

# Parting Words

## White Erasures: Critiquing Critical White Studies

James C. Jupp

The first time I read Peggy McIntosh's (1988) "White Privilege and Male Privilege" I was living on the U.S.–Mexican border in Matamoros by force of U.S. immigration laws. At that time, my Mexican wife worked as a personnel trainer for a multinational *maquiladora* (manufacturer/factory owner) and would have had to give up her job in order to begin the three-year process of "immediate entry" into the United States. I was working on the U.S. side teaching seventh grade language arts for Raymondville Independent School District and finishing my Master's degree in English at the University of Texas at Brownsville. On first reading the article, I considered it a confessional of self-flagellation that lacked serious commitment to political practice. I also thought it lacked any sense of bridging differences—at that time, I worked in a 98 percent Mexican and Mexican-American school. Although I understood her argument that male privilege interlocked with "a phenomenon of white privilege which was similarly denied and protected" (p. 1), I couldn't relate to the generalities she spun. McIntosh insisted that I had a host of White upper-middle class privileges, but they didn't fit my surroundings. I couldn't arrange to be with White people; I was getting robbed in Matamoros (like many of my wife's Mexican co-workers); there was no guarantee that the Matamorenses we saw daily would be friendly to us. After all, since we were an interracial couple, it followed—according to border stereotypes—that our age difference must be enormous, I must be rich, my wife must be a puta (prostitute). None of these things were true, but it didn't matter much because that was a starting point for negotiating perceptions.

It might seem like I'm leading into a discussion of reverse racism, but I'm not. I was more than aware that I occupied a space of privilege because I bumped into it every time I turned around. My privilege was most striking during my summer vacations when I crossed the border to study at the University of Texas at Brownsville. I'd pull my car out on La Sexta, the major avenue that connected La Colonia Modelo where I lived with the International Bridge No. 1 and pass car-washers with their buckets and brushes, handymen and plumbers smoking cigarettes and talking with their tools front-loaded onto tricycles ready to move, homeless people and groups of hoodlums on the street corners, taco stands near the bus terminal all painted yellow and full around the clock, and other workers who refused to work for the low wages being offered by the more than 150 multinational maquiladoras located temporarily in Matamoros and ready to move at the slightest market ripple to the Philippines, Honduras, or China.

When I approached the bridge each day, I could cross without showing ID by simply saying: "U.S. citizen." Many times I wondered: Who purchased my leisure? How can my work be worth so much? I knew I was on the receiving end of some unwieldy privi-

leges—many of which could be associated with my race, but when living in this Mexican/U.S. *mestizo* (mixed race) space, was privilege White? It was for me, but is dominant Mexican and Mexican-American culture related to race like in the United States? When living in dominant regional and bourgeois Mexican and Mexican-American cultures, can we whitewash privilege? Maybe...but even if you want to go so far as to say that the dominant Mexican and Mexican-American culture I was living in granted me White privilege, we're still not talking about the same type of White privilege as in McIntosh's upper middle class suburbs.

End White erasure #1.

Much of the literature on critical White studies (Frankenburg, 1993; McIntosh, 1988; Sleeter, 1992; Scheurich, 2002a; Scheurich, 2002b; Scheurich & Young, 2002) analyzes a complex of race, gender, and class normative privilege and then identifies a common-sense White worldview. As Christine Sleeter (1992) explains, "worldviews of whites tend to support white privilege, but do so in ways that whites interpret as natural or fair" (p. 20). James Joseph Scheurich and Michelle Young's article "Coloring Epistemology" (2002), which identifies White knowledge construction and historical privileges, analyzes racism on individual, institutional, societal, and civilizational levels. Scheurich and Young (2002) argue that racism is embedded in covert individual acts, institutional systems, societal assumptions, and a Euro-American civilizational ontology. According to Scheurich and Young (2002), the modernist tradition on which our civilization exists is founded on White supremacy and Whites, in an ontological sense, are complicit.

While I get this understanding of White racism, I question the national limits of this discourse, of which Scheurich and Young make no mention. Here, I refer to the privilege of my lived experience in Mexico as an English teacher in Mérida, Yucatán, from 1990 to 1995 in a way that might diminish the importance of "whiteness" in relation to structures of dominance.

In my experience, critical White studies literatures focus entirely on the United States. When I began teaching in Mérida in 1990, I became immersed in entirely different structures of dominance that weren't bound by whiteness. On the top of an interlocking and interconnected social pyramid in Yucatán was a small group of Lebanese businessmen who owned the Volkswagen dealership, the Coca-Cola bottling franchise, a huge cookie factory called Dondé that employed 500 yucatecos (people from Yucatan), the largest modern supermarket chain in the region, the most popular chain of department stores (Chapur), and a number of smaller retail chains and restaurant franchises. While the dominance of a Lebanese oligarchy in Yucatán might not be directly comparable to Scheurich's argument of an individual-institutional-societal-civilizational structure of Lebanese racism, it shows that you don't have to go too

far from the United States to find structures of dominance that aren't based on whiteness. Perhaps a broader and rooted geopolitical view (Appiah, 2005; Pinar, 2009) might deepen discussions on White race and dominance.

