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AND EDUARDO BONILLA-SILVA

# WHITE OUT

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THE CONTINUING  
SIGNIFICANCE  
OF RACISM

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Folks: in this reading can you recognize some of the arguments offered by the interviewees to deny the continuing salience of racism in this country (simply because their parents/grandparents were eventually accepted as whites)? Racism is not simply about interpersonal relations, it is also about institutions (including slavery and Jim Crow in the past and the political-economic forces that ensure race-based residential segregation today). How many of these interviewees truly associate with people of color, thereby allowing them to see, for example, what unequal educational opportunities

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## Playing the White Ethnic Card: Using Ethnic Identity to Deny Contemporary Racism

Questions: How many of you had teachers who did not look like you before you came to this school? How many of you have voluntarily associated with a student of color in this school? When you sit in the cafeteria where do you sit? Who, ultimately, benefits when the working class/middle class is divided racially?

CHARLES A. GALLAGHER

The ethnic revival among many whites in the 1960s and 1970s has been described as a "dying gasp" on the part of ethnic groups descended from the great waves of immigration of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (Steinberg 1989:51) to reassert or return to a real or imagined ethnic heritage. If this period was a "dying gasp" at attempting to revive a moribund sense of ethnic identity for whites, then the end of the twentieth century could be viewed as its funeral. A majority of white respondents I interviewed came from families so ethnically mixed, so far removed from the immigrant experience, and so thoroughly reconstituted through assimilation, divorce, remarriage, and relocation that the traits that once distinguished ethnic groups from various parts of Europe have become incidental background information. The overwhelming majority of whites in this study did not live in ethnic neighborhoods, did not feel compelled to date within their own ethnic group, did not have the ethnic traditions of their older kin, and did not obtain employment through ethnic networks. Most have undergone such extensive generational, spatial, and cultural assimilation that the "option" to engage in the activities or traditions that forge and give shape to an ethnic identity no longer exists (Waters 1990).

Even in its most diluted, tenuous, or symbolic forms, knowledge of one's ethnic ancestry did, however, perform important psychological, ideological and political functions for some whites. Many respondents selectively resurrected and appropriated ethnic family history to compare and equate the immigration experiences of older, typically deceased kin to Asian migration and the African-American experience of the Middle Passage, slavery, and institutional racism. In this way the "immigrant tales" or even a general knowledge of how white ethnic immigrants were treated by the dominant group upon arrival to the United States provided later-generation whites with the idioms and narratives to create a history of past white-group victimization and hardship.

Playing the "white ethnic card" was the means by which whites could construct a story of how ethnocentrism towards whites and racism against blacks and Asians were an equally shared part of white, black, and Asian history.

Historian Matthew Jacobson argues that by fashioning their distant ethnic ancestors as a racialized ethnic "other," whites can now "disavow any participation in the twentieth-century white privilege on the spurious basis of their parents' and grandparents' racial oppression" (Jacobson 1998:8). Selectively recalling ethnic family history provided whites in this study with the language, experiences, and metaphors to discuss past and present white ethnic victimization. Most importantly, the off-the-boat and up-to-the-suburbs success story provided some whites with a safe rhetorical space to champion a philosophy of color-blind universalism rather than the racial particularism many whites associate with identity politics. Ethnic identity was "used" by later-generation whites to evoke stories of immigrant relatives who overcame adversity by thrift, self-improvement, and hard work that made upward mobility and achieving the American Dream possible. These accounts validated many whites' beliefs that if past generations could climb the social and occupational ladder in an environment brutally hostile to white ethnic newcomers without government help, nonwhites, particularly blacks, should have been able to mirror their grandparents' mobility path.

