

# What Should White People Do?

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*In this paper I explore white attempts to move toward a proactive position against racism that will amount to more than self-criticism in the following three ways: by assessing the debate within feminism over white women's relation to whiteness; by exploring "white awareness training" methods developed by Judith Katz and the "race traitor" politics developed by Ignatiev and Garvey, and, a case study of white revisionism being currently attempted at the University of Mississippi.*

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In the movie *Dances with Wolves* (1991), Kevin Costner plays a white Union soldier stationed on the Indian frontier who undergoes a political transformation. He comes to realize that the native peoples his militia intends to kill are not the uncivilized heathens they were portrayed to be, and in fact have a rich civilization in many ways superior to his. Thus, he realizes that he is fighting on the wrong side. The remainder of the movie chronicles his struggle to figure out what this realization means *for him*.

I believe that this narrative represents a collective, semiconscious undercurrent of psychic and political struggle occurring now in the United States among significant numbers of white Anglos. Throughout U.S. history, some white people have joined in common cause with people of color to fight slavery, racism, and imperialism, from the New York Conspiracy of 1741 to the John Brown uprising to white supporters of civil rights and white protesters against the racism of the Vietnam War (Ignatiev and Garvey 1996, 131). Today, the scope of this disaffection has expanded, as many whites have begun to doubt not only specific racist institutions or aggressions but also the racialized legitimization narratives of "Western civilization" and the purported superiority of all things European.

*Dances with Wolves*, though politically flawed, nonetheless revealed the significance of this awakened white consciousness by winning the academy award for Best Picture of 1991.<sup>1</sup> White support for antiracism is often similarly flawed: riven with supremacist pretensions and an extension at times of the

*Hispania* vol. 13, no. 3 (Summer 1998) © by Linda Martín Alcoff

colonizer's privilege to decide the true, the just, and the culturally valuable. However, it is unwarranted to argue that these deep layers of persistent racism represent the core of all apparent white antiracism. Although it is important—and often easy—to expose the persistent racism in avowedly antiracist efforts, we need also to affirm that *some* of the time, in *some* respects even when not in *all*, whites empathize and identify with nonwhites, abhor how white supremacy has distorted their social interactions, and are willing to make significant sacrifices toward the eradication of white privilege.

For white North Americans, nevertheless, coming to terms with white privilege exacts a price. For Costner's Captain Dunbar, the effort costs him a good beating and nearly his life, but for contemporary whites, the price is more often psychological. As James Baldwin said years ago, "It is not really a 'negro revolution' that is upsetting the country. What is upsetting the country is a sense of its own identity" (Baldwin 1988, 8). And as one white student put it, "I mean now I really have to think about it. Like now I feel white. I feel white" (Gallagher 1994, 165). This "feeling white," when coupled with a repudiation of white privilege, can disable a positive self-image as well as a felt connection to community and history, and generally can disorient identity formation.

Chauvinist legitimization narratives that portrayed European-based societies as the progressive vanguard of the human race produced an almost invisible support structure for the collective self-esteem of all those who could claim such a European identity. In the first half of the twentieth century, the plausibility of these narratives was undermined by the profit-motivated violence of World War I and the technologically orchestrated genocides of World War II. As a response to that disillusionment, new narratives were developed, based on a thorough repudiation of "old world" ethnic hatreds and blind political obedience. The "new" or "modern world" legitimization narratives proclaimed that European-based societies led the world in maximizing individualism, civil liberties, and economic prosperity, which were assumed to be the highest human goods. Of course, many nonwhites are able to participate in these narratives and to see themselves to some extent as a part of the liberatory vanguard. But because it was the cultural traditions and economic methods of Europe and the United States that inspired and guided this progress, naturally whites were at the center and the forefront, with nonwhite allies alongside but to the back.

In the second half of this century, internal disillusionment with these white-vanguard narratives has grown strong once again, primarily because of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War, but also in light of events in South Africa, Ireland, and now in Central Europe, which have engendered doubt about whether the white race is less violent, less "uncivilized," or more democratic than any other. As a result, the cultural mechanisms supporting white self-esteem are breaking down and a growing white backlash has developed in response to this psychic threat.

Backlash, however, is not the only contemporary white response to the declining plausibility of white supremacist narratives. This paper explores other kinds of white responses, all of which, in one way or another, seek to transcend white vanguardism and move toward a proactive position against racism that will amount to more than mere self-criticism.

The issue I want to put center stage, however, is white identity. Many race theorists have argued that antiracist struggles require whites' acknowledgment that they are *white*; that is, that their experience, perceptions, and economic position have been profoundly affected by being constituted as white (Frankenberg 1993). Race may be a social construction without biological validity, yet it is real and powerful enough to alter the fundamental shape of all our lives (Gooding-Williams 1995; Taylor 1996; Alcoff 1996). Part of white privilege has been precisely whites' ability to ignore the ways white racial identity has benefitted them.

But what is it to acknowledge one's whiteness? Is it to acknowledge that one is inherently tied to structures of domination and oppression, that one is irrevocably on the wrong side? In other words, can the acknowledgment of whiteness produce only self-criticism, even shame and self-loathing? Is it possible to feel okay about being white?

Every individual, I would argue, needs to feel a connection to community, to a history, and to a human project larger than his or her own life. Without this connection, we are bereft of a concern for the future or an investment in the fate of our community. Nihilism is the result; and we see abundant signs of it all around, from the unchecked frenzy of consumption that ignores its likely long-term effects to the anarcholiberalism that is rife in the corporate United States at all levels and that values only immediate individual desires.

