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Race Ethnicity and Education
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cree20

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Version of record first published: 18 Oct 2007.

To cite this article: Zeus Leonardo (2007): The war on schools: NCLB, nation creation and the educational construction of whiteness, Race Ethnicity and Education, 10:3, 261-278

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13613320701503249

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Race Ethnicity and Education
Vol. 10, No. 3, September 2007, pp. 261–278

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

The war on schools: NCLB, nation creation and the educational construction of whiteness

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The study of whiteness in education is receiving increased attention. This essay argues that the No Child Left Behind Act is an example of color-blindness *par excellence*. NCLB's hidden referent of whiteness makes a casual pass at racial explanation that sidesteps race as a causal explanation for educational disparities. In this sense, NCLB is an 'act of whiteness' and perpetuates the innocence of whiteness as a system of privilege. It is a form of whiteness as policy. Its white common sense deems racial disparities as unfortunate outcomes of group competition, uneven social development, or worse, as stubborn cultural explanations of the inferiority of people of color. The essay argues for a color-conscious perspective that problematizes the otherwise race-neutral discourse of NCLB. It ends with a discussion of the future of whiteness by engaging the debate between the abolition and rearticulation of whiteness.

Much has been written about the nature of 'white privilege' in the recent uptake of whiteness studies, a fledgling discourse that is only two decades old. These concerns have been articulated in studies of everyday forms of taken-for-granted privileges (McIntosh, 1992; Bush, 2005), whiteness as performance (Giroux, 1997) and even 'whiteness as terror' (hooks, 1997). It is only lately that the discourse on white privilege (or more specifically, 'white supremacy') has been applied to the realm of formal educational policy (see Gillborn, 2005). Unlike the previous figuration of 'white supremacy' as the caricature of Klan members and segregationists, several scholars have launched a discourse that generalizes it as a racialized social system that upholds, reifies and reinforces the superiority of whites (Mills, 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Leonardo, 2004; Gillborn, 2005). This comes at a time when the signifier 'racist' begins to lose its edge, indeed its meaning. In this day and age everyone, every group is now deemed to be an equal opportunity racist and the concept withers away in the color-blind era of US race relations. Or worse, racism becomes an individual problem located in personal psyche.

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ISSN 1361-3324 (print)/ISSN 1470-109X (online)/07/030261–18
© 2007 Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/13613320701503249

Despite this color-blind tendency in US society, studies of whiteness have provided insights into the informal aspects of white privilege, or the everyday cognates of a more general white structural advantage. In this essay, I hope to begin a discussion on the formal aspects of white privilege by analyzing the No Child Left Behind Act as an 'act of whiteness.' The educational literature is replete with powerful critiques of NCLB as it affects children of color, poor students or immigrants (Novak & Fuller, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2004; Cochran-Smith, 2005). Less attention has been paid to the way it creates US nationhood through the educational construction of whiteness. In other words, how does NCLB construct and imagine the white nationhood? At length, I will discuss the historical and racial context out of which NCLB arises. This contextualization is necessary in order to historicize race in the context of its specific social conditions.

When nationalism is discussed in the literature, it usually refers to people of color or marginalized ethnic groups. There is good reason for this move because nationalism has been a staple social movement of hitherto oppressed peoples, such as African Americans, Chicanos or Native Americans (see Robinson, 1993; Churchill, 1998; Bush, 2000; Cesaire, 2000). But as Lipsitz (1998) has argued compellingly, such strong and identity-based movements also find their way into dominant groups, in this case white communities, with the US nation being no exception. That is, the creation of a white nation has arguably been one of the strongest forms of identity politics, both real and imagined. On one hand, a white nation is imagined every time a white subject argues for a return to the great past of American heritage or when the nativist response to immigration threatens to close the US border with Mexico, as showcased by the Minute Men, an armed group in the state of Arizona. On the other hand, it is also real when formal policies establish the white nation and protect its boundaries, much like the way people fence their property (Harris, 1995), limiting which groups are perceived as 'white.' Educational policy assists in creating the nation, especially when it stems from federal legislation, such as NCLB. And because the USA is a white-dominated country, NCLB represents a node in nation creation that is intimate with the educational construction of a white polity. Thus, the educational literature benefits from an analysis of NCLB not only as a national policy, but an *instantiation of whiteness*. Of course, we may argue that the USA *is* multicultural and there is a push for multicultural experiences in schools. This effort should not be underestimated, but it runs against a pretty formidable fence known as whiteness.

It has been argued that whiteness is a social creation, not a biological fact (Roediger, 1991; Frankenberg, 1993; Ignatiev, 1996; Leonardo, 2002). In this sense, white people had to be created, not born, or as Beilke *et al.* (2004) put it, 'White identity formation is more of an enculturation process than a skin color' (p. 42). In fact, white people did not exist about 500 years ago, or before modern race, as a form of skin organization, became meaningful through colonization of Africa, Latin America and parts of the Orient, simultaneously consolidating the Occident as a racial force. Over time, however, whiteness is re-created through the historical process of expansion or restriction, depending on the context and state of race relations. As Omi and Winant (1986) describe:

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> The meaning of race is defined and contested throughout society, in both collective action and personal practice. In the process, racial categories themselves are formed, transformed, destroyed and re-formed. We use the term *racial formation* to refer to the process by which social, economic and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings. Crucial to this formulation is the treatment of race as a *central axis* of social relations which cannot be subsumed under or reduced to some broader category or conception. (pp. 61–62, italics in original)

Like the concept of labor and the social relations to which it gives rise (Lukacs, 1971), race relations are articulated in the specificities of their historical conditions. Race may shift and morph in its relative significance to racial groups, but its centrality in US society is absolute insofar as it represents a central axis of self and social understanding.