Many whites who were still able to draw on these immigrant tales played the "ethnic card" to maintain, ignore, or discount white racial privilege by using ethnic narratives as a medium through which they could list a host of race-based grievances without appearing racist. With this ahistorical sleight of hand, the real discrimination white ethnics were temporarily subjected to upon arrival to the United States becomes analogous to and indistinguishable from three centuries of slavery, Jim Crow, legal segregation, and state-sanctioned "benign neglect." Within this perspective, where white ethnicity is reconstructed as the social equivalent of being black or Asian, whites are able to maintain the fiction that every group, regardless of color, has been equally victimized by racial and ethnic prejudice. Robert Blauner suggests that the immigrant analogy in which "the historical experience of European ethnic groups and the contemporary situation of racial minorities" (Blauner 1972:10) are equated allows whites to discount white privilege while ignoring the extent to which race and racism continue to shape the life chances of racial minorities.

Based on my interviews, it appears little has changed since Blauner first made his observations thirty years ago: the immigrant analogy remains part of many whites' "commonsense" understanding of race and ethnic relations and is used to dismiss charges of white privilege while negating claims of contemporary racism. Along with being able to deny that whiteness carries with it any unearned privileges, this everyone-was-a-victim mentality serves another important function for whites: framing discussions of contemporary race relations within the lens of ethnicity allows whites simultaneously to be victims and not to be held accountable for the past and present social arrangements that maintain white racial privilege (Gallagher 1997).

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Not only does a color-blind perspective negate white privilege but it also allows blame to be placed on racial minorities for lagging economically behind whites. In his research of whites in the Detroit area, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2001:161-162) found that his respondents routinely used a mix of political and economic liberalism in order to assert that since "discrimination is no longer a salient factor in the United States, [whites can] believe that blacks' plight is the result of blacks' cultural deficiencies (e.g., laziness, lack the proper values, and disorganized family life)." The color-blind perspective does an enormous amount of ideological work, as the structural advantages that flow to whites because of their skin color is assumed to flow to other racial groups as well.

#### THE DECLINING SIGNIFICANCE OF WHITE ETHNICITY

Among the eighty-nine white respondents<sup>1</sup> who were asked about their ethnic background in this study, only twelve respondents (13 percent) indicated that their ethnicity was a salient and important part of their identity. Individuals in this "ethnicity matters" category included respondents who had a parent born in Europe or lived in neighborhoods they defined as being ethnic. Respondents in this category typically celebrated some ethnic traditions or had a family member who spoke the mother language.

Fourteen respondents (16 percent) were "symbolically ethnic." Their ethnic identity was completely situational, typically gaining salience during the holidays or at family functions. Their ethnicity was, as Herbert Gans put it, "more a leisure time activity" (Gans 1999a [1979]). Respondents in this category quickly identified a European ancestry then proceeded to explain that their ethnicity was important to them only in very specific circumstances, such as holidays, eating ethnic foods, interacting with grandparents, or discussing family history. For many in this group, symbolic ethnicity came to mean Polish cookies at Christmas, grandmom's spaghetti dinners, or drinking beer on St. Paddy's Day.

The single largest category (thirty-five respondents or 39 percent) was what I term "name-only ethnics." These respondents explained that the only thing about them that was ethnic was their last name. The idea of being ethnic or having an ethnic identity did not resonate with them on any level. Most respondents knew that their ancestors came from various European countries, but outside of a vague geographic link to the continent, they lacked an ethnic identity as it is commonly understood. No cultural traits, shared heritage, or attachments to ethnic communities shaped their identity. One respondent summed up the feelings of persons in this category by explaining that while his name may sound Polish, he was Polish "just by name." Another response typical of those in this category was given by a young white woman from a large Northeastern city who identified her ethnic background as "Irish, Scotch (sic) and German." When asked, however, if these ancestries held any meaning for her she responded,

"No, just when someone says what's your ethnic background." The majority of my respondents reduced their ethnic identity to a list of nations in Europe without the cultural connections. For many whites, citing an ethnic ancestry was culturally analogous to stating that one had been born in California or New Jersey or preferred football over baseball, that is, ethnic ancestry carried little or no cultural weight.