If this analysis is correct, and everyone does need some felt connection to a community with both past and future, what are North American whites to do? Should they assimilate, like Captain John Dunbar in *Dances with Wolves*, as far as possible into non-European cultures, as some New Age advocates argue? Should they become, as Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey argue, race traitors who disavow all claims or ties to whiteness? Can a liberal repudiation of racial identity and an avowal of "color-blindness" produce the consciousness of white privilege that antiracism requires? Can a deracialized individualism provide the sense of historical continuity that moral action seems to require?

Feminism has usefully problematized the notion of a monolithic white identity by raising issues of gender and sometimes class. In the next section I will analyze white feminists' assessment of whiteness. Then, in the following three sections, I will explore three further "answers" to the white question: the early, influential antiracist "white awareness training" methods as developed by Judith Katz and others, the "race traitor" politics developed by Ignatiev and

Garvey, and finally, a kind of case study of white revisionism being attempted at the University of Mississippi. Each of these is an example of a response developed by whites for whites.

Before I go any further, I need to tell something about my own identity, which, like an increasing number of others in this country, is racially complex. In some places in the United States, I am perceived to look “white” and am assumed to be white. This means that, in those contexts, in one sense I am white, and therefore I know something about white privilege from the inside. Moreover, though born in Panamá, I was raised in the southern United States (Florida), where conditions of Jim Crow segregation reigned either officially or unofficially for most of my childhood. My mother and stepfather are white southerners, with all that that can imply. However, my father was Latino with mixed Spanish, Indian, and African heritage. His family, and thus that part of my family, never left Panamá, and his own sojourn here was mainly as a college student. Growing up in Florida, my sister and I were generally introduced to newcomers as my mother’s “Latin daughters.” So I have also known something about white chauvinism, mostly of the cultural sort (for example, “You must be so thankful to be in this country” and other assorted baseless assumptions).

I once heard the legal theorist Gerald Torres joke that Latinos have a tendency toward arrogance about racial matters; because Latinos are usually racially mixed, they often assume that they know what it is to be Indian, to be white, *and* to be black! Latinos also sometimes assume ourselves incapable of anti-black or anti-Indian racism because most of us have some black and indigenous forbears.<sup>1</sup> I do not want to make these assumptions, and my skin color certainly compels against them. But I have tried to use my intersectional location as a resource for considering the multiple “lived experiences” of racialized identity in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

#### WHITE WOMEN AND WHITE IDENTITY

Whiteness is both homogeneous and fractured. Unlike Latino identity, which is understood to be mixed, and unlike African American identity under the strictures of the one-drop rule, whiteness is accorded only to those who are (supposedly) “pure” white. In the recent historical past this was not so clear-cut, as Jews, Irish, Italians, and other southern Europeans were sometimes excluded from whiteness and at other times enjoyed a halfway status as almost white, but not quite (unlike those with partial African heritage, no matter how light). But today, in mainstream white bread America, the borders around whiteness are assumed to be clear.

In another sense, whiteness has always been fractured by class, gender, sex, ethnicity, age, and able-bodiedness. The privileges whiteness bestowed were differentially distributed and were also simply different (for example, the

privilege to get the job for a man, the privilege not to work for women, and so on). In much feminist literature the normative, dominant subject position is described in detail as a white, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied male. This normative figure carries the weight as well in the cultural narrative of reconfiguring black-white relations; there have been far more “buddy” movies about white men and black men than films exploring women’s relationships.<sup>4</sup> In *Dances with Wolves*, the revision of the Manifest Destiny narrative centers on a white, normative male to carry the story; this seems to assume that if whiteness is to be recast, it must be recast from the center out. Anything else—any revision that centered on a woman, for example—would not have the cultural force, the felt *significance*, of a white man relearning his place. This situation must raise the question, what is white women’s relation to whiteness?

Feminist theory has given various answers to this question, and much of the debate has centered on the question of whether white women benefit on the whole from whiteness, or whether whiteness is a ruse to divide women and to keep white women from understanding their true interests. Some feminists have argued that sexism is more fundamental than racism, in the sense that sexual identity is more important in determining social status than racial identity. For example, Shulamith Firestone (1970) argues that the racism that exists among white women is a form of inauthenticity or false consciousness that does not represent their true interests. Mary Daly (1978) similarly argues that charges of racism against feminists serve patriarchal ends by promoting divisiveness among women. According to Daly, feminists should disengage from male-created identifications with race, nation, or ethnicity.

Other feminists have criticized this view. Margaret A. Simons (1979) argues that the claim that sexism is primary trivializes racist oppression and implausibly assumes that sexism alone can provide an adequate explanation for genocide and war (for example, that white men “feminized” nonwhite or Jewish men). The existence of some form of sexist oppression in every society does not justify a conception of patriarchy that generalizes the relations between all men and all women in one undifferentiated analysis. According to Simons, white women’s identity must be understood both as white and as female. Gloria Joseph (1981) also argues that white women are both tools and benefactors of racism, and that feminists must recognize and address white women’s social position as both oppressors and oppressed. In fact, Joseph contends that given the extensive privileges of whiteness, white women’s immediate self-interest is to maintain racism. She suggests that we need to explore the concept of “white female supremacy” as well as white male supremacy.

Adrienne Rich’s “Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynephobia” (1979), a paper that has been very widely used in women’s studies courses, takes up these issues in a way that mainly addresses a white feminist audience. In this paper, Rich develops the concept of “white solipsism” to describe a

perceptual practice that implicitly takes a white perspective as universal. She argues that “colorblindness,” or the ideal of ignoring racial identities, falls into white solipsism because a racist society has no truly accessible colorblind perspective. The claim to a colorblind perspective by whites works just to conceal the partiality of their perceptions.

