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Stephanie M. Wildman

Santa Clara University School of Law, swildman@scu.edu

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Reflections on Whiteness and Latina/o Critical Theory*

Stephanie M. Wildman**

This essay is dedicated to Trina Grillo (1948-1996)

Trina Grillo, Adrienne Davis and I spent some time working together on a project about privilege, categories, and the construction of race. My recounting of this episode is obviously just my version, and of course, because you are hearing about it from just one of us, it probably is wrong. This is not to say that only I must remember it wrong. All of us can only see, after all, our own piece of the puzzle. But I wanted to raise the remembrance, in my inadequate oneness, of the three of us working together, because we were trying to do something new, just as LatCrit Theory and Critical Race Theory each set out to change the discourse. We seem to have names for these projects before we necessarily understand all they may encompass and grow to be. I think that is why the work is so hard, because we do not know before we plunge in, where exactly it will lead.

Our favorite part of the project we undertook, which we never really finished, was called "The White Boys Handbook". Because we may never finish it, I wanted to share our ideas with all of you.

Basically there is a plane crash, and in the wreckage we discover this book. Nothing on its cover gives any indication of its contents. But when we open it up, it reveals all the secrets of how to behave as if you rule the world. Suddenly we have an explanation for why so many of them seem to behave the same way and also why they just do not get it. There is this handbook that teaches them all how

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** Professor of Law, University of San Francisco School of Law.

to be who they are and makes them unable to hear us or see us so much of the time. These are the rules we always feel so outside of and do not understand until we trip over them. These are the rules we did not make.

There are chapters on how to saunter into a room and sit in a chair taking up as much space as possible, and information on how to act like no one says anything of any importance until you rise to speak. The book gives lessons on how not to see or hear any women or any men of color or any issues that might concern them, but to say exactly what they said (if it was a good idea) without giving them credit and acting like they had not just said the exact same thing.

There could be a special chapter on white boys in the legal academy, including how to decide what books and articles to recommend for students to read, how to be exclusive about who to cite, and how to discern what is good scholarship from what is drivel, determining good scholarship to be that which conforms to the status quo.

Of course, we would have to add chapters on white women as white boys, and men of color as white boys, but I imagine you get the idea of how this book would read. We were sure it would be a best-seller -- not a single footnote.

It was from this consideration of whiteness, its characteristics and attributes of white privilege -- what Richard Delgado has described as critical white studies¹ -- that these thoughts emerge. This is the work that I have tried to bring to Critical Race Theory -- an exposition of this white privilege. I thought I might begin by coming out here as a white person, a non-Latina white person, consonant with this work about white privilege, and make clear my status. I do so in part because of an experience I had when I was invited to speak at the University of Texas.

The University has a reimbursement request form, which the

1 See CRITICAL RACE THEORY: THE CUTTING EDGE 541 (Richard Delgado ed., 1995).

law journal had filled out, so that they could be reimbursed for sending me an airplane ticket. Being a state school, Texas had a portion of the form devoted to questions about race and ethnicity. In an effort to be helpful, the student filling out my form had entered my race for me. She had checked Black. Now here was a lose-lose situation if ever there was one. I do not feel antipathy at being regarded as Black, but the fact is I am not. So next to the box I wrote, "Sadly, not". But I thought it was interesting that people thought I could not be white, perhaps because of the things I say and write.

Looking at me you can all imagine that most of my life people have assumed that I *am* white, unless I am in a context where they are inquiring if I am Jewish, which I also am. Then I am still white, but it is white and . . . Whiteness, unmodified remains the dominant cultural norm.²

Because of white privilege, the opinion and voice of non-Latina/o whites³ is heard throughout the dominant culture, while other voices have to fight for the air waves. So, you may wonder, why add more whiteness? Why should we talk about whites again? -- especially when Trina and I have already written about the problem of whites stealing the center of conversations and placing their own concerns ahead of everyone else's.⁴

2 Professor Nuñez described the history of Anglo-Saxonization that was accompanied by Christianity as part of the formation of this dominant culture. In this vision, I am white only as long as my whiteness is unmodified and I "pass" as a real white. I do get many unsought privileges for that whiteness. I will not be followed around when I enter a store or a bank, the emergency room in the hospital will pay attention when my child is brought in with a broken wrist and will not ask her if she has been abused. I receive these privileges because appearance places me within the dominant fold.

