just as masculinity and femininity, male and female are not equivalent and symmetrical categories, neither are Black and White, even allowing for the more contemporary Brown. Although dichotomous, they do not provide equal access to power and other resources. According to Kincheloe (1999), “...a pedagogy of whiteness reveals such power-related processes to whites and non-whites alike, exposing how members of both groups are stripped of self-knowledge (p. 163). No one would dispute the fact that Whiteness still carries the embedded meanings of superiority and the other categories of “lesser than” as they darken in color. Other groups include, in contemporary American parlance, generally and arbitrarily considered Brown, including Latinos, Asians (previously yellow) and Native Americans (previously red). The color wheel itself has revolved in the eyes of the indeterminate observer. I will not pursue the implications of these supposed racial distinctions in this paper, as I believe that the most important aspect of Whiteness is its early and continued distinction from Blackness.

To expose this false perspective even further, there has been, since colonial times, a triple conflation of White, European and Christian that implies moral and cultural superiority first codified within the language of race in fifteenth century Spain and adopted into the colonial discourse of white superiority and non-white inferiority in the New World (Bonnett, 1998).

### The Political Is Personal

As a child, I was not a White person, but matured into one rapidly at about the age of ten in an invented American version of racial puberty. As part of the G.I. Bill put in effect after World War II, the American government adjusted their very definition of Whiteness to include Hebrews, as we were named in the official records of the time. They were offering mortgages to returning GIs to enable them to live in the newly built suburbs of Long Island. This was an early program in Affirmative Action for Jewish men only. My father qualified for this program and was able to secure a \$10,000 mortgage that bought him a small tract house in Valley Stream, the very first town over the city line, as was said colloquially. By government fiat, we were permitted to live in these communities and thereafter were White people, joining the Irish and the Italians before us (Brodkin,1998). No one spoke of it and I only learned as an adult that, during my childhood, I was not White. No wonder I feel queasy about the distinction.

As I approached this form of racial adolescence, instead of my body developing curves and secondary sex characteristics of the other officially recognized puberty, it began to turn white. I know this sounds physically impossible and that is precisely because it is. This does not disturb the indeterminate observer, who vision overrides physical reality. I still retain contingent white skin privilege in the United States. It is not impervious to dissolution. There is a simple question that causes it to dissolve. It lasts until the question can be posed, “What kind of name is that, (often code for “Are you a Jew?”)?” Full membership in the Whiteness club still demands Christianity as it did from the start.

Although I am in a body that American eyes see as White, there is actually nothing white about it. In fact, the color of my skin falls somewhere on the visual

spectrum between pink and yellow. To place this color combination within a bodily context, my body is also recognizable as female and now as old. All this is the minimum amount of information immediately available to anyone who reads the American visual code. Judging visually is unconscious and, as research demonstrates, takes only a few seconds (Kaschak, 2015). It is not possible for our human brains to defer or refuse these split second decisions.

Which combinations of seen attributes are salient at a given moment depends on context. It is the multiplicity of characteristics in context to which our human eyes/minds attribute meaning. I am a particular kind of White person, as judged from the outside. There are those whose skin color is lighter than mine and are not members of the White group, including many Latin Americans whom I know. There are Europeans who are darker than many of these Latins, but are still considered White. Color itself cannot explain these distinctions, so what can? How is our very vision and perception so carefully colonized that we cannot see what is in front of our own eyes?

The human perceptual system is designed to organize visual images into patterns and then to relegate as much as possible to the unconscious mind. The most ordinary task would be impossible without this organizing system. These patterns are organized by issues of meaning or mattering. In this way, the consciousness-lowering that we call socialization creates these meanings and, like a cultural magician, makes them disappear from view. Of course, like magic, this is only an optical illusion. The racism or sexism is still alive and well, but hidden from sight.