Rich provides a very perceptive critique of colorblindness and, unlike other radical feminists, she acknowledges the significance of white women’s racism. However, Rich continues to put sexism at the center of all women’s lives and to portray white women as primarily victims of racism rather than agents who help to sustain it. Rich claims that white women did not create racism but have been forced to serve racist institutions, and that those who think they benefit from racism are deluded. In her view, white women’s racism is actually a misdirected outlet for their rage over their own powerlessness, a view that only slightly revises Firestone’s. In Rich’s account, slavery is more accurately described as an institution of patriarchy than one of white supremacy; to blame white women is to impede the process of forging political and emotional connections between white and nonwhite women. The apparent protection some white women receive from patriarchy degrades them by enforcing childishness and helplessness. Therefore, white women’s true interests lie in making alliances with other women, not with men. This analysis suggests that the “whiteness” of white women is not in any sense the same as the “whiteness” of white men.

In contrast, Marilyn Frye (1983, 1992) has suggested that despite the severity of sexism, white women do not escape race privilege. It is a feature of this race privilege that white women have a choice to hear or not to hear—and to respond or not to respond—to the demands and criticisms of women of color. Racism differentially distributes general epistemic authority to make judgments and determinations, such that, for example, whites often assume the right to decide the true or accurate racial identity of everyone. When white feminists proclaim that white women are primarily *women*, this is an extension of an essentially white privilege.

In Frye’s view, white feminists should be disloyal to whiteness. Because white women understandably want to be treated as human beings, their feminism often takes the form of pursuit of the full entitlements of “whiteness,” which Frye defines as a socially constructed status that confers entitlements and authority. For example, the demand for equality has implicitly and practically meant the demand for equality with white men (a demand for equality with, say, *puertorri queños* would hardly mean liberation). But the demand to be equal to white men is necessarily a demand to achieve “whiteness,” a status that depends on racist structures of social relations for its power and autonomy. Like Rich and Firestone, Frye argues that solidarity with white men is not in white women’s ultimate interest. Racism has motivated white men to oppress and constrain white women’s sexuality and reproductive

powers in order to secure the regeneration of a “pure” white population. Thus, we must become disloyal to whiteness and unlearn our “whiteness” assumptions of entitlement and authority.

What does “becoming disloyal” mean in practice? For Frye and Rich, it clearly cannot mean upholding some form of colorblindness or individualism, which would only conceal white privilege and implicit white perspectives. So how can whites be disloyal to whiteness while acknowledging the significance of their own racial identity?

#### ANTI-RACISM TRAINING

A liberal approach to answering this question is developed in Judith Katz’s now-classic *White Awareness. Handbook for Anti-Racism Training* (Katz 1978). This book is representative of the popularized psychological approach to antiracism, an approach often generated in, and aiming to be suited for, the kinds of in-house workshops and encounter groups that have developed from corporate America since the 1960s, though Katz’s own context was closer to universities. Many corporations have discovered that racism (sometimes) impedes productivity, and therefore they have been hiring consultants to retrain and “sensitize” white management personnel. This is, of course, only part of the audience for “antiracism training”; some universities and movement organizations have also tried this approach. But the specific social location and source of economic funding needs to be kept in mind when analyzing the reeducation approaches used in antiracism workshops.

*White Awareness* attributes widespread responsibility for racism to whites. However, Katz is highly critical of white guilt fixations, because these are self-indulgent. She explains that such criticisms led her to move from black-white group encounters to all-white groups. She also avoided using people of color to reeducate whites, she says, because she found that this led whites to focus on getting acceptance and forgiveness from their nonwhite trainers.

Facing the enormity and depth of racism is painful and demoralizing, as one loses one’s sense of self-trust and even self-love; but Katz nonetheless holds out the hope that whites can become antiracist and that “we may ultimately find comfort in our move to liberation” (1978, vii). Racism causes whites to suffer; it cripples their intellectual and psychological development and locks them “in a psychological prison that victimizes and oppresses them every day of their lives” (14). Such claims do not, of course, entail that whites’ victimization by racism is worse than or equal to that of other groups, but Katz’s wording is striking. Throughout the book, racism is portrayed as a kind of macro-agent with its own agenda, operating separately from white people.

This problem takes on added significance given that antiracism and sensitivity training is a growth industry in corporate America today, the same corporate culture that continues to use racism and cultural chauvinism as an

excuse to pay people of color far lower wages by undervaluing what is actually comparable or more difficult work. Katz makes no reference to exploitation or the need for a redistribution of resources, and instead treats racism as a psychological pathology that can be solved through behavior modification. Although racism no doubt is debilitating for whites in a number of ways, unless we analyze who benefits from and promotes racism, we cannot see clearly what needs to be done to counter it.

However, *White Awareness* usefully develops processes that can permit collective exploration of and critical reflection on white racial consciousness. It builds on whites' own tacit knowledge of racism to promote reflection, thereby enhancing whites' confidence in their own agency and counteracting fatalism. And it helpfully acknowledges the likelihood of white emotional responses like anger, guilt, and resistance, without seeing these as indicative of an insurmountable racism. Instead, it develops group processes and supportive environments in which such emotional responses can be aired, worked through, and transcended. I have at least anecdotal reports that the book has been used productively in contexts of political organizing to initiate an exploration and reflection by whites about the many subtle layers of racism and supremacist assumptions embedded in their interactions.