The final category was those respondents who defined themselves as not having a European-based ethnic identity. The twenty-eight respondents (32 percent) who fell into this category eschewed reference to lineage from Europe and instead defined themselves in what they defined as nonethnic terms, labeling themselves as "Heinz 57," "American," "white," or "Caucasian." The responses in this category mirror those given in the U.S. decennial census. Over 13 million Americans in the 1990 census either identified themselves as American or simply did not answer the question. Stanley Lieberman describes this group's identity as having a "recognition of being white, but lack of any clear-cut identification with, and/or knowledge of, a specific European origin" (Lieberman 1991). Subsequent investigation of this nonresponding group suggested that its members did not "feel" ethnic enough to warrant a response. This lack of ethnic affiliation may also explain the almost 1.8 million individuals who defined their ancestry as "white" in the 1990 U.S. census.

A rather surprising finding was that 68 percent of my sample fell into categories where ethnic identity no longer had any bearing on how respondents defined themselves or their day-to-day activities. Respondents in the "ethnicity matters" and "symbolically ethnic" categories were able to draw on ethnic histories in ways that respondents from "name-only ethnicity" and "not ethnic" categories were not. Unlike those who can still draw on real and symbolic forms of ethnicity, the respondents who were ethnic "in name only" or did not define themselves as ethnic at all did not have a repertoire of ethnic experiences to tap. One cannot be nostalgic for a usable ethnic past if the traditions, superstitions, folk wisdom, and stories of family life in the "ethnic neighborhood" have not been passed down from parent to child.

Marcus Hansen's famous aphorism of third-generation return—"What the son wishes to forget, the grandson wishes to remember" (Hansen 1952:492-500)—requires that subsequent generations are told the immigrant tales of migration to the United States: What was everyday life like in ethnic communities? Who discriminated against "our" group and why? What hardship and struggles did "our" ancestors face? What did our ancestors eat? How was home life organized? How was entry into the dominant group and upward mobility achieved? The story telling required to answer these questions have not been told to those now four, five and six generations removed from the immigrant experience. Hansen's adage for the twenty-first century should read: "What the grandson wished to remember, the great-great-granddaughter has never been told." With some noticeable exceptions, the white Americans of European ancestry in this

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study are exemplars of "straight-line" intergenerational assimilation. The children and grandchildren of Michael Novak's "unmeltable ethnics" have melted rather rapidly into a cultural group that is rather homogenous, discarding almost all of their ethnic background (Novak 1971). For the majority of my respondents, ethnicity was not a salient part of their social identity. However, individuals from each of these four categories of ethnic salience did draw on immigrant tales either explicitly or indirectly through critiques of racial but not ethnic identity politics.

EVERYBODY GOES THROUGH IT: IRISH = ITALIAN =  
WHITE = BLACK = ASIAN

Tom, a twenty-two-year-old from New Jersey, defined himself as being Italian-Irish-American but does not "have a preference for Italians or Irish or Germans; it doesn't really matter to me." Like Tom, Shannon puts little emphasis on her ethnic background, describing herself as "American but my background is Irish." Both Tom and Shannon do however draw on the white ethnic experience of immigration and their observations that Asians possess a strong work ethic to refute blacks' claims that past and present racism explains contemporary racial inequality. Tom explains that:

I wouldn't be surprised if people just said [about blacks], "get off your butt, get an education, go to work." These people [Asians] came into this country not having anything. They worked hard, that's how they got here. *There's no difference between what they did now and what my grandparents did eighty, ninety, hundred years ago when they came to this country.* They didn't know anything. They worked hard and survived. They didn't even think of looking at the government or turning to the government and saying this isn't fair because I'm Italian that you are not giving me a job. You know, Koreans work very hard. I've met a lot of Korean people and they are very, very hardworking people.

Like Tom, Shannon also suggests that blacks lack the strong work ethic that made upward mobility possible for white ethnics and Asian-Americans. Tom's response is a example of how the color-blind immigrant analogy is still used by whites first to equate the historical experiences of white immigrants to the experiences of blacks and then to blame blacks for not climbing the socioeconomic ladder as quickly as the whites' ancestors.