3 See Berta Esperanza Hernández-Truyol, *Building Bridges -- Latinas and Latinos at the Crossroads: Realities, Rhetoric and Replacement*, 25 COLUM. HUM. RTS. L. REV. 369, 381 (1994) (discussing non-latina/o whites).

4 See generally Trina Grillo & Stephanie M. Wildman, *Obscuring the Importance of Race: The Implication of Making Comparisons Between Racism and Sexism (or Other Isms)*, in STEPHANIE M. WILDMAN ET AL., PRIVILEGE

Studying whiteness from a critical perspective reveals a lot about the construction of hierarchy, power, insiders, and outsiders. Because whiteness is considered the norm of the dominant culture, it remains mostly invisible, taken as a given. Whiteness is rarely named in conversations about race, except when it is discussed as the opposite of Black. Discussions about race are usually constructed along this bipolar axis, making many of the dynamics of the social construction of race invisible and thereby perpetuating white privilege.

The invisibility of whiteness works in curious ways when Latinas/os are added to the discussion. The bipolar construction of race eliminates Latinas/os from conversations about race. As a group, Latinas/os cross many racial groups of different colors, including white; yet they are not positioned with whites in the bipolar conversation. Latinas/os are defined as non-white or other by the dominant culture. Even the history of how to name the group shows they are not the powerful. The fight for some kind of recognition in the census, to enable adequate funding requests for education and other programs led to the use of the category "Hispanic".⁵ The recognition in the census was a form of political victory, but the power to self-name remained elusive.

There remains a lot of blurriness in our cultural thinking about race, nationality, and ethnicity. This blurriness helps to maintain the dominant cultural status quo that privileges whiteness. Illuminating the blur and examining this cultural thinking is helped greatly when we turn the lens to focus on Latinas/os.

I will say first that there is a downside to this lens, to naming Latinas/os as a group, because this act of naming essentializes a very diverse group, making it appear to be a homogeneous whole.

REVEALED: HOW INVISIBLE PREFERENCE UNDERMINES AMERICA 85 (1996) (describing the operation of intersecting systems of privilege, including white privilege).

⁵ See MICHAEL OMI & HOWARD WINANT, RACIAL FORMATION IN THE UNITED STATES: FROM THE 1960S TO THE 1980S, at 76 (1986).

The term essentializes the many different communities, the Cubanos, Puerto Riqueños, Chicanos, all into one lump. To talk about Latinas/os means ignoring the diversity and many-faceted groups encompassed in the term.

The error of this homogenization is perhaps best illustrated by Berta Hernández-Truyol story about trying to order a tortilla in New Mexico, thinking she would get an omelette and getting a white pancake-like bread. As she explained, "Same word, same language, different meaning."⁶

Can we achieve a common language to talk about race and ethnicity?⁷ A common language does not seem possible under the present dominant discourse construction of race as black and white. So by naming Latinas/os as a group perhaps we can be strategically essentialist in order to move the dialogue forward. The pitfalls of essentialism have been well-documented by many people here. But strategic essentialism recognizes that we have to name things in order to talk about them and that sometimes we should.⁸

I like using the terminology given to us by the Spanish language, even though I do not understand all the linguistic nuances, because the term "Latinas/os" has the potential to help us remember not to essentialize based on gender. The word "race", being genderless, is gendered male in most conversations, and the word race does not afford us this helpful linguistic reminder to avoid essentialism, even as we engage in trying to use essentialism strategically.