#### End White erasures #2

Furthermore, my reading in the tradición latinoamericana screams out that structures of dominance aren't inherently White. The discourse about cultural syncretism, or *mestizaje*, represents a way of knowing that, while radical at the beginning of the twentieth century, now appears as a grand narrative in Latin American school textbooks, presidential speeches, and conservative patriotism. Early examples of *mestizaje* are found in the chronicles of the Franciscan monk Motolinía (1994 [1555]) who lived with indigenous tribes, learned the lingua franca of pre-Hispanic Mexico—Nahuatl—to perfection, encouraged interracial marriage and worship, fought for the rights of indigenous tribes, and established Spanish-indigenous millenarian and communal religio-political communities while vigorously converting indigenous peoples to Christianity.

While the discourse of *mestizaje* emerged during the Colonial Period, it gained political importance during the Independence Period and played a central role in defining the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Simón Bolívar's (1997 [1815]) "Carta a Jamaica" explained the political aspirations of the Independence from Spain while making direct reference to *mestizaje*: "we are neither Indians nor Europeans, but rather an intermediary species between the legitimate heirs and the Spanish usurpers" (p. 93). The Mexican Revolution of 1910 embodied *mestizaje*'s coming of age as a grand narrative in Latin American nation building, as the central figures of the Mexican Revolution, Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, were campesinos or rural mestizos who freed themselves through violent action; they were not elite patriarchs educated in Europe like Simón Bolívar. With the Revolution's central figures being mestizos comes the idea that the *mestizo*—the mix of European, Indian, and African-Caribbean ancestry and culture—represents the central historical, social, and political protagonist in Latin America. We see here that critical White studies literatures often lack historical specificity, a problem they share with U.S. multicultural thinking, which forever adopts a frame of analysis based on the U.S. civil rights movement.

#### End White erasures #3.

From my three White erasures, I find critical White studies literatures to 1) engage in totalizing understandings that may not represent Whites' experiences, 2) be entirely focused on the U.S. experience, and 3) ignore historical specificity, represented here by *mestizaje*. Yet in these three erasures, I've somehow managed to evade the central questions that critical White studies literatures want me to consider: Why, in our thinking, do Whites, like myself, make erasures? How does whiteness play out in institutions like schools? I'll take up these questions in Part 2, to appear in the summer issue.

## References

- Appiah, K. (2005). *The Ethics of Identity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Bolívar, S. (1997). Carta de Jamaica. In G.M. Varona-Lacey (Ed.), *Introducción a la literatura hispano-americana: de la Conquista al siglo xx* (pp. 87–100). Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company.
- De Benavente, T. (Motolinía) (1994[1555]). *Relaciones de la Nueva España*. México, DF: Universidad Autónoma de México.
- Frankenberg, R. (1993). Growing up white: The social geography of race; Thinking through race. In *The Social Construction of Whiteness: White Women, Race Matters* (pp. 43–70, 137–190). New York: Routledge.
- McIntosh, P. (1988). White privilege and male privilege: A personal account of coming to see correspondences through work in women's studies. Wellesley Center for Research on Women. Wellesley, MA. Working Paper 189.
- Pinar, W. (2004). *What Is Curriculum Theory?* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Pinar, W.F. (2006). *The Synoptic Text Today and Other Essays: Curriculum Development After the Reconceptualization*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Pinar, W. (2009). *The Worldliness of a Cosmopolitan Education: Passionate Lives in Public Service*. New York: Routledge.
- Scheurich, J. (2002a). Introduction. In J. Scheurich (Ed.), *Anti-racist Scholarship: An Advocacy* (pp. 1–19). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Scheurich, J. (2002b). Toward a white discourse on white racism. In J. Scheurich (Ed.), *Anti-racist Scholarship: An Advocacy* (pp. 25–36). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Scheurich, J., & Young, M. (2002). Coloring epistemology: Are our research epistemologies racially biased? In J. Scheurich (Ed.), *Anti-racist Scholarship: An Advocacy* (pp. 51–73). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Slattery, P. (2006). *Curriculum Development in the Postmodern* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Sleeter, C. (1992). Resisting racial awareness: How teachers understand the social order from their racial, gender, and social class locations. *Educational Foundations*, 6(2), 7–32. 🌐