In our time, race is partly re-created through NCLB and the mechanism of color-blindness. With respect to the meaning of whiteness, it is under constant negotiation and is part of the national and global struggle over who is or is not white at any given time, of who is allowed into what Cheryl Harris (1995) calls 'whiteness as property.' We have already seen arguments of how Irish and Jews became white (Ignatiev, 1996; Brodkin, 1999), or Asians as 'honorary whites' and in some cases having claims to Aryan status (Mazumdar, 1989; Bonilla-Silva, 2004). As part of what Omi and Winant (1986) call a racial formation, *white formation* does not have a transcendental essence but is malleable according to social conditions and the state of white hegemony. In other words, whiteness is able to accommodate, or make certain compromises, in order to maintain its ideological hegemony. Ignatiev's documentation of the Irish racial ascendancy toward whiteness, its transformation from green to white, is a poignant example. Today Arabs (considered by the US Census as whites) are witnessing a transformation of their identity in post-9/11 whiteness. The Arabs' key to the white house is slowly being taken away. This does not suggest that Arabs necessarily and currently think of themselves as white, but that their proximity to whiteness is becoming less apparent, increasingly troubled and more complicated.

In education, the very presence of multiculturalism is evidence of a reaction to a white normativity in school curricula, administrative structures and classroom interactions. Since the 1970s, multiculturalism has challenged the centrality of whiteness or Euronormativity, fracturing its hold on basic education (Banks, 2006). DiAngelo (2006) puts it right when she describes whiteness as both empty and full: 'Whiteness is both "empty," in that it is normalized and thus typically unmarked, and content laden, or "full," in that it generates norms and reference points' (p. 1984). Said another way, whiteness is nowhere since it is unmarked and everywhere since it is the standard whereby other groups are judged. Likewise, NCLB contains within it the absent marker of whiteness that defines the Standards Movement. To Ignatiev's chagrin (1997), NCLB does not seek to abolish whiteness, but strengthens and solidifies it. When educators face punishments resulting from insufficient yearly progress, they are policed by an unspoken whiteness (as well as a certain bourgeois worldview, but I shall focus on race). Many affected schools and districts boast high numbers of students of color. When the white referent of NCLB is not discussed, these communities receive

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the impression that they are failing non-racialized academic standards. The upshot is that the fault is entirely theirs, a cornerstone of color-blind discourse that conveniently forgets about structural reasons for school failure. On the other hand, when largely white middle-class schools and districts meet or exceed their targets, they receive a similar but beneficial message: that their merit is entirely theirs. As a result, whiteness is reified through NCLB behind the façade of a non-racialized process of nation creation. The educational construction of whiteness goes unnoticed as an unremarkable aspect of NCLB. This essay hopes to make this process more visible.

Our color-blind era, our color-mute discourse,[1] our color-deaf sensibility

The Civil War ended the 250-year-old and peculiar institution of slavery. However, the Emancipation Proclamation was not a measure designed to end racism once and for all, but to end a *particular form* of it called slavery. For we know too well that racism continued into the post-bondage era, this time morphing into Jim Crow institutions. After emancipation blacks again found themselves swimming upstream during Reconstruction, living apparently 'separate but equal' lives with whites. The spirit of *Plessy* v. *Ferguson* became a metaphor for US race relations, at the heart of which is 'heterophobia,' or what Memmi (2000) calls the 'fear of difference.' The USA witnessed a different kind of racism, one equally as overt as slavery, but taking on a different albeit sometimes 'kinder' form. Blacks and whites were considered too different to co-exist and housing and schools were segregated as part of the natural order of things. We may say that the North won the war, but the South won the peace. The Union may have been preserved but the ideology of racial separation remained the law of the land.

With the rise of the Civil Rights Movement, US racism again fell into an institutional crisis and ill repute. With the world watching, Americans came under scrutiny through violent images in the media. Blacks and other people of color were perceived as victims of an unfair caste system and Americans suffered a loss in legitimacy amidst the Cold War (see Bobo & Smith, 1998). Things had to change and integration became the answer. People of color and their white sympathizers paid for progress in blood and the legislation we now know as the Civil Rights Acts is commonly assumed to have remedied the group oppression that people of color suffered. This does not suggest that fair-minded Americans do not recognize that racism continues into our present day and age. However, racism today is presumed to be more individualistic, not structural, and fundamentally attitudinal and multi-directional, not just white on black. But like the Civil War, the Civil Rights Acts were not meant to end racism altogether either, but a form of it known as Jim Crow. Guided by the spirit of *Brown* v. *Board of Education*, post-Civil Rights America enters a new Reconstruction, what scholars are now calling the Color-Blind Era. We may be tempted to say that 'things have changed' and we would be right. But whereas during pre-Civil Rights, people of color knew who was responsible for their unfair position in life, in the post-Civil Rights Era they are told that they are their own worst enemy, that they block their own progress in a largely fair system (see Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 1999). I think

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it was Seymour Sarason who said, 'The more things change, the more they remain the same' (cited by Fullan, 1991, p. 38).