Naming Latinas/os, being strategically essentialist, instead of relying on the umbrella categories "race" or "people of color", can help us reveal the hierarchies that exist within the category race. My friend Julianna Alvarez tells a story of working for a white

6 See Hernández-Truyol, *supra* note 3, at 406-07.

7 See generally ADRIENNE RICH, *THE DREAM OF A COMMON LANGUAGE: POEMS 1974-1977* (1978).

8 See generally GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK, *THE POST-COLONIAL CRITIC: INTERVIEWS, STRATEGIES, DIALOGUES* (Sarah Harasym ed., 1990) (discussing strategic essentialism); Angela P. Harris, *Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory*, 42 *STAN. L. REV.* 581 (1990) (same).

woman from South Africa. This woman began an argument in which she was particularly abusive to Julianna. Julianna responded, "My skin may be dark, but I'm not Black. You can't treat me like that." After her anger had subsided, my friend realized she should have said, "You can't treat me like that just because I'm Latina and a person of color." Although she would not use these words to describe what she had done, she had incorporated the bipolar dominant discourse into her gut reaction. Such a reaction reinforced the privileging of whiteness. But she realized that she did not want to benefit from using a racial hierarchy, from positioning herself above other people of color.

Being strategically essentialist in this way, naming Latinas/os as a particular community to be examined, ironically creates a less essentialist conversation within race theory in two significant ways: (1) it illuminates that there are different issues for different people of color, and (2) it reminds us that gender matters and is linked to the racial discourse. Of course critical race theorists never claimed all races are alike or that gender does not matter. But the problems of our language, the very word for race, encourages us to forget the complexity that must be part of the conversation. This creation of categories, like race, black, and white, may block the paths to creative thinking about the issues. So we have to be aware of the pitfalls of categories, even as we strategically use them.⁹

In their landmark book, *Racial Formation in the United States*, Michael Omi and Howard Winant talk about three paradigms of race that have been used in racial discourse in this country: ethnicity, class, and nation.¹⁰ Their book shows the inadequacy of any of these descriptions to depict racial dynamics in this country where race has been and continues to be a social construction. Ian Haney López's book *White By Law* is an important step in this work

9 See Stephanie M. Wildman & Adrienne D. Davis, *Making Systems of Privilege Visible*, in PRIVILEGE REVEALED, *supra* note 4, at 7-24.

10 See OMI & WINANT, *supra* note 5, at 9-52.

about the social construction of race.¹¹

Peggy McIntosh wrote an article on white privilege in which she listed conditions she took for granted that her African American co-workers, friends and acquaintances could not count on most of the time.¹² Many of the conditions on her list of 46 apply to Latinas/os as well. This list includes:

-- I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.

-- When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization", I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.

-- I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.

I have begun my own list of conditions I can count on that are specific to dominant cultural white privilege, with respect to my Latina/o friends, acquaintances, and colleagues:

1. People who see me and hear my name will assume that my children and I speak fluent English. People will not be surprised if I speak English well.

2. People who see me will assume that I am white (the University of Texas notwithstanding).

3. People who see me will assume I am a citizen of the United States. They will probably voice this by assuming I am an American, an assumption they ironically will not make for people from Central and South America, who of course are equally entitled to claim that word. People will never assume that my children or I are illegal immigrants.

4. People will assume that I was born in this country, and will be surprised to learn that my mother was not.

11 See generally IAN F. HANEY LÓPEZ, *WHITE BY LAW* (1996).

12 See Peggy McIntosh, *White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies*, in *POWER, PRIVILEGE, AND THE LAW: A CIVIL RIGHTS READER 22* (Leslie Bender & Dan Braveman eds., 1995).

5. Stereotyped assumptions will not be made about my class and educational background (or my likely form of employment, if I were a man.)

6. People will not comment about my sense of time, if I am prompt or late or talk too long, unless I am unusually late. Then people will assume I have an individual, personal reason for being late. My lateness will not be dismissed as a joke about "white time".