A notable weakness of *White Awareness* is that it does not offer a transformative, substantive white identity. Katz argues against replacing whiteness with ethnic identities on the grounds that this obscures the racialized organization of white supremacy, and thus she maintains the need to self-identify as white. But whiteness figures in *White Awareness* only as an identity of unfair privilege based on white supremacy; unlike ethnic identities, it has no other substantive cultural content. Stage Five of the training process is called "Individual Racism: The Meaning of Whiteness," and the first goal listed is to help participants "explore their White culture and develop a sense of positive identification with their whiteness" (135). However, the workshops in this stage discuss only the luxuries and privileges associated with whiteness. Among the directions to the facilitator is the following:

You should also help the group identify positive aspects of being White. It is important for them to feel good about themselves as White people. All too often Whites deny their whiteness because they feel that being White is negative. (Katz 1979, 145)

However, the book provides no help in determining what these positive aspects might be, and given its context, readers must find it difficult to guess how Katz would substantively define whiteness except in terms of racism and unfair privilege.

In 1992, on the quincentenary of Columbus' invasion, I participated in a public debate in Syracuse with the local Italian American booster club over

the political meanings of Columbus Day. They argued that Italian Americans suffered intense and ongoing discrimination in this country and that the celebration of Columbus Day was very important for raising community pride and instilling recognition of the important contributions Italians have made. I agreed with their depiction of the situation and the need for positive cultural symbols but asked why Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and even Mario Cuomo could not be used instead of a man responsible for transcontinental genocide and enslavement of Native Americans. The Italians have a particular wealth of admirable cultural leaders, and this club's continued insistence on Columbus suggested to me that more than achieving group equality was at stake.

If white identity is to be transformed, it does need more of a substantive reconstruction, including a revision of historical narratives and cultural focuses. The following two sections explore more recent attempts to transform whiteness, both of which take some issue with the liberal approach.

#### TRAITORS TO WHITENESS

One of the most radical positions on white antiracism that has emerged in recent years can be found in the journal *Race Traitor: A Journal of the New Abolitionism*. The journal has created a space where radical whites can share and spread ideas, get feedback and criticism from people of color, and help to educate themselves and their readers on the "true" history of the Civil War and the neglected legacy of white resistance to racism. They can also develop their critical analyses of current social phenomena, such as multiculturalism and the increasing cultural crossovers of white youth.

Journal editors Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey are anticapitalist, and they believe that we must be willing to take up arms. Their politics are probably best classified as libertarian anarchist, and it is other anarchist journals and 'zines that seem most often to reprint or refer to *Race Traitor*. The editors strive for a strong working-class political perspective, and they have managed to develop class inclusiveness among the journal's writers, a characteristic too rarely found in leftist journals of any type. In an interesting way, they have put less effort into making allies among feminists or gay activists, perhaps because they do not view these issues as centrally connected to white supremacy. This follows from an analysis found regularly in the journal that "white supremacy" has largely been an ideology used by the wealthy and powerful to fool the white poor into being more race-loyal than class-loyal, blinding them to their own interests. As we have seen, however, a similar case could be made for white women and also for white gays.

The most interesting aspect of this approach is its declared focus on whites. Unlike other leftist publications that have tried to develop multiracial groups, *Race Traitor* seems to believe that a political network of white traitors is needed

to focus on retrieving white antiracist history, deepening the analysis of whiteness and racism, and encouraging the small but growing tendency among white youth to rebel against racist cultural hierarchies and enforced segregation. Consider the editors' report of the following news item:

According to press reports and our own correspondents, the white race is showing signs of fracture in the rural midwest. Several female students at North Newton Junior-Senior High School near Morocco, Indiana, who call themselves the "Free to Be Me" group, recently started braiding their hair in dreadlocks and wearing baggy jeans and combat boots, a style identified with Hip Hop culture. Morocco is a small farming community seventy miles south of Chicago; of the 850 students at the school, two are black. Whites in the town accuse the group of "acting black," and male students have reacted by calling them names, spitting at them, punching and pushing them into lockers, and threatening them with further violence. Since mid-November there have been death threats, a bomb scare, and a Ku Klux Klan rally at the school. "This is a white community," said one sixteen-year-old male student. "If they don't want to be white, they should leave." (Ignatiev and Garvey 1996, flyleaf)

Not only have the students encountered violent opposition, but school officials have suspended them with the excuse of "dress code violations." This example, which received wide publicity on the *Montel Williams Show*, is clearly the kind of spontaneous, "in your face" rebellion that *Race Traitor* hopes to encourage. The editors comment, "This incident reveals . . . the tremendous power of crossover culture to undermine both white solidarity and male authority."

It is important to understand why *this* sort of event is what *Race Traitor* finds so hopeful, rather than the more common and certainly more tame occurrences of white antiracist organizing on college campuses and white support for such political efforts as the Free Mumia Abu-Jamal campaign, union campaigns, and Martin Luther King Day rallies. What happened in Morocco, Indiana, differs from those events in that it was a spontaneous (every anarchist's dream) rebellion that involved a *repudiation of white identity*.

The cornerstone of the *Race Traitor* position is, "nothing less than the abolition of the white race will lay the foundation for a new departure" (1996, 2). The journal's main slogan is "treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity" (10). Whites need to challenge the "normal operation" of "the institutions that reproduce race as a social category" (3). Sounding like Foucault at times, the editors argue that whiteness is made real through social practices that occur in a multitude of daily social interactions, and that this process works

only because it assumes that people designated white will play by the rules. “But if enough of those who looked white broke the rules of the club” such that, for example, the police would “come to doubt their ability to recognize a white person,” this could disrupt the whole mechanism, and whiteness might be abolished (13). How many such white dissidents would it take? “One John Brown—against the background of slave resistance—was enough for Virginia” (13). His deeds “were part of a chain of events that involved mutual actions and reactions on a scale beyond anything they could have anticipated—until a war began” (13). Thus, given the persistence of rebellions by people of color, white acts of treason might be just what is needed to ignite a civil war, one that perhaps this time could truly be a revolutionary war as well.