Sociologists have traced the fundamental transformation in whites' racial attitude since the 1960s. By and large, survey data suggest that white Americans indicate a belief in integration and disapproval with prejudicial attitudes, and support principles of equality among the races (Brown *et al.*, 2003). This is not a small matter and points to the moral success of the Civil Rights Movement to alter the nation's public racial discourse. In general, white Americans publicly declare that racial preference is wrong, that color should not prevent access to goods and services. But color-blindness goes one step further. Not only should race no longer matter, it should not be a consideration to either social policy, like affirmative action, or interpersonal interactions, like interracial dating. As Ian Lopez (2006) describes:

> Contemporary colorblindness is a set of understandings—buttressed by law and the courts, and reinforcing racial patterns of white dominance—that define how people comprehend, rationalize, and act on race. As applied, however much some people genuinely believe that the best way to get beyond racism is to get beyond race, colorblindness continues to retard racial progress. It does so for a simple reason: It focuses on the surface, on the bare fact of racial classification, rather than looking down into the nature of social practices. It gets racism and racial remediation exactly backward, and insulates new forms of race baiting. (p. 6)

People should be treated fairly regardless of (i.e. not taking into account) race and its legacies. It would be hard to argue with such logic. Race should not be seen, talked about and race-talk should not be heard with too attentive of an ear because it is tantamount to victimology: see no race, speak no race, hear no race. At the end of the 1970s, this color-blind ethos was signaled by several important, influential publications, such as William Julius Wilson's (1978) book, *The Declining Significance of Race*.

A racial paradox is at work here. When surveyed, whites express attitudes about racial fairness. But when pressed with questions about what they would do about integration, such as in housing (or education), whites are less forthcoming. That is, *in principle* whites believe in integration, but more than half are *not willing to act* on this principle. By 1980, around the time that Wilson's book pronounced the declining significance of race, only 40% of whites surveyed said they would support a law that stated, 'a homeowner cannot refuse to sell to someone because of their race or skin color' (Brown *et al.*, 2003, p. 42). As Brown *et al.* continue, 'Defining racism isn't a matter of semantics or theoretical issue…[and] [b]y now, the prejudice approach to the study of racism has been discredited and has become almost completely obsolete' (p. 43; see also Bonilla-Silva, 1997). In other words, defining racism as fundamentally a problem of attitude and prejudice fails to account for the material consequences of institutional racism, behaviors that produce unequal outcomes despite the transformation of racial attitudes, and the creation of policies, such as NCLB, which refuse to acknowledge the causal link between academic achievement and the racial organization of society.

In the Color-Blind Era, success (or more important, failure) is conceived as individual or cultural. If we assume that structural racism has been solved or has negligible

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impact, then we are responsible for our own lot, not in the sense that we have to take inventory of our bad decisions (which everyone has), but in the sense that structural obstacles to mobility, like slavery and Jim Crow, have been lifted. Regarding cultural explanations, Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom (1999) argue that blacks lack mobility because of their pathological cultural practices, such as young single-parenthood and low value on education, not because of a debilitating structure of white racism (see also McWhorter, 2001). They do not go as far as suggesting that racism is a relic of the past, but they play it down in exchange for a more optimistic look at US racial relations and drawing attention to the failings of people of color. Against this, we can say that students of color may have their own problems (cultural or otherwise), but they did not create the racial condition under which they fail. This does not preclude people of color from committing self-sabotage, but under white supremacy one cannot be sure that racism did not have something to do with it.

To color-blind analysts, after some 40-odd years of Civil Rights legislation, we have all but erased 250 years' effect of slavery, 100 years' damage of Jim Crow, not to mention a 'little matter of genocide' for Native Americans (Churchill, 1998). In fact, whites have experienced 360 years of affirmative action since the *Dred Scot* decision declared that, 'We the people' (read whites) never intended to include either enslaved *or* free blacks as citizens of the American society (Brown *et al.*, 2003). Of course, it is possible that today's color-blindness is a way of feigning color-consciousness, that is, color-blindness is really a misnomer in a color-obsessed nation.[2] But to the color-blind society, they amount to the same thing because color-blind people do not recognize it as feigning but as a reality and more significantly, an *accomplishment*. In this manner, color-blindness serves as a metaphor for our times. This ethos implicates even corrective mechanisms that arose out of the Civil Rights tradition, such as affirmative action.