When pressed about why she believed blacks see racial inequality where she does not, Shannon said:

I think that the black people have a very hard time accepting that they are not succeeding because they don't want to work, when they could work and they could succeed just like—I mean look at all the black people who have succeeded in this world—even in this county how can we say

that we're like, suppressing them in any way. I mean look at all the ways you can succeed. I think that they are blaming the wrong people, and I think that the Korean and the Chinese, I don't think they do that.

When asked to clarify how assigning "blame" shapes white attitudes towards blacks, Shannon offers the explanation that whites think:

That they're [blacks] the losers. That they're putting the blame on somebody who's not—it's an excuse for them—it's your fault; it's the white society's fault. I think it just makes them [whites] think less of them. It makes them think that they don't have a work ethic. *I mean when we came to this country no one had anything—I mean they [Asians] had less than the blacks when they came over to this country, way less.* And look at where this country has come. They [blacks] can work just as hard and succeed way above their expectations if they just stopped and looked at themselves.

In these accounts, white immigrants of the past and newly arrived Asians are "model minorities" who succeeded without the help of government intervention. As a discursive strategy this narrative equates the historical experiences of Asians, whites, and blacks and then assigns blame to blacks (or any nonwhites) for not following the same mobility path or achieving economic parity with whites. Talk of institutional racism and discrimination were dismissed as excuses by blacks for not engaging in the type of work and thrift needed to achieve the American Dream. Both these responses are illustrative of what Lawrence Bobo and James Kluegel have termed *laissez-faire racism*: whites blame blacks for high rates of black poverty by using stereotypes to justify their beliefs ("they don't want to work" and "blacks need to get off their butts") while ignoring the structural conditions that perpetuate such inequality (Bobo and Kluegel 1997). By ignoring how racism is structured into everyday life, many whites are able to view hate crimes or other racially motivated acts as anomalies perpetrated by "a small number of prejudiced individuals (who may be of any race)" (Doane, Chapter 1 in this volume).

Tom's and Shannon's belief about blacks lacking a work ethic or relying on government assistance rather than gainful employment is consistent with national surveys of whites' attitudes towards blacks. A National Opinion Research Center study found that 78 percent of whites believed that blacks were more likely to prefer to live off welfare, 62 percent believed that blacks were less hard-working, 56 percent responded that blacks were violent, and 53 percent believed blacks were less intelligent (*New York Times* 1991).

In an insightful account of how white immigrant ethnic communities were constructed in the early 1970s as the cultural antithesis of nonwhite communities, Micaela di Leonardo outlines the importance of the "model minority" in creating dichotomy between white ethnics deserving of our respect and



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Model minorities—constructed as various Asian groups and, more recently, some Latins—are those who “work hard,” have “traditional family values,” “respect their elders,” and thus succeed in the United States without any help . . . it is simply an extension into the present, and onto different populations, of the ahistorical and antiempirical ethnic report card model” (di Leonardo 1999:61).

Several respondents described backgrounds rooted in ethnic traditions with close ties to immigrant parents or grandparents or living in communities that were ethnically homogeneous. Mary, a thirty-year-old who grew up in a Polish and Ukranian neighborhood in Philadelphia, links the “race as ethnicity” perspective to a belief that we have moved to a color-blind society. Asked why she sensed black-white tensions, she explained:

I think if the world thought of people as people and if people left the past in the past, I think a lot more things could be accomplished. I think everyone thinks they have to pay for the sins of their fathers or whatever, because every time somebody does want to complain about racial or minorities they always go back to when there were slaves in the United States. Well you can't blame me. None of my relatives owned slaves, so why should I be, like, singled out for that. *My relatives were people who came over from Poland who didn't have two nickels to rub together,* you know, so I just think it's the past and some people don't want to let that go and want to keep saying, well because of this that happened a hundred years ago it's everyone's fault. Well it's not. Everyone has a chance nowadays to go for an education and everyone has a chance to learn.