Such strategic thinking obviously resonates with the postmodern sensibilities of radical youth today, which accounts in part, I believe, for the increased interest in anarchist theories of social change. That is, both postmodernism and anarchism offer a theoretical justification for the current belief that old-fashioned, barricade-style “wars of position” are hopeless in a shifting terrain of capitalist power, with resources that are not themselves centralized or geographically stable in any way. In a situation in which political power cannot be mapped, economic power exists on no fixed grid, and the causal relations between politics, economics, and culture have no stability, it is possible to hope that enough incidents like the Morocco case might be just the catalyst needed.

But what other sorts of white treason can one engage in today? In the civil rights movement white individuals refused white solidarity over Jim Crow and sat in at lunch counters with African Americans, rode in the backs of buses, and marched in open opposition to their communities. These were public acts of social treason without a doubt, and they incited violent reactions sometimes as brutal as black people themselves suffered. In the absence of such a political movement, there are other actions whites can take that are less dramatic but that can send similar messages, such as the clothing styles chosen by the “Free To Be Me” group in Morocco, or the choice of schools and neighborhoods, realtors and other services or businesses. However, outside the context of a widely publicized political movement, the meanings of such acts are less predictable, and they may even have harmful unintended effects, as when the choice of a minority neighborhood by whites actually aids gentrification. In the Morocco case, one of the two black students also was threatened and harassed, and his mother was attacked and beaten by two white men while she was shopping in town. Thus the most violence was suffered by the black families in the school, families that were not consulted and probably unprepared for the attack. Given that we lack total control over the meanings and the effects of our actions, and given the absence of a widely publicized political movement of “white treason” that could confer meaning, the real effects of individual actions is uncertain.

The major problem with *Race Traitor's* proposal, however, is that, in one important sense, whites cannot disavow whiteness. One's appearance of being white will still operate to confer privilege in numerous and significant ways, and to avow treason does not render whites ineligible for these privileges, even if they work hard to avoid them. In one essay for the journal, Edward H. Peeples recounts a small incident that happened to him at a Richmond newsstand in 1976. When he went to purchase an African American newspaper, the white cashier looked at him and explained "You don't want this newspaper; its the colored newspaper." Peeples responded, loudly enough for others in the shop to hear, "You must think I'm white." He explains what happened next.

[The cashier] was startled. But within seconds she came to realize that these simple words represented a profound act of racial sedition. I had betrayed her precious "white race". . . . The cashier became furious. But she was clearly at a loss of what to do with this Judas. (Quoted in Ignatiev and Garvey 1996, 82)

I do not doubt that such an act in the South is a profound sedition. But such a practice could not completely eliminate the operation of white privilege, for the reasons already stated. And some "treasonous" whites, with white privilege still largely in place, might then feel entitled to disengage with whiteness without feeling any link of responsibility for white racist atrocities of the past; or they might consider a declaration that they are "not white" as a sufficient solution to racism without the trouble of organizing or collective action. This position would then end up uncomfortably similar to the "colorblindness" attitude that pretends ignorance about one's own white identity and refuses responsibility.

These worries relate to another feature I found in *Race Traitor*, the tendency to emphasize that most whites have not committed racist violence (see, for example, 16-17). The authors have developed a rhetorical strategy intended to promote a disassociation or disidentification between whites (especially the working class) and racist institutions; to say, in effect, "this is not really *your* history, so why defend it?" On the one hand, this strategy is based on a more accurate telling of Southern history than I myself received in grade school: I was never told that there were a significant number of white deserters and dissenters during the Civil War. Among whites in the South, it was commonly said during the civil rights movement that the only whites who crossed lines of racial solidarity and supported the "rabble-rousers" like Dr. Martin Luther King were Northerners (Yankees!), and Jewish to boot. An accurate revision of white history would be enlightening and encouraging to whites with anti-racist tendencies.

Yet there is a danger in the strategy of disassociating white workers from past racist violence: some white workers *did* participate in such violence. It is notoriously difficult to tell how many, given the secretive nature of Ku Klux Klan activity. Judging from the documented public announcements and celebrations of lynching, as when W. E. B. DuBois sorrowfully describes passing a severed black finger displayed for the public while he was on his way to work in Atlanta, we have to conclude that, like the German population during the Nazi regime, white working-class people in the South and elsewhere largely knew about the atrocities and largely approved of them.

Shortly before he died, I discovered that my own grandfather had participated in Klan violence in his youth. He was a semiliterate sharecropper who lived poor and died poor, sneered at by the rich folks he worked for; but I also believe that his sense of white superiority must have helped to produce the self-confidence it took for him to go back to school as an adult and learn to read, write, and do enough arithmetic to improve his job skills. Therefore, although I believe, like Ignatiev and Garvey, that an argument can be constructed that it is actually not in poor whites' overall economic interest to maintain racism (certainly, taking more than one generation into account), I think these authors sidestep the issue of moral culpability and its relation to social identity. Ignatiev writes "It is our faith . . . that the majority of so-called whites in this country are neither deeply nor consciously committed to white supremacy; like most human beings in most times and places, they would do the right thing if it were convenient" (12). But white supremacy may be deeply held *because* it is not conscious. If the collective structures of identity formation that are necessary to create a positive sense of self—a self that is capable of being loved—require racism, then only the creation of new structures of identity formation can redress this balance. Racism appears to be deeply sedimented into white psyches in a process that is newly reinforced each day.