Because color-blindness discourages all racial preferences as a form of unfair advantage, affirmative action is targeted as oppressive to white Americans, although there is little empirical proof to suggest that this is happening. At the anecdotal level, we hear the occasional story (almost always hypothetical) about a white person who was not admitted by Harvard because an abstract person of color stole his spot, or a worker whose employment chances were curtailed by a phantom black or brown person. But to Brown *et al.* (2003), 'To assume that government policies benefited only blacks or were color-blind, as many white Americans commonly believe, is like looking at the world with one eye' (p. 27). In fact, one of the largest recipients of affirmative action has been white women (Marable, 1996; Tatum, 1997). More accurately called 'ambivalent action' (Leonardo, 2003), affirmative action is now growing out of favor, reaching the Supreme Court in a recent case involving the University of Michigan campus. Although the High Court ruled that race may be used as a consideration in social policy, the onslaught has proven successful in large and powerful states, like California, where Proposition 209 passed, effectively dismantling affirmative action. NCLB comes at the heels of this color-blind atmosphere, challenging racial disparities ironically by recognizing 'a problem without a cause.'

Also known as 'laissez-faire racism,' 'symbolic racism' or 'new racism,' color-blindness does not just represent the fear of difference, but the *intensification of racial*

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difference masking as its obliteration. Within this discourse, we are all humans and any attempt to use race as an analytical framework or interpretive lens for US society is itself deemed racist because it is believed to be ensnared in the white supremacist notion that race is a real form of difference (Leonardo, 2006). That race is an invention is common to much, if not all, critical scholarship on race (Lott, 1999). So this assertion is not new and race-conscious scholars agree with color-blind scholars on this point. In fact, the critique serves as a strawman because it refutes an argument that no one credible is making. That said, to suggest that race is *only* a social construction ignores its real effects through the inability to engage actual, empirical states of affairs (Feagin, 2006). David Gillborn puts it best when he describes race as a 'black hole.'[3] Figuratively, we cannot actually see race (since it is not real in the scientific sense), but we observe its ability to create a gravity field around itself, pull our self-perceptions and desires into its vortex, and sometimes warp our sense of how it actually works. In other words, race creates real effects. Race may be ideological, but it produces material consequences.

To conclude this section, we may characterize color-blindness as the inability to deal with the reality of race. The contours of color-blind discourse include:

1. Race and racism are declining in significance.
2. Racism is largely isolated, an exception to the rule.
3. Individualizes racism as irrational and pathological.
4. Individualizes success and failure.
5. Blames people of color for their limitations and behaviors.
6. Mainly a study of attitude and attitudinal changes, rather than actual behavior.
7. Downplays institutional relations or the racialized system.
8. Plays up racial progress.
9. Emphasizes class stratification as the explanation for racism.
10. Downplays the legacy of slavery and genocide (as long ago).

Without explaining each one of the 10 tenets, the color-blindness would have us forget history (both in the sense of a past and its continuity with the present), psychologize racism without the benefit of a sociological understanding and displace racial stratification with competing explanations, such as class analysis. A well-informed race analysis is arguably richer (no pun intended) with class analysis (see Leonardo, 2005), but subsuming racial oppression under the general framework of class exploitation proves unconvincing to many people of color who experience the racial nature of white supremacy. In this sense, color-blindness infects otherwise radical theory and exposes its reactionary position on race structures.

NCLB: 'No Color Left Behind' or 'No Caucasian Left Behind?'

It is from within this historical condition of color-blindness that No Child Left Behind originated. Therefore, it is a symptom of our times. When NCLB received overwhelming support from both Democrats and Republicans in 2001, it was hailed as the most sweeping educational reform since the original Elementary and Secondary

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Education Act (ESEA) 40 years ago. The name was adopted from the Children's Defense Fund, 'Leave No Child Behind' (Welner & Weitzman, 2005). Noble in its ostensive intent, NCLB reached across the political aisle when it recognized a pattern whereby certain groups of students were not succeeding compared to their counterparts. It sought out these groups and enacted a federal mandate from a political party that usually favors state sovereignty. Although Republican history certainly shows a proclivity for states' rights, in his two terms President Bush has supported a particular deployment of federal action as part of nation creation, sparked by the Supreme Court's decision giving the nod to President Bush's first term. NCLB is the educational cognate of the Patriot Act following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, through its emphasis on nationhood and Americanism. It was foreshadowed by *A Nation at Risk*, a report commissioned by the Reagan administration in the 1980s.

Consistent with the discourse of the War on Terror, if there are any failing schools in the USA, NCLB will 'smoke 'em out.' In contrast to previous reforms where underperforming schools were provided resources for remediation, NCLB introduces the threat of student exit from schools and bleeding of moneys from low-performing schools (Sunderman & Kim, 2005). It is the educational War on Terror that will show the rest of the globe that Americans 'mean business.' In fact, NCLB contains Section 9528, a provision that obligates schools to provide access to military recruiters or risk losing funding (Furumoto, 2005). One might ask what the military has to do with education. As part of nation building, social institutions (what Althusser called Ideological State Apparatuses), such as schools, have always been part of the military project, of inculcating militaristic values and their endorsement. With the help of NCLB, the Pentagon would like to double Latino presence in the armed forces to 22%, which would increase the current 60% of soldiers of color in a nation represented by roughly 70% whites, a veritable dark wall of protection for whiteness. As the educational Patriot Act, NCLB sends a message to young children regarding what it means to act like a patriot: accept the rightness of whiteness.