Mary draws on and equates the hardships her relatives endured as white ethnic newcomers to the historical experiences of nonwhites. She also believes that the “chance to learn” is equally available to all and presumably, if taken advantage of, would provide upward socioeconomic mobility. Joey, a fifty-one-year-old butcher who grew up in a predominately Italian neighborhood of Philadelphia, defines himself as Sicilian, although he is half Italian and half Irish. Joey, like Mary, discerns little difference between the experiences of white ethnics and those of nonwhites. Joey voices his outrage that blacks are all too willing to rely on the government for assistance rather than engage in the type of “honest” work he and his janitor father embraced.

Like, as far as I'm concerned, this affirmative action to me didn't make no sense, cause *nobody gave my grandfather a break* because he couldn't speak English . . . he had to learn and he had to—and then my viewpoint again on the influx of immigrants in America today is this . . . my

grandfather came here to put something in America. Today you're taught that the government gives you this, the government gives you that, and they come here and take out.

Joey distinguishes between the hardworking, independent immigrants of yesterday and those immigrants (and blacks) who are viewed as being socially and economically parasitic. Like Joey, Carmelo was also raised in a "traditional" ethnic environment. His parents are Italian, he was raised in an Italian neighborhood, acquired his first jobs through ethnic networks, has some command of the Italian language, and married his Italian high school sweetheart. Although he has since moved to what he calls a "white-bread" upper-middle-class suburb, he owns and operates a very successful and upscale Italian cheese shop in the "Italian" part of the city. Like Mary and Joey, Carmelo embraces an understanding of social mobility that levels racial and ethnic differences:

You realize that Italians, when they first came over, were treated like blacks think they are being treated. And they think they are the only ones being treated like this. . . . *Everybody goes through it.* Every ethnic group, every race is going through this persecution for being different in the beginning.

Carmelo's historical revisionism allows a story to be told that equates the experiences of blacks and immigrant Italians. Rewriting the past as a place that was equally hostile to all newcomers regardless of race allows some whites to argue that, since everyone started at the socioeconomic bottom, everyone has the same opportunity to achieve the American Dream (Steinberg 1995). Viewing ethnic and racial history as being similar for all groups is, as sociologist Charles Jaret puts it, a "self-serving ideology" because it justifies the structural advantages whites have received because of their skin color (Jaret 1995).

#### SLAVERY IS OVER: "JUST GET ON WITH IT"

Other young whites did not want to be held accountable for slavery, its legacy, or the ways whites benefit by racial oppression. Slavery was viewed as tragic and regrettable, but it happened "a long time ago." These respondents were oblivious to how the racial caste system, which structured and touched almost every aspect of society, privileged and continues to privilege whites in innumerable ways. References to slavery also provided a comparative historical reference point for some whites to demonstrate how enlightened were their views on race relative to those of their parents and grandparents. James, who "thought" his parents "might" be German or Irish but viewed himself as "just plain old American" was adamant that neither he nor his ancestors were complicit in the slave trade and as such should not be held accountable for society's past sins. When asked why he thought blacks were quick to point out racial discrimination when discussing

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occupational mobility, James gave this account:

They want more. They have some crazy grudge about what went on with slavery and all that stuff, and they want to get us back for it . . . they [blacks today] weren't slaves and they have no right to say that I was a slave owner because I wasn't a slave owner. My parents weren't slave owners. Your parents weren't slave owners. If you want to make a controversy about it and stuff like that, fine, there was a time for it. A hundred years ago. It's over. Let it go . . . they say they don't get treated equally because they had to go through a long struggle to get from where they were, slaves, to get up equal with everybody. But I think the struggle is over.

Unsure of her ancestors' role in slavery, Lori explains she gets "angry when I hear black people say your people enslaved us—my people, I don't even know if we were in the country back then. I have no clue." Lucia grew up in a middle-class suburb outside Philadelphia. Her parents were both born in Italy. She, too, was angered that slavery continues to be raised by blacks as an explanation for contemporary racial inequality. Blacks, she laments, should "like, stop living in the past, with what your ancestors went through and live for yourself. If you want to make it a better world, then stop fighting a fight that ended a long time ago. Just get on with it."

