CYNTHIA KAUFMAN

"THE MAKING AND UNMAKING OF WHITENESS"

a conference report

On April 13–14, 1997, what was called the first major conference on what it means to be white, "The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness," took place on the campus of the University of California Berkeley. The conference was organized by a group of Berkeley graduate students who have participated in an ongoing seminar on whiteness. What they originally conceived of as a one-day academic conference turned into three days of intense discussion framed by academia but richly overflowing that container. The conference, which was free and widely publicized (largely on the internet by people interested in the conference), drew a large crowd of active antiracist organizers and received surprising press attention. It was covered in several local newspapers and local TV news was present throughout most of the conference. It became the radio talk show cause-of-the-moment, though commentators could not decide if the conference should be denounced for promoting white supremacy or for promoting white self-flagellation.

On the first day, the clash between academic and activist worlds seemed to be leading the conference to the verge of disintegration. Members of the audience were outraged by the dearth of sessions addressing activist concerns.[1] They were disturbed by the classic aca-

Cynthia Kaufman is a member of the *Socialist Review* editorial collective. She teaches philosophy and women's studies at De Anza College in Cupertino.

demic format. And the crowd often groaned and broke out in whispers of disdain when panelists used words like *non-white* and *Hispanic*.[2] Also challenged was the fact that many panelists framed their forms of address as if the audience were all white.[3]

For me the conference was exciting on a number of levels. As a person who often inhabits highly academic spaces alternately with highly activist political spaces, it was a rare pleasure to see these two worlds butting up against one another in what was largely a productive, if not easy or comfortable, way. Also, I had just finished coteaching a faculty and staff development class on white awareness of racism with my colleague, Jean Miller, at the community college where I am a faculty member. The central goal of the class was to get white faculty and staff members to take on antiracist work as their own. One of our central premises was that white people often see themselves as outside of the racial structure and that this gets in the way of their doing antiracist work, or doing it well. When white people do not see themselves as situated in the racial structure, it is too easy for them to see challenging racism as the work of people of color or when they do take the work on, to take it on from a guilt-laden or missionary perspective. For me, questions around how we understand the place of white people in the US racial structure, and what it means to be white, were pressing.

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When I began to take up this work, I felt anxiety about the numerous ways that it could be done badly. If the goal is to decenter whiteness, are we perhaps re-centering it with this direct attention? Given the fact that most academic curriculum is disguised "White Studies," are we further marginalizing the work of and about people of color by focusing yet more attention on the realities of white people? While many scholars of color have insisted that whites need to look critically at what it means to be white (as people of color have done for a very long time), what needs to be done to assure that the work is politically productive? The conference helped me to clarify my thinking on some of these questions. In some ways it confirmed my worst fears and in others it helped point the way toward an antiracist understanding of whiteness.

In one of the first talks at the conference, "On the Whiteness of the Police," author Annalee Newitz discussed conflicts in police forces and in popular representations of the police between the nonracist professional officer and the working-class white racist cop. While its author, Newitz, seemed quite unaware of the ways in which "professional" is defined along deeply racial terms, this point did not seem lost on many conference participants who suggested, in comments addressed to the panel and in conversations around the conference, that the very form of the conference was deeply racialized. Panelists were reminded from the floor that the disembodied authorial voice of "objective" analysis instantiated one of the major tropes of whiteness as an invisible, false universal. Expectations around what is considered polite, how intimate and personal one is expected to be, as well as practices associated with dress and eating required by the professional world are precisely those dominant in the white middle class.[4] While points like this were often made from the floor, it was striking how little attention was given to academic forms in the academic papers given at the conference.

By the second day I had begun to feel that something was very wrong with the process we were engaged in. Whiteness was beginning to come forward as an interesting cultural phenomenon, to be analyzed and mused upon. White thinkers were being positioned as the experts on the experience of whiteness and the discussion was developing from the floor as if attention to whiteness were a new thing, just invented for the first time by white scholars. It was therefore a breath of fresh air for me when John Powell spoke in the middle of the second day. Putting most of his paper aside, and using the time allotted him to make some comments about the conference, Powell challenged us to look critically and with sharp political eyes at the project we were all engaged in. Many of the papers, he argued, seemed to be motivated by a desire to understand white identity correctly. He argued that his own project was not about understanding whiteness but rather about challenging racial hierarchy. Whiteness, he argued, is a relational term and cannot be understood outside the context of its relations to its subordinated others. The purpose of studying whiteness should be to help

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in the fight to challenge racism. Unless its antiracist agenda is kept clear, the studying of whiteness is likely to turn into a narcissistic practice among white scholars, in which white scholars are given license to study themselves, pay even less attention to the realities of people of color, and leave intact the structures of racism.

Through Powell's intervention, and the interventions of many people from the floor as questioners, the conference was continually being challenged to be strong and declarative about its politics and to not hide behind the niceties and unquestioned privilege of the academic conference format. By the second day, conference organizers had asked the invited discussants to give their time over to the audience for questions and comments. Panelists revised their papers and the discussions became increasingly frank and searching. A session was added to the end of the conference to deal with concerns around antiracist organizing.