The whiteness of NCLB is the hidden referent of the federal act. It is the guiding ideology that frames how school failure will be explained and how it should be remedied. As Melissa Da Silva (2005) puts it, 'appealing to a white-normed commonsense highlight[s] the real danger of NCLB, that is, all the ways in which it reinforces and contributes to color-blind racism…the preservation of white privilege—that is, the rational, material interests…of American whites.' NCLB overtly targets improving four subgroups of student performance: minority children, students with disabilities, poor children and English language learners. Regarding race, it would be tempting to dub NCLB as 'No Color Left Behind.' In principle, it is laudable to hold schools to higher standards with a promise of academic proficiency in at least the three Rs. It is about time that someone insisted on an accountability system with an attitude. For the degradation of students of color has lasted long enough and NCLB represents the chutzpah that educational reformers have been waiting for. However, consistent with a racial formation analysis, with NCLB it seems that 'the color line has not been erased so much as it has been redrawn' (Freeman, 2005, p. 191). Insofar as NCLB is

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guided by an ideology of whiteness, it depends on the continuation of racial differences as part of a logical, rather than social, outcome. In other words, by ostensibly giving public schools a chance to show progress, NCLB gives whiteness the license to declare students of color failures under a presumed-to-be fair system.

On prima facie, NCLB seems to be driven by a racial understanding. But recognizing a problem does not equate with locating the source of that problem. In other words, NCLB acknowledges the symptoms, but not the causes of the achievement problem affecting children of color. It frames race as incidental ('they happen to be whites or blacks, etc.'), rather than causal ('because they are whites or blacks, etc.'), to student disparities in achievement. Deserving to be quoted at length, Welner and Weitzman (2005) declare:

> Americans appreciate the notion of accountability, at least in theory. Students should be responsible for their own learning. Teachers should be responsible for teaching. Principals and school districts should provide teachers and students the resources needed for success. If any of these people do not carry out their responsibilities, there should be repercussions. When students underperform, they should be failed and their teachers and school administrators should be sanctioned or fired. But confronted with the reality of the crisis conditions in many American schools, these simplistic responses amount to little more than empty blustering. More to the point, they amount to a cry that something—some unspecified thing—needs to be done and that teachers and educational authorities know what that thing is and will do it if only a big enough sword is held over their heads. (p. 246)

NCLB does not make visible the structural obstacles that children of color and their families face, such as health disparities, labor market discrimination and the like, processes that a class analysis alone cannot unmask (Brown *et al.*, 2003). This is vintage whiteness. In fact, NCLB hides these dynamics even more efficiently, tucked away in the language of tough love and harsh sanctions. Employment discrimination disappears in the abstract individualism of NCLB, where the threat of laissez-faire market forces becomes the final stop for persistently failing schools that will finally succumb to privatization under the voucher system. Some analysts have pointed out that NCLB is an attack on public schools, showcasing their hopelessness and moribund status (Darling-Hammond, 2004). This is what Kohn (2004) calls NCLB's 'clever gambit' that forces educators and families either to be against public schools or accept mediocrity. This does not suggest that if NCLB were to acknowledge structural, racial inequalities, it would succeed in eliminating them, thereby saving public schools. But their absence signals its ultimate and perhaps predictable failure—its 'conciliatory nature' (Freeman, 2005, p. 196)—like the fate of many reforms squeamish about race before it. The intractability of systemic school reform should not be underestimated and we should not pretend that it will take less than a Herculean effort, but some of the causes of school failure are not a mystery either. A nation that supports an undeclared apartheid through color-blind policies produces foreseeable results. It is difficult to be surprised when such policies do not make a dent in narrowing the achievement gap.

It would be quite hopeful to expect major federal or even less ambitious educational policies to address these structurally determining factors. But such expectations would be a sign of either naivety or blind optimism. That said, from an analyst's

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point of view, NCLB's inability to locate educational disparities within larger relations of power does not just betray its color-blind ideology, but its *reinforcement of whiteness*. Ultimately, it subverts its own claims to 'fix the problem' because it confuses symptoms for substance, implicating it in a certain performative contradiction. It is unable to deliver its own promise even as it annunciates it. All four subgroups targeted by NCLB implicate children of color. It is a well-known fact (or a dirty little secret) that African Americans, particularly boys, are diagnosed with difficulties overrepresenting them in special education; English language learning impacts more non-whites; and NCLB's targeting of minority children speaks for itself. The fourth category of children who live in poverty includes white children but their whiteness is not responsible for their poverty, rather their class status or their position in the relations of production.

White working-class people embody the contradictions of both race and class, but NCLB does not leave them behind because they are whites, but because they are poor. One of these contradictions is showcased by poor whites' capacity to cope with their poverty due to the consolation provided by their membership in the white race. Living an exploitative, material life, poor whites often displace their critique of the bourgeoisie with animosity towards poor minorities in particular, and people of color in general. This leads Roediger (1994) to suggest that poor whites' 'correct' analysis of their impoverished condition is bound up with a racial analysis; that is, their economic liberation is at once their racial emancipation. That said, and without minimizing the exploitation that poor or working-class whites experience, their whiteness alleviates some of their suffering through what Du Bois (1998) called whites' 'public and psychological wages' (see also Roediger, 1991). In other words, poor whites are not poor *because* they are whites, but *despite* this. It would be a bit like arguing that if Stephen Hawking were to become Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, it is due to his physical disabilities. Rather, Hawking would have to compensate for his physical disadvantages, such as being the brightest mind on the planet. He would earn the title despite his challenges.