In Costa Rica, where I live now, skin color is not a particularly salient concern. There I am a Gringa or, more politely, an ex-pat. I have lived there at least part time

since my early twenties, but I will always and forever be a foreigner. I am not at all thought of as White. The Costa Ricans have their categories, but race is not as high on the list as is nationality, which is inherited throughout the generations. If your ancestors were from Italy and you have an Italian surname, you will forever after be referred to as Italian. Or Polish. Or Jewish. There are many other systems on the planet that serve to reduce people to categories, focusing instead on ethnic groups, tribes or clans, but a review of them is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say, racialization is a culturally meaningful concept; it matters to North Americans.

Multi-cultural psychology is unique to the U.S. It is as Western as the dominant culture itself and takes for granted Western values and categories for sorting human beings. Thus, it is in extreme danger of mirroring the categories of American racism unquestioningly. From a larger global perspective, things are not so black and white, nor are people. As another example, although I am bi-lingual and bi-cultural, it is in the wrong direction for North American multi-cultural perspectives to see those categories. They do not exist and where does that leave me and others in my position. Partially invisible.

Looking in the cultural mirror from another angle, Costa Ricans who come to the United States are known as Latinos or Hispanics and automatically all considered Brown or People of Color, although they fit awkwardly into all three American racial designations. Most are considered to be White in Costa Rica, but a brief plane trip can change all that. However, Latino is not a race and is not even a nationality, but many nationalities. Spaniards, ancestors of the majority of Costa Ricans, are generally



considered to be White. Here we expose an additional hidden geographical meaning of Whiteness. To be precise, Europeans are White; Latinos are not.

A friend of mine who is a member of the racialized group African-American had an illuminating experience one day in a café in Paris. She was, of course, getting their famously atrocious service. She reflexively attributed it to racialization, as she had learned through many hard lessons in the American South of her childhood. On further investigation, she discovered that she was indeed being treated badly, but it was because she was an American. She had never thought of herself as an American, but always as a particular kind of American, an African-American. The Parisian waiters did not perceive that distinction.

Whiteness then is not so much a personal quality as it is a reflection of power embedded in the very structure and functioning of American culture. One of the functions of the indeterminate observer is to metabolize the outlandish into the ordinary, taken-for-granted. In that process, the seen becomes unseen, the visible, invisible and the racism and sexism taken for granted and named ordinary life.

### Therapeutic Intersections

The way that feminists and psychotherapists know to combat this unconscious colonization of the eyes and mind begins with the indelicate art of consciousness-raising or “Seeing with beginner’s eyes”. This process of “bringing into awareness” is part and parcel of every effective therapeutic approach, although in itself does not necessarily bring about change (Kaschak, 1992). Within the paradigm of feminist therapy,

consciousness-raising serves to permit the individual to discern that what seems an individual problem instead involves membership in a culturally meaningful group. That is, the problem belongs to all racialized and gendered people, although differently depending on other aspects of their experience and identity. The correct level of analysis can lead to a more effective solution.

Thus, feminist therapy supports the development as a practice and an art the ability to notice and to question cultural realities. Feminist and culturally sensitive therapy is one context in which this process can occur or, at least, begin. Buddhist practice and group analysis, as used to occur in consciousness-raising groups, are others.

Whiteness has to be made visible long before it can be made irrelevant. The first step is to defy the pressures of color-blindness and begin to name the obvious. The first step in the process of consciousness-raising is noticing and involves de-familiarizing (Friedman, 2011; 2012) the quotidian. Such a first step is fraught with danger, as it involves naming each White person as such, undermining the system by invoking it. This must occur carefully and not mirror in any way White racism, but must instead occur as a call to consciousness. Only then can these distortions be resisted. As a start, in any circumstance in which the speaker would identify someone as Black or Brown, they might begin the practice of identifying the White persons as well. It would sound something like the following: “I passed a White man on the street today who was hassling another White man. I was afraid that a fight would break out and crossed the street.”