7. People will not assume I have a low IQ.

8. People will pronounce my name correctly or politely ask the correct pronunciation. They will not behave as if it is an enormous imposition to get my name right.¹³

9. People will not question my objectivity or my entitlement to speak concerning questions of race or immigration.¹⁴

All of these conditions are related to the assumption that I belong and will fit into the social norm. Since so many Latinas/os are also white, a consideration of these conditions reveals the construction of race is not about race at all, but about power. Critical Race Theory does address this notion of inside and outside. But distinct recognition time, studying the operation of this power in terms of Latinas/os adds force to the analysis. It is necessary for all of us, Latina/o or not, to pay specific attention to the operation of the construction of race in relation to Latinas/os. If we do not turn this lens specifically, it evaporates. It is in the dominant cultural interest to have it evaporate, to keep control of the blur, so that we will not see the issues raised: issues about the meaning of race and ethnicity, passing, and what is in a name.

The assumption about me, implicit in my list of conditions -- that I belong -- shows the power of the dominant culture's value in assimilation; belonging is everything, and belonging is defined as sameness and in not being the other. This empty value in assimilation reveals why a multicultural perspective, one that honors

13 Thanks to Catharine Wells for this idea.

14 Thanks to Margalynne Armstrong for this idea.

difference and does not require assimilation, is so important. It is an incredible strength to be bi- or tri-lingual, to understand more cultures than just the dominant norm. These real advantages possessed by Latinas/os are viewed by the dominant culture as disadvantages. This is a crime.

The dominant culture has been fond in these times of battles around affirmative action of appropriating the language of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., saying we must judge people by the content of their character, not by the color of their skin. However, the dominant culture fails to value the multi-cultural ability of Latinas/os as a measure of their character. The failure to acknowledge the importance of multi-culturalism, to treat it as some PC fad, is the failure to acknowledge or value the Latina/o existence. The affirmative action critique also ignores the existence of privileges based on whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality, and class. Recognizing privilege would require seeing that the debates about merit are not waged on a level playing field.

Consider this notion of so-called merit. What if we defined as an aspect of merit for law school admissions the ability to speak more than one language -- the ability to be bi- or tri-lingual? What if we required knowledge of a non-English language as part of graduation requirements, so students could serve a wider client base? Who would then be the experts sought after in study groups? The operation of white privilege makes such a scenario unlikely, but promoting such requirements might be a worthwhile project.

Writing this list of conditions did reveal some gender commonalities, and some other commonalities, to the extent Jewish people are othered by this dominant culture. And so this effort made me realize that I had to think more complexly about all the identity categories. Adrienne Davis, Trina Grillo and I offered the koosh ball as a metaphor for the multi-dimensional way we need to learn to think about the intersections of all of our attributes.¹⁵ Multi-culturalism also seeks to encourage us to move beyond linear

15 See Wildman & Davis, *supra* note 9, at 22-24.

thinking and the either/or choices that the dominant culture seems to mandate. Looking at our multi-faceted selves will help us to see commonalities and to construct bonds bridged upon them, instead of learning about socially constructed difference and exclusion.

Latinas are important leaders in this effort. I want to give one example from within the legal academy concerning work that remains to be done. Recently, at a conference about including these issues within our classrooms (where the audience was a group receptive to these concerns rather than the usual audience of law professors), Margaret Montoya rose and spoke in Spanish and English. She described the difficulty of finding her voice at this conference of supposed *compañeros* that was so alienating to her. She spoke of the speech patterns that favor those who are pushy and jump in front of others, of the lack of time to be thoughtful, to process and really hear what people were saying. She said that these patterns excluded voices like her own -- Latina voices.

And as I listened to her, tears streamed down my face, because I too have a history of trouble in making my voice heard, in classrooms as a student and teacher, at conferences, and at meetings. A multicultural perspective in conferences -- one that recognizes other ways of being in the world, besides the dominant cultural norms -- would be more inclusive to Latinas, but also to many others. Protocols for conferences are just one baby step that we desperately need. We need to rearrange the furniture. We need also to think about our classrooms, who we are including, who is being heard. Classrooms are the first place we can effect with a multi-cultural perspective in what we study and in how we discuss the issues that are raised.