From wave to tsunami: the growth of third wave whiteness

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Steve Garner has provided a through and far reaching critique on the extent to which a “Third Wave” perspective on whiteness has (or has not) lived up to the theoretical promises and epistemological claims outlined here in this journal almost a decade ago. Not surprisingly from a scholar who quite literally wrote a book on whiteness (Whiteness: An Introduction, Routledge 2010) his observations and assessments are exceptionally expansive, touching on no less than ten strengths and weaknesses on our piece, “The Future of Whiteness: Mapping the Third Wave”.

In this response we focus on three of the larger concerns he raises about the promise of “white studies”. We will focus on (1) Gardner’s question if “canon of whiteness” with an agreed upon set of theoretical principles or empirical propositions has emerged over the last decade or if whiteness should simply be subsumed under the umbrella race and ethnic relations. (2) How do we reconcile that the centrality of whiteness is essentially an expression of white supremacy with scholarship that drifts away from or minimizes the power relations inherent in a racial hierarchy where whiteness is hegemonic. Garner’s concern here is one of definition: how should whiteness be defined and could the idea of white studies be operationalized, moving from the abstract to the concrete. (3) Garner asks if the study of whiteness, and third wave whiteness in particular, has lived up to its most grand, and sweeping claim to “make white supremacy visible”. We conclude that the field of whiteness studies has not only grown exponentially, but the treatment of whiteness as a socio-political category linked to power and privilege, is now a subfield within the broader category of critical race studies and racial and ethnic relations. Whiteness studies or at least a discussion of white privilege is now included in many standard sociology textbooks and readers.
First, racial categories are social inventions. There is no particular canon, methodology or single defining treatise that defines the study of whiteness or its social construction. In our conceptualization of whiteness, we did not intend to suggest that it has any meaning outside of its relational and contingent placement in a racial hierarchy. White supremacy, and the construction, meaning and presentation of whiteness reflect specific historic and contingent power relations. Yet, as a category of study, it only derives its political meaning in relation to other racial groups within a racial hierarchy.

If there was one grand narrative that animated or guided how we were conceptualizing whiteness, following Michael Omi and Howard Winant, it would be to define this category as a racial project. Omi and Winant define this concept as an “interpretation, representation or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular lines (56) … [it is] racist if it creates or reproduces structures of domination based on essentialist categories of race” (Omi and Winant 1986, 71). At its core the focus on whiteness, has always been to make visible those institutions, social and cultural practices that redistribute resources along racial lines. The goal is to reveal the power inherent in whiteness. By some measures making the power relationships that undergird whiteness visible has been a success. One need only look at what occurs in in university classrooms, to see how the study of whiteness has become integrated into the curriculum. The dramatic rise in the number of college courses across the country that explicitly address the social, political and cultural meaning of whiteness in the United States, is evidence of the way that the study of whiteness has become normative.

The number of college classes with “whiteness” in their titles exploded in the early 1990s and all but disappeared by 2000. The life, death and rebirth of studying whiteness in the classroom is as much a tale about demographics as it is about cultural politics. The whiteness studies movement in the 1990s typically fused how whiteness, like all races, is a social construction with a type activism that explicitly challenged the invisibility of white privilege. The latter part of this mix became a lightning rod for conservatives during the 1990s Culture Wars who felt the classroom was being unduly politicized and the curriculum itself was anti-white. While these charges were rather exaggerated, there was a chilling effect in the university and the number of classes specifically addressing whiteness as an academic subject fell precipitously.

What has happened over the last decade however, is that the study of whiteness is back in the curriculum in many classes, but not as a stand-alone course offering. Whiteness – as a discreet area of study, has been folded into course materials along other racial groups that have long been the subject of critical examination. Students now routinely learn how whiteness as a racial category is socially constructed in the same way they would examine the social and political process of how ethnic groups including the
Chinese, Korean, and Japanese became, “Asians” upon arrival to the United States. Or how the word Hispanic, before it became Latino, now operates as a catchall that includes over twenty nationalities under one US Census. The invention of “Negroes”, then Blacks, and now African Americans, is an identity that homogenized diverse cultural, ethnic and linguistic groups from Africa, via the Middle Passage. The US-born “Negroes”, then became further transformed and new group, through rape, sexual slavery and less often consensual relationships with Europeans and Native Americans. What often surprises my European American students is that, their whiteness and white identity, rather than being a “natural”, stable, unchanging, unproblematic and unambiguous identity, was socially, economically and politically produced through violence and structural racism.

The number of courses focusing solely on whites almost disappeared within a decade but the scholarship within this field exploded with hundreds of scholars examining every conceivable facet of whiteness. What has happened is that scholars, typically white scholars, turned the research lens on the everyday practices, experiences, accomplishments and problems of white communities. The research is far reaching and extremely eclectic, from predictors of church attendance in rural white communities (Trandby and Hartmann 2008) to an examination of the relative rise in mortality rates in certain white communities (Murakawa 2011). Research on the explosion of opioid abuse and overdoses in rural and suburban white communities, particularly in areas that have seen their local economies devastated by post-industrial economic decline (Linnemann and Wall 2013).