Consciousness-raising and power analysis, two irreducible aspects of feminist psychotherapy, along with gender analysis, shed light on what easily can become

unconscious and taken-for-granted. The feminist call to consciousness of the yet unnamed category of gender ushered in an intellectual and cultural revolution which cannot be undone. These very same steps can be applied to the cultural racialization. Careful attention facilitates the process of naming into visibility that which has been relegated to the invisible. Conscious-raising allows what has been made invisible to become visible through the learning process of consciousness-lowering that each culture designs for each individual. Whiteness is one of the most important aspects of this socialization process, becoming the invisible, default position for racialization. That is, it becomes the race that is not one, especially among Whites in the Western nations.

Feminist therapy analyzes personal and structural power. Feminist therapists, but especially those designated as White, must deal with the deleterious consequences and effects of Whiteness, while, at the same time, rejecting its very existence. Much as many feminist men have opposed masculinity, so must we all resist being seen as White, Black or Brown, being sorted and compartmentalized by the amount of melanin in the skin, being reduced to a visual category. Whiteness is not an identity, but an historical category that damages all who come into contact with it.

Resistance occurs on two levels. First, as I have indicated here, the very sorting principle must be rejected. Secondly, the power differential, as manifested in the sense of entitlement also associated with masculinity (Kaschak, 1992) must be refused over and over. In no way does such resistance historical and material inequities and its accompanying human damage, but it can contribute to its future reduction.

Feminist therapy was originally opposed to the idea of individual, confidential, separated therapy, except in temporary and urgent circumstances (Kaschak, 1976). This

crucial aspect of intervention has been entirely lost as feminist therapy has become a profession instead of a revolution, a way of earning a living instead of resisting racism and misogyny. By participating in professionalized feminist therapy, women and men are separated from each other and from the very process of group consciousness that lies at the root of feminist therapy. In this way, they are also separated from the collective action necessary for social change. I lament this loss that consolidates power and awareness in the relationship with the therapist. I think it is a mistake of huge proportions for feminists. Racism, like misogyny, classism, etc. cannot be opposed individually, for they are not at all individual issues or characteristics.

While Whiteness acquires meaning only in context, Whiteness is also the invisible context for meaning-making, that is, for what matters. From it flow the categories and meanings that come to matter in everyday life. It becomes the norm, the default position, that need not even be named to exist and to provide definition.

In the four decades since I began teaching and training therapists, I have had the opportunity to discuss these issues with many generations of students. The semester invariably begins, all these years later, with several students protesting that the subject matter is not about them and that a course in Gender and Ethnicity should be an elective for women and ethnic minorities. White students consistently begin by saying that they have no ethnicity and are just regular or “White bread” Americans. The course, I hope, changes their minds. And isn’t that just what education is about, changing minds?

Just as the official romantic narrative of the media remains predominantly heterosexual and in other agents of the indeterminate observer’s influence, so is the history of racism is described in the language of “progress” rather than of domination and

hallucination. The choice of language deceives us. There is no progress involved in dismantling a system that never should have been put in place.

I believe that feminists, multi-culturalists and all people need to stop legitimizing the Black/White/Brown categories and stop using White as the invisible or default position. Racialization is a hallucination that must be cured and such “cures” are the purview of psychotherapy. Americans are hypnotized by the indeterminate cultural observer into seeing back and white where there is an infinite spectrum of browns, pinks, yellows, etc. and no black or white at all. In recent years, we have even invented the color brown where yellow and red were once used.

I prefer to consider gender, race, class and sexual orientation as multiplicities rather than intersections, as they combine and recombine in unique and complex ways and do not simply overlap. These are not just intersections, attributions that are simply additive or even subtractive; they are multipliers and, paradoxically, as they multiply, they divide.

I reject the categories. Why do we still see through their eyes? For it to be effective, training in racial socialization must move beyond an awareness of privilege and biases to an understanding of racial hierarchies, one’s place in them, as well as one’s role in preserving (or questioning) the status quo. Multi-cultural concepts should not just reflect these categories, but should seek to destroy them, to define the discourse.

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