Thus, the issue of convenience unfortunately misses the point. In regard to clearly identified racist acts of commission that require conscious intent, Ignatiev may be right. But this notion can coexist with the idea that white people's sense of who they are in the world, especially in this country, depends deeply on white supremacy. And this dependence may often operate precisely because they are themselves oppressed; that is, because their immigrant relations were a humble lot without other cultural resources from which to draw a sense of entitlement. White supremacy may be all that poor whites have to hold on to in order to maintain a sense of self-love. The very genealogy of whiteness was entwined from the beginning with a racial hierarchy, which can be found in every major cultural narrative from Christopher Columbus to Manifest Destiny to the Space Race and the Computer Revolution. Staying in the vanguard is quite often inconvenient; it requires war and great sacrifice to remain "ahead." But it is pursued nevertheless, precisely because it is necessary

for the possibility of self-love. So here is the predicament: we *must* tell the full story of white racism in all its complexity, and this complexity cannot be fully resolved through a class analysis that sequesters the guilty as only among the rich. Yet facing the reality of whites' moral culpability threatens their very ability to be moral today, because it threatens their ability to imagine themselves as having a socially coherent relation to a past and a future toward which anyone could feel an attachment.

*Race Traitor's* attention to crossover culture may be motivated by this concern, in the hope that a "mixed" cultural identity could replace whiteness and thereby avoid its moral legacy. Paradoxically, although its contributors criticize all variants of multiculturalism because, among other reasons, it tends to talk about oppression without naming any oppressors, *Race Traitor* is very optimistic about white crossover. The editors recognize that "the willingness to borrow from black culture does not equal race treason" (3). Yet they interpret the increase in white crossover as signaling the fracturing of white supremacy. Phil Rubio even claims that "white cultural assimilation . . . is already a form of political awareness" (in Ignatiev and Garvey 1996, 161).

This position has elicited skepticism from some readers of color, whose critiques the journal has printed. Salim Washington and Paul Garon both have expressed concern that examples of race traitors are being romanticized. Washington points out that black artists continue to "suffer through diminished access to and control of the means of cultural production" (Ignatiev and Garvey 1996, 166). Merely to appreciate and acknowledge black influences in dominant culture does nothing to remedy this. Garon similarly stresses that the usual economic effects of crossover are that white performers are enriched and black performers have even less chance to make a living. Garon also challenges the view (not necessarily held by Rubio) that no essential musical integrity is lost when white performers play the blues. Context affects the meaning imparted, and in Garon's view, race is a salient feature of musical context.

This issue illuminates the difficulties of white transformation. When does the transcendence of cultural chauvinism merge into cultural appropriation? Especially in a consumer society, the core of white privilege is the ability to consume anything, anyone, anywhere. The desire to crossover itself is coterminous with a colonizing desire of appropriation, even to the trappings of social identity.

Contemporary music does model, at times, an exemplary globalism, in which borrowings are so rapid and multidirectional that the concepts of "origin" and "identity," as well as "private property," are quickly losing their intelligibility. This does not mean that the culture industry transcends the racial hierarchies of existing political economies, hybridity in cultural forms does not entail a corresponding distribution of economic success. However, in trying to overcome unfair distributions of financial resources or access to

cultural production, it is unrealistic to propose a voluntary self-segregation or, for example, that whites stick to white music. Hybridity, and therefore crossover, is an unstoppable force. Racism has not, on the whole, slowed cultural hybridization. This means that cultural hybridization is not a sufficient cause or even a necessary indicator of antiracism.

To analyze the political implications of crossover culture, it might be helpful to use Sartre's analysis of the Look and its role in social relations. According to Sartre, in the Look of the Other we perceive the Other's subjective consciousness—that is, the Other's interior life similar to our own. We also perceive our being-for-others, or the value and meaning we have in the eyes of the Other. As Lewis Gordon has recently argued in his interesting book *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism*, white racism is generally predicated on the need and desire of whites to deflect the Look of the Black Other, a Look that will reveal guilt, accusation, and moral deficiency (Gordon 1995, especially chapter 14). If racism is the attempt to deflect a Black Look, then what is crossover?

Sartre, who was famously pessimistic about the egalitarian potential of human relations, presented two options that can be taken toward the Other. The first involves an attempt to transcend the Other's transcendence, or negate the Other's own freedom, especially the freedom to judge and value. This mode is characteristic of hate and sadism. The other mode involves the attempt to incorporate the transcendence of the Other; that is, to have the Other's love, but freely of the Other's own choosing. This is the paradox of love: we want the Other to love us in a way that is absolute, unchanging, and reliable, but we want this love to be freely given without coercion. Thus we want the love to be simultaneously noncontingent and contingent. Sartre characterizes this as the desire to incorporate the Other's freedom *within me*, such that my needs and desires are still at the center and the Other exists only as a portion of my arranged world without real autonomy.

White attempts to appropriate black culture may fall into this category, as a strategy that does not seek to deflect the Black Look or repress it into blank submission but instead seeks to incorporate the Black Look within oneself. In other words, attempts by whites to assimilate wholly to blackness may be motivated by the desire to make the Black Look—or Black subjectivity, which is what the Look signifies—safely internal and thus nonthreatening to the self. The recognition of an irreducible difference, a difference that crossover tries to overcome, would maintain the Other's own point of departure, the Other's own space of autonomous judgment, and thus the possibility for a truly reciprocal recognition of full subjectivity.