In another helpful intervention, David Roediger pointed out that people of color have been studying white people for a very long time, and it would be tragic, though he pointed out that it was likely to become the case, if white people entering this field were to ignore the work done in this area by people of color and co-opt the recognition for being the only important authors on whiteness. He reminded the audience that the recent interest in whiteness among white scholars was urged by prominent African American scholars, bell hooks and Toni Morrison among them. He told the story of Toni Morrison being asked in a television interview why she did not write about white people. While the interviewer seemed to think it was a clever question, it showed a lack of awareness. Morrison had recently published *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination.*[5] Morrison's work on whiteness has largely been overlooked as she has been pigeonholed as an expert on African American experience. Roediger castigated the academic world that has refused to take African American knowledge of whiteness as significant and cautioned those present to not make the same mistake, reminding us of the important work on whiteness by scholars such as W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, and Morrison.

Giving another set of cautionary remarks that I found useful, Ruth Frankenberg raised the specter of whiteness studies becoming a form of ethnic studies "me-too-ism," where white people assert their right to have their own department in Ethnic Studies along with groups of people of color. While participants in the conference, panelists and audience alike, seemed united on the need for a critical study of whiteness, Frankenberg argued that this study cannot be built along the same lines as the studies of other groups in the racial structure. The peculiar position of white people in a structure of white supremacy makes this impossible. It is crucial to focus on the political practices through which white identities are formed and white culture created. A study of whiteness must keep these political practices front and center if it is going to be helpful in antiracist projects. A focus on culture which minimizes the importance of racism as part of what it means to be white would be counterproductive. White culture should not be studied outside of its relation to racism.

There seemed to be a consensus at the conference around the claim that race is not a valid biological concept, but only a political construct. In her paper, "Legal Rhetoric in the Construction of Whiteness: Uses and Appropriations of Deconstruction and Anti-Essentialism in Conceptions of Race," Cheryl Harris argued that anti-essentialism around race should not lead to the claim that we should get beyond, or deny the importance of, race. In her careful study of the decisions of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, Harris argued that minimizing race through claims of color blindness is making a comeback as a tool for perpetuating racial hierarchy.

Along similar lines, Howard Winant used California's Proposition 209 as an example of the ways that the erasure of race works as a racist strategy.[6] Winant argued that several panelists at the conference (most notably Walter Benn-Michaels) were engaged in this practice. Drawing the audience's attention to Franz Fanon's critique of Sartre in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Winant claimed that it was imperative for members of the dominant group to acknowledge the realities of race as long as its effects are real for racially subordinate groups. Frankenberg commented in her paper that whiteness is only unmarked where

white supremacy is hegemonic. When white supremacy is being built or reconfigured it is strongly marked. Those wanting to preserve it at those moments are likely to insist on its remaining invisible.

Whiteness must be marked, investigated, and understood if whites are to be effective antiracists, but unless the political content of that project is kept clear and central, the study of whiteness is likely to become a form of self-help for white people in an identity crisis. In this area I found Mab Segrest's talk "The Souls of White Folk" to be especially helpful. Paraphrasing W.E.B. Du Bois, Segrest said that white people have largely given up a love of humanity for a love of power and in the process have become deeply alienated from their own existence. Those of us who are white need to study racism and what it means to be white in such a way that power is always in the picture. We should become so aware of the reality that we inhabit, we should know it so thoroughly that it becomes uninhabitable and we feel a need to do something about it. And we should do this, Segrest claimed, as a way of redeeming the emotional richness of our own realities.

It will be interesting to see where this area of study goes in the next few years. There has been a recent explosion of literature on and attention to whiteness.[7] At the conference there seemed to be a strong sense of the political importance of the happenings in this area. Yet there was an equally strong sense that it is quite possible to do this work badly, and have it end up reinforcing the racial structures that are ostensibly being brought down. The conference did much to fuel those doubts as well as to point out possible ways to address them.

NOTES

1 With the notable exception of Mab Segrest and Alan Berrubé all of the speakers were from the academic world, and few were involved in antiracist work outside of academia.

2 Commenting on the term *nonwhite*, panelist John Powell referred to white members of the audience as "the uncolored," arguing that it is problematic to identify people through a negation. *Hispanic*, while still contested nationwide, is largely rejected by radical Latinos in the Western United States.

3 The majority of the audience as well as the panelists were white, but perhaps 20 percent of both were people of color, with most of the people of color being African American. There were few Asian American and Latino participants, and many of the papers were structured along the black/white binary that is still at the heart of much of the literature on race in the United States.

4 While many panelists worked out of paradigms that took seriously the intersections of race, class, and gender, at times whiteness began to look like a monolithic category, not nuanced by the intersecting dynamics of class and gender.

5 Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

6 In 1997 California voters passed Proposition 209 which outlawed "racial preferences." The bill was called "The California Civil Rights Initiative" and supporters claimed that outlawing affirmative action would get us back to the principles of legal equality for all people by getting rid of legal attention to differences between us. Opponents pointed out that as long as race and gender matter in society, the law must take affirmative steps to challenge their negative effects.

7 Some of the books, recent and otherwise, that I have found most useful are: Tomás Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historic Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask*, trans. Charles Lam Markman (New York: Grove, 1967); Michelle Fine et al., *Off White: Readings on Race, Power and Society* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Judith Katz, *White Awareness: Handbook for Anti-Racist Training* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978); Toni Morrison; David Roediger, *Toward the Abolition of Whiteness* (New York: Verso, 1994); and Mab Segrest, *Memoir of a Race Traitor* (Boston: South End Press, 1994).