If, as some white respondents see it, blacks cannot claim victim status because slavery, Jim Crow, and institutional racism have been dismantled, then whites can maintain that white privilege is also a thing of the past. This point was raised several times when respondents pointed to how much race relations have changed over the last few decades. Respondents generally believed that inequality and the lack of access to opportunity were fully addressed in the 1960s. As Jason put it, "why it is still such a problem when everything is, like, over and done with since like the sixties." Joe criticized blacks who use the past to complain about their lack of mobility today. As he sees it:

they don't know what in the world happened back in the fifties and the forties with slavery. They're just going on what they read in books, you know, what their great-great-great-grandparents have been passing down. They have nothing to do with what happened back then. I don't know why they have to keep bringing it up, you know, keep causing stuff—well, we were slaves. You weren't a slave. Your great-great-great-great-great-great-grandparents were slaves. There is no reason to cause a fight now. You know, like Michael Jordan is, like, one of the highest paid athletes in the sports business. . . . He gets paid more than the president. Michael Jackson. Look at his house. You know. You're black, you're white, you're Hispanic, you're Asian. You can do it, too.

For my white respondents, Michael Jackson and Michael Jordan are larger-than-life examples that race has declined in significance. Joe's equating being

black, Asian, or Hispanic with being white suggests there is no social cost to being a racial minority, nor is there any social benefit to being white. Reflecting on race and opportunity, James explains that "the struggle is over. I think there was a long, hard climb that they took and I think they made it. So let it go, don't keep carrying it on." As Joe reminds us, anyone "can do" the American Dream. Joe sees an America where skin color no longer matters. The irony is the way white respondents explain that race no longer matters for blacks but in real and direct ways matters immensely for them.

Writer Ellis Cose asks this question, which is central to understanding the ideological nuance of Joe's comment: "Life is rough for a lot of people, not all of whom are black, so why, given the advantages at least some African-Americans so conspicuously enjoy, should whites feel any guilt whatsoever" (Cose 1995[1993]:190)?

To feel or express guilt would suggest that whites may have certain advantages in a social system based on the principles of equal opportunity, meritocracy, and color blindness. Ignoring the role of race in American history erases any sense that whites should feel any guilt for the privileges that have provided them with greater economic mobility relative to blacks. As Stephen Steinberg wryly puts it: "No guilt, no obligation to redress wrongs" (Steinberg 1995:59).

Like Joe, Jeff also believes that dwelling on past wrongs is both counterproductive and ultimately unfair to whites. He explains:

I don't personally feel responsible for my father's sins. Uh, I also don't believe in reparations for something that cannot ever be erased or changed. The past has happened. We can try to make the future better. I don't think that by making me personally pay or by making anybody of my race pay because at one time my race was the perpetrators of sins is going to do anything for the future except keep it going in a vicious cycle.

There is an inherent racial logic in discounting the role slavery has played in shaping contemporary race relations. In order to make the assertion that we now live in a color-blind America where equal opportunity is normative, the social and economic consequences of slavery and the impact of past discrimination on racial minorities today must be negated. Looking back and reconstructing a white ethnic experience that varies little from the experiences of nonwhites creates a happy and guilt-free revisionism where whites did not benefit from the social, economic, and political arrangements of slavery and Jim Crow. The ethnicity-is-race perspective also allows ethnic identity to operate as a carrier of racial group interest. Refuting or denying any historical connection to slavery serves to erase or minimize past and present white privilege. Once this erasure is complete, it is possible to talk of white ethnics and racial minorities as having