Such an analysis does not require a wholesale rejection of crossover, but counsels a careful scrutiny of crossover postures that would seek to erase difference. An example of such a posture would be one that Garon criticizes, the view that the blues are a transracial, universally accessible cultural form. It

may be that the denial of the black specificity of blues, with the argument that suffering is available across race is motivated by unease about what expressions of *black* suffering especially signify for white listeners. Universal suffering is nonaccusatory; black suffering is implicitly accusatory, just by making reference to black history. Thus, to incorporate the blues as a cultural form that is proper to American experience without a racial specificity helpfully deflects the potential meaning for whites of a blues identified as black. This does not entail that white antiracists should never sing the blues, or that they cannot develop new forms of the blues, but that the blackness of the blues, or at least of its cultural genesis, should not be dismissed as irrelevant.

#### NEW TRADITIONS IN MISSISSIPPI

If the main problem with Katz's *White Awareness* is a lack of social and historical context or class analysis, *Race Traitor* provides class analysis without sufficient attention to cultural processes of identity formation. The final white antiracist example I will discuss is more consciously situated in a particular context and aimed at transforming white self-understanding.

The conclusions of Ruth Frankenburg's ethnographic study of white women suggest that whiteness is an invisible racial identity to whites (Frankenberg 1993). Katz similarly argues that the first task of antiracism is for whites to come to understand that they are white. But where I grew up, whiteness was a substantive racial identity whose political privileges were well known and mostly considered justified. The cultural substance of whiteness consisted in such elements as putting peanuts in your R.C. Cola and souping up your car engine. There was a recognizably white way to dance, get drunk, and sing in church. Ethnic differences among whites were subordinated to the all-important racial identification that secured one's place in a segregated society. Because Southern whiteness has had a high degree of racial self-consciousness, then, it should be an instructive location at which to observe attempts at antiracist transformation.

About ten years ago, the University of Mississippi decided to go proactive against racism, as well as sexism, by instituting a mandatory course for all freshmen. Michael L. Harrington, chair of the Philosophy Department, was asked to design a suitable course. Harrington called the course University Studies 101, taught it himself for a number of years, and developed a textbook that continues to be used. Harrington is a white Southerner who both knows the mindset of white Mississippians very well and has fought racism in the South and at the University of Mississippi since the 1960s. Being asked to design this course was just the sort of chance he had been waiting for.

The University of Mississippi, or "Ole Miss," as it is affectionately called, is one of the most racist institutions in the South. It has played key roles in defending the Confederacy, fighting Reconstruction, and maintaining segre-

gation. In 1963, it took more than thirty thousand federal troops to enforce the admission of Ole Miss's first African American student, James Meredith. White residents of Oxford, the town that Bob Dylan memorialized, came to campus armed and organized when the court order was issued to admit Meredith, and several journalists and soldiers were killed before the rioting was over. Even after this, the university administration continued actively to oppose integration. It took another ten years before faculty could speak up in favor of integration without losing their jobs. Still, to this day, Ole Miss keeps its reputation across the South as a school where whites can go and be openly racist, as I remember vividly from a conversation I had with the Homecoming Queen in my high school in Florida who decided to attend college there. At Ole Miss, rebel flags wave at sports events and hang from dormitory windows; the university band plays "Dixie" as a fight song.<sup>4</sup> For obvious reasons, then, in a state in which African Americans make up nearly half the population, the black student body at Ole Miss is still under 10 per cent. In this environment, to teach against racism in a mandatory course was surely to engage the struggle in the belly of the beast.

Harrington's strategy was to envelop an antiracist and antisexist message in a course ostensibly organized around the topic of university life, what a university is, and what an intellectual community needs in order to flourish. In this way, the message could be framed as a series of do's rather than don'ts. For example, maintaining a university with high standards is in every student's interest; to protect and develop such a university, students need to value and respect cultural diversity and gender equality. The university traditions of intellectual diversity and academic freedom require sufficient tolerance of diversity so that critical debate can develop. The textbook for the course, *Traditions and Changes: The University of Mississippi in Principle and in Practice*, thus presents three full chapters before the subject of racism is broached. Both the textbook and the course, then, are as strategically thought out and organized as the workshops in *White Awareness* and as carefully directed in their goal of producing lasting changes in the thinking and behavior of whites.

Harrington did not shy away from providing an accurate history of racism at Ole Miss, although the text acknowledges the pain these accounts invoke. He gives and assesses the entire history of the institution, so that students have the historical facts concerning the university's legacy of support for white supremacy. Harrington provides a revised narrative of U.S. history and Southern history as well, but here he adopts a two-sided approach. U.S. cultural and political traditions are argued to have a dual character, on the one hand institutionalizing inequality and on the other hand valuing and slowly extending equality. The overall argument is that there is something positive from the past to draw from, but it is a potential not yet fully realized. White Mississippians will benefit overall from developing a cooperative spirit with black Mississippians in order to advance common goals, but this can come

about only through fully acknowledging and overcoming racism. Harrington hopefully declares that from the “disaster of the human spirit in Mississippi” arises “the opportunity for a phoenix redemption” (Harrington 1996, 141). The significant diversity of the state can be a rich resource from which to build a stronger society that is a “shining symbol to a nation and to a world battling the same demons we can exorcize” (141).

*Traditions and Changes* has significant limitations. It offers no class analysis, nor does it explore any issues of reparation or redistribution of economic resources. The projection of a shared interest glosses over real class disparities that are likely to continue to be disproportionately distributed between whites and blacks, even though many whites are also poor in the state. This is, however, a course for freshmen at the University of Mississippi and its task is to move students from an initial starting position that is comparatively low.