Poor whites have racial advantages despite their poverty. White bodies register this contradiction and it is not possible to separate out their white identity from their class experience. Poor or working-class whites *feel* their exploitation as concrete white subjects. They cannot parse out the portion of their identity that is responsible for their suffering, and that for their privilege. That said, analysis is poor without a sense of causality. Or as Brown *et al.* (2003) remark, 'White Americans may face difficulties in life…but race is not one of them' (p. 34). Structurally speaking, policy analysis must be able to trace the origins of benefits and disadvantages. Without a discourse of causality, educators confuse epiphenomena with substance, correlations with causation.

Regarding people of color, structural racism usually takes on an economic form or has economic ramifications through employment discrimination and the racial division of labor. In contrast to whites, many people of color under white supremacy are poor because they are racialized minorities, not despite this. We may repeat the same reasoning for whites with disabilities, whose whiteness is not the source of their problem unlike students of color with disabilities, whose racial identity influences their

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overrepresentation in special education programs. Students of color diagnosed with disabilities face at least two strikes against them. If Novak and Fuller (2003) are correct in suggesting that NCLB comes with a 'diversity penalty' by punishing schools with higher populations of students of color, then the opposite must also be true insofar as NCLB comes with a *whiteness reward* for mostly white schools. Although this language may appear like the 'oppression sweepstakes' discourse, it is an attempt to disaggregate causality from correlations between oppression and one's identity. Despite my sympathies with Marxism, the root of racial disparity is not *economic in nature* since an analysis of the inner workings of capitalism alone cannot explain it (see Leonardo, 2005). Rather, racial oppression takes an *economic form* without necessarily being economic in nature. Because the hidden referent of NCLB is whiteness and its ideology is color-blind, it is tempting to dub it 'No Caucasian Left Behind.'

NCLB's 'pull yourselves up by your own schoolstraps' mentality betrays a certain lack of appreciation for the racial conditions in which schools exist. For example, it pretends that the achievement gap is ultimately a problem of both teaching and the educational state apparatus, something that could be addressed by putting pressure on teachers to 'do their job.' This is why NCLB defines funding for the Act in a manner that only covers testing costs, since teaching grade and subject proficiency is already a teacher's job. It does not acknowledge the resources required to provide struggling students the opportunity to excel. Although it is common that authorized funds do not match appropriate funds, NCLB's appropriation for Title I, Part A for the first four years (2002–05) of its enactment shows a $21.5 billion shortfall (or 31% missing) (Welner & Weitzman, 2005). This is tantamount to providing funds to test children but not to teach them, according to Senator Kennedy. Or as Darling-Hammond (2004) observes, NCLB 'ignores the important inputs of resources that enable school quality, [which] mistakes measuring schools for fixing them' (pp. 8–9). Although President Bush is right to criticize the 'soft bigotry of low expectations,' this funding shortfall creates what Welner and Weitzman call the 'soft bigotry of low expenditures' (p. 242). According to one conservative estimate, total national spending on education would need to increase by $137.8 billion, more than 11 times the current Title I funding. Even if schools continue the upward trend in progress evidenced in the 1990s, one analyst calculates that schools would take more than 100 years to reach the NCLB's target (see Darling Hammond, 2004). Even this figure is conservative, if reforms fail to address the structures of racism. It might be tempting to declare NCLB a naive attempt to reform public schools. Nothing could be farther from the truth. It is a well-informed and brilliant strategy of color-blind proportions. As it stands, NCLB's color-blindness ensures that school reform will proceed at the snail's pace of whiteness.

The future of race, whiteness and education

In exchange for a color-blind discourse, this essay has argued for a color-conscious perspective. NCLB will enter its second phase of reauthorization and it becomes even more imperative that critical discussions around its color-blindness occur among

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educators. Bonilla-Silva (2005) outlines color-conscious analysis and its contours include the following list:

1. Racial phenomena are regarded as the 'normal outcome' of the racial structure of a society.
2. The changing nature of what analysts label 'racism' is explained as the normal outcome of racial contestation in a racialized social system.
3. The framework of racialization allows analysts to explain overt as well as covert racial behavior.
4. Racially motivated behavior, whether or not the actors are conscious of it, is regarded as 'rational'—that is, as based on the races' different interests.
5. The reproduction of racial phenomena in contemporary societies is explained in this framework not by reference to a long-distant past but in relation to its contemporary structure.
6. A racialization framework accounts for the ways in which racial/ethnic stereotypes emerge, are transformed, and disappear. (pp. 21–22)