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similar life chances. The ethnic reductionism so central to the "ethnic paradigm," writes David Theo Goldberg:

reduces racial formations to ethnicity and analogizes the future trajectory of the racial condition to the melting pot experience of immigrant assimilation . . . it takes the formative experience of ethnic groups as generally similar, it overlooks the particular experience in a groups' social constitution of oppressive conditions such as colonialism, slavery, exclusion and in some cases virtual extirpation . . . this paradigmatic disposition to blame the victim implicitly reifies as given the very racial definition of otherness it is claiming to erode. (Goldberg 1993:78)

Goldberg's treatment of the future of race relations is explicitly connected to the past. The color-blind narrative which now dominates political discourse engages in historic revisionism in order to present a story of contemporary race relations where being white is not synonymous with being privileged. It is this denial of privilege and reworking of the past that allows Leslie Carr to argue that "color blindness is not the opposite of racism, it is another form of racism" (Carr 1997).

"BE PROUD OF WHAT YOU ARE. . . NOT OVERLY PROUD"

Suggesting that ethnic identity is an option that whites can ignore or attend to when the situation, mood, or season arises, Mary Waters observes that whites "do not understand why blacks make so much of their ethnicity. They see an equivalence between the African-American and say, Polish American heritages" (Waters 1990:167). Like those whites in Waters's study, many of my respondents felt their ethnicity was primarily ornamental or a way to accessorize culturally. As Waters insightfully points out, the flexibility and play whites have in "choosing" an ethnic identity when the mood or social circumstances warrants do not exist for blacks and Latinos.

Viewing racial identity as a minor variation of ethnic identity, many whites were bothered that racial minorities, particularly blacks, focused on the extent to which they felt race shaped their daily experiences. When asked about her ethnic background, Theresa explains that she is: "Irish and German and English. But I'm not really into it. . . I just, kind of, I mean, I'm aware of it and around the holidays I kind of get proud of it, but that's it. It's not like really overexcessive or anything."

Not having an "overexcessive" ethnic identity means that Theresa can engage in the kind of ethnic grazing that does not constrain, dictate, or circumscribe individual behavior. She is not linked and obligated to communities that are organized around ethnicity. Expressing an ethnic identity is a private affair. Later in the interview the discussion turned to racial identity politics. In angry tones

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Theresa made this point:

I mean you should be proud of who you are, be proud of what you are, and not overly proud, accept who you are and don't make a big deal about it. I mean, I think they tend to make a big deal out of it. It's like well, I can see that you're black. You don't have to wear the shirt telling me that you are, you know.

Theresa is not part of any ethnic community. The social and political functions ethnicity may have served at one time have in large part been lost or are instrumentally obsolete. She has no ethnic group identity that she can use as a "carrier of group interests." She is unable or unwilling to use her racial identity as a way to discuss racial politics because she might appear racist. She is unable to rely on an immigrant analogy because she lacks the knowledge about the experiences of her immigrant ancestors. The ethnic symbols that Theresa sees African-Americans use to evoke a sense of group solidarity, in this case a black pride T-shirt, do not exist for this admittedly nonethnic white.

Jill, a young white female, defines herself as being a German-American who takes pride in her German ancestry and finds comfort in the German community of the small town in which she was raised outside Pittsburgh. Jill makes the point that expressing an ethnic identity is a valid, legitimate expression for white ethnics, but focusing on one's whiteness is not:

It's like those black T-shirts they wear, "It's a black thing, you wouldn't understand." I think that's exactly how I think their attitude is toward white people... I mean you could wear something that said "It's a German thing" or "It's a Polish thing," but you couldn't say "it's white thing." Because I guess they view themselves like a huge ethnic culture, and white people aren't really an ethnic culture because their ethnicity comes from Europe or Canada or something.