It is interesting to note the different strategies offered here and in *Race Traitor*. The latter makes its appeal to whites by arguing that racist practices really served only the interests of the rich, and thus that poor whites were used as dupes to support racism. Although this strategy supplies a needed class analysis of the history of racism, it does not help whites think about how to overcome their own connection to a racist past. It simply says, “you are not really connected to that racist past.” But in the South, white culture has been more widely supportive of racist practices like segregation and discrimination and racist symbols, such as the Rebel flag and “Dixie.” Whites gain other benefits besides economic ones from racism, such as a collective sense of superiority and entitlement. Reductive arguments that portray these as merely bourgeois scams cannot make sense of the complicated realities.

In relation to this issue, it is interesting that both *Race Traitor* and *Traditions and Changes* reject multiculturalism. Harrington defines multiculturalism as the premise that “all cultural differences are equal in value,” contrasting it with cultural diversity which promotes “tolerance for cultural differences, leaving open the question of which are desirable or superior” (1996, 38). In Mississippi, an antiracist cannot argue for the equal rights of diverse cultural traditions without undercutting the ability to argue against continued veneration of the Rebel flag.

Thus, despite its limitations, I found *Traditions and Changes* to provide a helpful model for acknowledging white complicity in racism and the need to repudiate key aspects of white identity within an overall project that seeks to develop a collective transformation toward a nonracist white identity. Utilizing the positive traditions of critical, open, and democratic reflection, University Studies 101 and its textbook aim to create a series of open-ended discussions that will get white students to contribute in transforming their university, their community, and in the process, themselves.

## WHITE DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS

I have wanted to suggest that there is an ongoing but rarely named struggle among whites as a result of liberation movements and the declining plausibility of white supremacist narratives. Antiracist theorists need to acknowledge that the struggle occurs not only in relation to conscious choices and objectively determinable economic interests but in relation to psychic processes of identity formation, which means that rational arguments against racism will not be sufficient to make a progressive move. As whites lose their psychic social status, and as processes of positive identity construction are derailed, intense anxiety, hysteria, and depression can result. The most likely solution to this will be, of course, for new processes to develop that simply shift targets to create new categories of the abject through which to inflate collective self-esteem, and this is already happening in revivals of nativism, the vilification of illegal immigrants, a state-sponsored homophobia, and so on.

Such developments may prompt the question: why maintain white identity at all, given that any group identity will be based on exclusion and an implicit superiority? Should we not move beyond race categories? I doubt that this can be done anytime soon. The weight of too much history is sedimented in these marked bodies with inscriptions that are very deep. Rather than attempting to erase these inscriptions as a first step, we need a period of reinscription to redescribe and reunderstand what we see when we see race. Paul Gilroy's study *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* traces outlines of an identity configuration of a multinational black culture that does not seem to rely on an objectification (or abjectification) process involving repudiation of the Other (Gilroy 1993). His characterization of black Atlantic identity portrays it as working more through an invocation of a shared past and shared present cultural forms than through a shared discrete set of substantive or essential Afrocentric elements that require contrasting, excluded alternatives. Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin have done similar work in relation to Jewish identity, invoking a "diaspora identity" that is not based on exclusion or identity borders (Boyarin and Boyarin 1995). However, both the Boyarins and Gilroy understand such identities as relying heavily on a shared history, which is precisely what is problematic for whites. The attempt to emphasize the genuinely positive moments of that past and to see only those moments as representative of the true core of whiteness is too obviously implausible, as well as susceptible to becoming part of a rewriting of the supremacist or vanguard narrative once again.

Perhaps white identity needs to develop its own version of "double consciousness"; indeed, to name as such that two-sided sense of the past and the future that can be found in aspects of the works discussed in this essay. White double consciousness is not the move between white and black subjectivities or black and American perspectives, as DuBois developed the

notion. Instead, for whites, double consciousness requires an everpresent acknowledgment of the historical legacy of white identity constructions in the persistent structures of inequality and exploitation, as well as a newly awakened memory of the many white traitors to white privilege who have struggled to contribute to the building of an inclusive human community. The Michelangelos stand beside the Christopher Columbuses, and Noam Chomskys next to the Pat Buchanans. The legacy of European-based cultures is a complicated one. It is better approached through a two-sided analysis than an argument that obscures either its positive or negative aspects. White representations within multiculturalism must then be similarly dialectical, retrieving from obscurity the history of white antiracism even while providing a detailed account of colonialism and its many cultural effects. This, then, is the challenge: to transform the basis of collective self-respect from global, racial vanguardism to a dedicated commitment to end racism.

## NOTES

1. For balanced critiques of the movie, see Bird 1996. The movie champions one group of Indians by demonizing another group in traditional one-dimensional fashion. It replays a "going native" transformative narrative in which Europeans shed their enculturated deformities to return to an original nobility, in which native peoples are mere instruments toward this end.

2. For an excellent antidote to this, see Ramos 1995.

3. For more on my own identity, see Alcoff 1995.

4. For a critique of the way racism survives in these movies, see Wiegman 1995, esp. chap. 4.

5. For a recently published case, see D'Orso 1996. This tells the story of the town massacre also chronicled in John Singleton's film *Rosewood* 1997. See also Jordan 1968, Gossett 1965; Hudson 1972; Acuna 1988; and Mills 1997.

6. As this essay goes to press, the playing of Dixie at sports events is being challenged and may soon end at the University of Mississippi.

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