Color-consciousness begins from the assumption that race matters, from womb to tomb. Racialism is a natural part of a racial formation, something into which children grow. In the USA it is not deviant to think and act in a racial manner; rather, feigning color-blindness is deviant (which is different from 'normalized'). In other words, it takes a lot of energy and effort to perpetuate color-blindness because it is unnatural. In a context of racial contestation, racial behaviors are rational insofar as they represent a racial subject's awareness of racial antagonisms and acts to secure or take away power. Seen this way, a racist person is not merely uninformed, ignorant or misguided. That is, he or she is not irrational but behaves consistently with his or her racial interests (which is not the same as being guided by 'reason'). Finally, racial formations, as Omi and Winant (1986) never tire of reminding us, shift and have no transcendental essence. They reflect the racial understandings of their time. Notwithstanding the insights from whiteness scholars, an important and still relatively underresearched topic of race studies is whiteness, particularly as this relates to educational policy. What is whiteness and what does it want from us? In a 2002 essay, I attempted to answer this question. Whiteness is a skin collective that cannot be reduced to its members. Blacks, Latinos and Asians participate in whiteness, although it benefits whites in absolute terms. This means that, as Ignatiev and Roediger suggest, at least in theory, if not in practice, we must disaggregate whiteness (a racial ideology) from white people (racialized individuals). This is a position that parts from Gary Howard's (1999) claim that white people and whiteness are unavoidably implicated in each other. This binding between whiteness and white people is reasonable because they are frequent partners in crime. But conceptually, it becomes a form of reduction, of reducing white identity to ideology. In other words, I am suggesting that whites do have a choice regarding whiteness and may opt to commit 'race treason,' or what Ignatiev and Garvey call 'the ultimate act of humanity' (1996, p. 10).

When we define the ideology of whiteness as hopelessly bound up with what it means to be white, then whites are trapped into a particular way of making sense of their racial

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experience and as James Baldwin once remarked, 'there is no hope for [them]' (cited in Roediger, 1994, p. 13). Recalling Marx's (1988) words in *Theses on Feuerbach*, today's neo-abolitionists argue that *the point is not to interpret whiteness but to abolish it* (Roediger, 1994; Ignatiev & Garvey, 1996; Ignatiev, 1997). Along similar lines, as long as educational reform is driven by a white logic, there is no hope for schools, which does not vitiate against local or smaller-scale reforms. But it points out that nothing short of a radical shift in our perspective on race will produce what educators fondly talk about as 'race equality.' It will remain at the level of polite dinner-table conversation. Yet one question remains: What does it mean to abolish whiteness and how does it occur?

To the abolitionist, it is unconvincing to argue for the 'rearticulation' or 'transformation' of whiteness. Searching for an identity that is both white and anti-racist, we may be tempted to conjure up a 'new white American,' a 'transformed white global subject.' But this suggestion lacks both empirical support and conceptual legs. It appears as the 'last stand of whiteness' to assert itself into a history that has never existed or provides no example. Against the claim for a positive iteration of whiteness, Ignatiev (1997) forces the issue,

> We at *Race Traitor*…have asked some of those who think whiteness contains any positive elements to indicate what they are. We are still waiting for an answer. Until we get one, we will take our stand with David Roediger, who has insisted that whiteness is not merely oppressive and false, it is nothing but oppressive and false.

In theory and in the liberal white mind, arguing for a transformed whiteness is appealing. Its limitation is that it substitutes proxy for praxis. It betrays a conciliatory posture toward the function and purpose of whiteness as a parasitic ideology. Whiteness exists in order to prey upon its racialized counterparts and *it has always existed in this manner*, prompting Roediger (1994) to announce that 'whiteness is not only false and oppressive, it is nothing but false and oppressive' (p. 13). Whiteness has taken different forms in the evolution of societies: official Apartheid there, Jim Crow here and genocide in another. On the other hand, white people have made many different choices in life, sometimes working against whiteness but more accurately vacillating between ideologies of whiteness and the Other, in differing and context-based choices, in various degrees of intensity and commitment. When white teachers and educators question NCLB's racial ramifications, they are making a choice against whiteness *as* white people. They are not transforming whiteness into something positive but rather themselves. Whiteness does not transform to become anti-racist; it is by definition racist. When whites protest NCLB's color-blind rationale, they are not using whiteness but racial Otherness to make sense of it. They are committing race treason.

Empirically, transforming whiteness lacks any concrete example. When whites congeal into a skin collective (and people of color may join them), the results have been predictable. History shows that Irish workers picked race over class by edging out black workers, Californians voted against affirmative action (a staple of Civil Rights legislation) and suburbanization created the hypersegregation of blacks in

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ghettos. When white ideology (i.e. whiteness) is centered, the margins suffer. *There is no example to the contrary*. Rearticulating or transforming whiteness appears more like a wish fulfillment. How does one, for example, rearticulate fascism to be something other than we know it? Contrary to the rhetoric of rearticulation, it does not imagine a new form of, but represents the possessive investment in, whiteness (Lipsitz, 1998). It is stuck in the quicksand of annunciation, as if whiteness could be wished away through a discourse of white positivity that is nowhere to be found. Whiteness has existed for one simple reason: racial stratification. On the other hand, white Americans exist at the intersection of discourses that struggle for supremacy over their subjectivity. They exist in multiple worlds and have had to make decisions about traversing the racial landscape that is the United States. In history, whites may be and have been transformed.