There is the sense among some whites that there is a double standard that violates two strongly held cultural beliefs. The first is that we are a society based on individual, not group, rights. They feel that race-based organizations or petitioning for civil rights based on group membership is inherently unfair because it subverts deeply held beliefs concerning individual agency, equal opportunity, and the meritocratic ideals. The second point of anger and contention is that blacks could organize around their race, but if whites used their whiteness to discuss race relations they would be viewed as racists. Jen, a middle-class woman from a suburb of a large city, was enraged by the way blacks could use their blackness to promote various agendas but whites could not. In an attack on racial identity politics and her perception of a racial double standard, she

complains that:

[the street vendors] had a picture of Jesus, but he was black, OK, now what about if I took Malcolm X and made him white? They'd like, they'd kill me. But that just bothers me. That they can do whatever they want but as soon as we retaliate and say something against them, then they make a big uproar. I mean, I don't really care about the clothes. If they want to say that they're black and proud of it, then be proud of it. But if you want to turn around and say that I'm white or Italian or whatever, that they shouldn't put me down for that, either.

Jill points to what she perceives is a racist double standard. Blacks are able to organize around race, but whites cannot because it would be labeled racist and most whites are too far removed from their ethnic ancestry to draw upon it as a meaningful social identity.

#### CONCLUSION

Herbert Gans observes that symbolic ethnicity is "characterized by a nostalgic allegiance to the culture of the immigrant generation, or that of the old country; a love for and a pride in a tradition that can be felt without having to be incorporated in everyday behavior" (Gans 1999[1979]:422). Richard Alba notes that "symbolic ethnicity makes few and intermittent demands on everyday life and tends to be expressed in the private domain of leisure-time activities" (Alba 1990:306). In both its symbolic and "name-only" forms, ethnic identity is understood as a personal, private orientation that, like a hobby, makes those who express it feel good. However, ethnic identity, even in its most diluted form is not, as much of the ethnic identity literature implies, benign. Many of the respondents who had little in the way of an ethnic identity or consciousness selectively resurrected ethnic family history to create a rather ahistorical record that equated the experiences of their ancestors with the experiences of blacks. For many of my respondents, ethnic identity was "hidden" and emerged only when, as Ashley Doane notes, the "dominant group interests are threatened by challenges from subordinate groups" (Doane 1997b:378).

Ethnic identity was asserted when white privilege was implied, perceived, or alleged, and that identity was used to reassert, defend, or rationalize those privileges. In this way, ethnic identity performed an important function. Whites could argue that all racial and ethnic groups had a difficult time adjusting to a new nation and had their own set of obstacles and prejudices to overcome. A recent Kaiser/Harvard Survey confirms these beliefs. Almost two-thirds (64 percent) of whites in a national survey believed that whites have not benefited from past or present discrimination and that whites should not be obliged to right any wrongs. The survey also found that 69 percent of whites agreed with the statement: "The Italians, Irish, and many other groups overcame prejudice and

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worked their way up, African-Americans should do the same thing without any special help from the government" (Kaiser Family Foundation 1997). A recent Gallup poll found that almost 70 percent of whites felt that whites were treated no differently from blacks in their neighborhood (Gallup Organization 1997). Those obstacles specific to the black population, such as institutional racism, voting rights, job discrimination and civil rights were, as many whites see it, addressed and rectified during the Civil Rights movement (Gallagher 1995).

Playing the white ethnic card was the foundation by which some whites could negate contemporary racism and defend white privilege while espousing the American creed of equal opportunity for all. The immigrant analogy rewrites white and black history as being the same, while an all-things-are-now-equal view of race relations promotes the view that we now live in a color-blind society. Once the color-blind narrative is established, internalized, and made hegemonic, it is possible to interpret Martin Luther King's plea that "individuals should not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" to mean that blacks are racist because they continue to argue that skin color remains an important component of allocating resources and upward social mobility. Not only does laissez-faire, color-blind racism preserve and rationalize white privilege, it ignores the institutional arrangements that maintain white supremacy while framing black grievances as being illegitimate. Ruth Frankenberg suggests "whiteness is often renamed or displaced within ethnic and class namings" (Frankenberg 2000). Playing the "white ethnic card" allows whites with little ethnic identity to rename their whiteness as an expression of ethnic ancestry while displacing the ways in which whites are privileged by their skin color.

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