Whiteness studies scholars have asked “What does intergenerational socio-economic mobility or immobility mean to white workers? “How do whites make sense of the ‘American Dream’ in a context in which it has left a sizable portion of the children and grandchildren of Baby Boomer (1945–1963) behind?” (Martinot 2010). Are Latinos and Asian communities following the pattern of earlier groups of European immigrants such as the Irish and Italians, that is, are they on the fast track to whitening (Gallagher 2010)? And if, so are there historic parallels to other groups who were once viewed outside the parameters of whiteness?

Professors informed by whiteness studies ask how is whiteness, as an increasingly explicit, often reactionary racial identity, emerging in the United States and how this trend is reconciled within the context of a nation that describes itself as post-race, colourblind society. While there may be very few “Social Construction of Whiteness” type classes left in the university the rebirth of this field in the form of an abundance of research on the cultural meaning of whiteness, shifts in white racial attitudes, and how the concept of whiteness has moved from a relatively invisible and unattended category to one that in now used openly by some whites as a legitimate carrier of group interests will be discussed in the classroom for decades to
come. We are aware of professors who have recently tweaked the materials in their syllabi to better explain to their students the unique way race, particularly whiteness, has played out in shaping President Trump’s rise to the White House and the social, economic and political factors that explain the rise of white identity politics, white nationalism, the spike in hate crimes and what deepening racial fault lines means for an increasingly diverse nation.

Finally, one need only review the table of contents in race and ethnicity textbooks or readers on US race relations to understand the extent to which whiteness, white privilege and its socio-historic construction are areas that are routinely examined from a social constructionist perspective that addresses white privilege and white invisibility.

Garner’s second contention is essentially one concerned with definitions and measurement, specifically the dilemma of having paradigm that now appears so inclusionary, far-reaching and interdisciplinary that the field has lost its initial purpose and focus. Whiteness as a conceptual lens is used to investigate fields that are extremely disparate (leisure, music, education, sub-cultures …) but what these research projects typically share is a focus on how whiteness operates in a system of racial stratification where the very existence of whiteness is rendered invisible and/or normalized through cultural practices. That whiteness as a critical lens has been taken up by scholars in law, education, history, cultural studies, feminist studies, film and media studies, or sociology does not mean that the field of study lacks clarity. What this wide usage suggests is that scholars are bringing the central underlying concept of whiteness, that is how white supremacy is experienced, expressed and reproduced, into their respective disciplines.

Finally, there is a concern that the study of whiteness, as Garner puts it to “make white supremacy visible” has drifted from its original purpose. Of the tens of thousands of articles, chapters and books listed in Google Scholar no doubt there exists research that is navel gazing or misses the forest for the trees but there has been an explosion of outstanding scholarship (much appearing in this journal) on whiteness that has been first and foremost concerned with exposing and dismantling white supremacy.

The current challenges emerging within the field of white studies is how to best employ recent scholarship to address the following question: How has Right wing politics (globally) managed the paradox of the diminishing returns of whiteness as a category of privilege, for the poor and working classes. A neo-conservative ideological turn has decoupling, or separated whiteness from its location as a cultural, political and economic site of privilege. In other words, whiteness is discussed as if it is a politically neutral category that exists outside of a racial structure. Racial justice and racial inequality is eluded. Sociological survey research and polling has revealed that a majority of white Americans, embrace the belief (and myth) that race as a social identity no longer shapes life chances, impedes mobility
or results in unequal or discriminatory treatment. This colour-blind discourse takes many forms and is disseminated throughout popular culture by government officials, politicians, celebrities, CEOs and talking heads. The incessant and ubiquitous presentation of race as a benign social marker in the media has reinforced a public discourse (and an orthodoxy) that about race that leads to the same conclusion among non-Blacks; we are now a post-racial, colourblind society where merit alone translates into mobility. As an ideological perspective the core belief that undergirds colourblind egalitarianism is the conviction that institutional racism and white privilege are practices that ended in the past. The perception by a majority of whites that we now are colourblind is why the Black Lives Matter movement was so jarring for some whites; in a colourblind America “all lives” should matter and to privilege black lives over others is, from a colourblind perspective a form of racism.

In the Era of Trump, the widespread belief among non-Blacks is that structural obstacles and inequality are no longer responsible for the racial inequalities that Blacks, Native Americans and some Latino groups face. This is a challenge for Whiteness Studies scholars. Although the socio-economic playing field is not level, a public discourse of colour-blindness and meritocracy continues to prevail. The concept of race (and racism) has been reconstituted, repackaged, and offered up in the media as an easily digested dichotomy; on one hand society’s presentation of self is one of colourblindness and on the other a minority of the population continues to embrace outdated racist ideologies. This new racial configuration levels a vertical socio-economic hierarchy where social resources typically flow to whites at the top of the pecking order and replaces it with a horizontal structure where ostensibly all racial categories have similar life chances. The resurrection of colourblindness as the dominant racial narrative today demonstrates the significance of theoretical value of sociological research that makes whiteness and white supremacy visible. Illuminating the mechanisms that socially, economically and politically reproduce whiteness as an identity and white supremacy is constantly dodging and pivoting so as to mask the inherent power dynamics are examples of how whiteness scholarship remains true to its calling.

**Disclosure statement**

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