It has been claimed that abolishing whiteness does not equate with abolishing white people. In other words, ridding society of whiteness (an ideology and material structure) does not mean the disappearance of white people, let alone committing genocide against them (McLaren, 1997; Leonardo, 2002). Upon further reflection and arguing against this thesis, the abolition of whiteness comes with the eventual vanishing of white people. By 'vanishing,' I mean something vastly different from color-blindness, where whites perform a disappearing act as they claim that races do not exist. The white race was an invention; therefore, white people had to be 'created.' Monique Wittig (1993) once argued that 'one is not born a woman.' By this, she means that 'woman' is an idealized creation, a subject onto whom a patriarchal society grafts expectations and roles, such as 'mother.' In this sense, 'woman' is not real in the ontological sense, whereas 'women' is a sex-class and provides a basis for group identity and solidarity. The dissolution of a patriarchal society may come with the eventual disappearance of certain categories: woman and women as well as man and men. Indeed, this would signal the end of gender as an organizing principle. In racial terms, dissolving whiteness, both in the ideological and institutional sense, means that the category 'white' would no longer be useful. The same 'white' bodies (in the physical sense) will exist but a society would not signify them as white. In short, abolishing whiteness would mean abolishing the concept of white people. White people would no longer exist and wither away.

The neo-abolitionist discourse comes closest to this position and we may go a long way with it. It is one of the most provocative white-led race discourses to come along since the original abolitionism. However, in arguing for the disappearance of whiteness, neo-abolitionism makes the mistake in suggesting that races do not currently exist. This leads Ignatiev to reject the invocation of races, white or otherwise. It is tempting, even understandable, to argue that, 'Given their dubious ontological and moral pedigree, it [is] difficult to show the desirability of racial identities' (Ingram, 2005, p. 256). Ignatiev encourages whites to repudiate their whiteness, sever their loyalty to the white race and denounce their membership in the group. In other words, to Ignatiev we cannot make disappear a people that do not exist in the first place. Race is a figment of the imagination, a veritable monster in the proverbial hallway closet. Under these assumptions, even anti-racism is doomed to fail because it

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acknowledges the existence of races. What Fanon (1967) would have been tempted to call 'the fact of whiteness' vanishes right in front of our eyes. This conundrum represents a fatal contradiction in Ignatiev's neo-abolitionism because race is also a 'pigment of our imagination' (Rumbaut, 1996, p. xvi). In other words, race is a combination of real and non-real characteristics, ideological as a category but material in its modes of existence.

Ignatiev appears to conflate the concepts of 'real' and 'existence.' Although race may not be real (particularly in the scientific sense), it exists in real terms, such as a racial economy and its institutions. As Apple (2003) notes, 'Indeed, it would be misleading to talk of race as an "it". "It" is not a thing, a reified object that can be measured as if it were a simple biological entity. Race is a *construction*, a sent of fully social *relationships*' (p. 109, italics in original). Although the ontological status of the racial concept is suspect, racial groups, policies and histories exist. Without this admission, neo-abolitionism represents less the approach to abolishing whiteness and more its lifeline and current modus operandi: now you see it, now you don't. It is the hallmark of color-blindness to suggest that races do not exist, something that many whites would likely be comfortable annunciating. It is hardly subversive for whites to announce that they are not white. This is already their inclination. The opposite is more difficult and resisted: white racial ownership.

No Child Left Behind does not signal the disappearance of whiteness, but its solidification. Its color-blindness ensures the continuation of racial structures, not their abolition. Because it is not guided by a race-conscious appreciation of US society, it does not discredit whiteness but ultimately people of color. When the year 2014 rolls around and the achievement gap has not been significantly narrowed, the nation's eyes will be on students and families of color. They, not whiteness or white people, will be indicted. By and large, they already know this. When American democracy falters in matters regarding race, color-blindness locates the problem in people of color as alibis for a condition they did not create. After all, NCLB gave public schools and people of color an opportunity to show their mettle. In the eyes of whiteness, what more do we need? Read as a racial narrative, NCLB is whiteness turned into policy.

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Notes

1. Color-mute is borrowed from Mica Pollock's *Colormute* (2004). It signifies racial discourse, such as California's Proposition 209, which outlaws mention of the existence of racial categories despite the fact that they exist in practice.
2. Color-blindness is not actually the 'inability to see race' and is therefore an imperfect term. In the USA, color-blind people cannot fail to see race, but they choose to see it in a *particular* way. In asserting that race should not matter in either social policy or transactions, color-blind people—especially whites—experience what psychologists call cognitive dissonance. Color-blindness prevents them from dealing with the racial conditioning of their behavior, which is considered as incidental rather than causal. Racial consequences may then be dismissed as unintentional or the common refrain expressed that actions or words have been 'taken out of context.' Be that as it may, color-blindness is useful as a term to describe people's attempts to avoid race as an explanatory framework. For this reason, I will use it for the remainder of the essay.

3. David Gillborn delivered a symposium titled 'It's not a Conspiracy, it's Worse than That,' for the Center for Multicultural Education, University of Washington, 9 November 2005.

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