THE
FUTURE OF
WHITENESS

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" ... justice can never be done in the midst of injustice. A colonial administrator has no possibility of acting rightly toward the natives, nor a general toward his soldiers; the only solution is to be neither general nor military chief."

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier), 2011

"In the course of history, there comes a time when humanity is called to shift to a new level of consciousness. To reach a higher moral ground. A time when we have to shed our fear and give hope to each other. That time is now."

Wangari Maathai, Nobel Lecture, 2004

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Introduction: The Unbearable Whiteness of Being

This is a book about a topic many would rather avoid. That topic is white identity, its difficult past, complicated present, and uncertain future. Before we can consider its future, or jump to the conclusion that whiteness is withering away, fragmenting beyond recognition, or massively expanding the kinds of persons it includes, we need to understand what whiteness is as a social and historical identity among other such identities, whether this single term can even make sense of a grouping so impossibly varied, and how its utility as a term can survive its constantly changing boundaries. We also have to understand how whiteness is lived, and not just how it is ideologically represented or manipulated. It is especially important to consider how it is lived today by those who are coming to repudiate the ideology of white supremacy. "Being white these days," as Nell Painter (2012, 389) has so aptly remarked, "is not what it used to be." In particular, the historical links between the formation of white identity and racism are becoming more difficult to dodge.

Michael Moore is one of those white folks who clearly figured out the wrongness of racism early on in his life. His first real political act was an intervention at the Elks

Club, no less, when he entered a speech contest on the life of Abraham Lincoln. Moore had discovered in 1970 that segregation still held sway at the Elks golf course in Flint Michigan, where a sign announced "CAUCASIANS ONLY" in helpfully capitalized letters. Confused and incensed by discovering what he had thought was just a southern backwardness right in the midst of his northern hometown, Moore became truly livid when he found the same organization sponsoring a contest for the best speech honoring Lincoln. The Elks seemed to be totally oblivious to the contradiction, but Moore, at 16, was not. "They want a speech? I'll give them a speech," he thought to himself. The resultant effort was an essay that sounds like the Moore we have come to know, not too terribly nuanced, but clear and to the point. He called for segregation, a segregation from the Elks Club.

Moore has been one of our bravest social and cultural critics and a role model as a white antiracist, touring college campuses with Cornel West and calling out racism in every movie he's made. For his efforts, he has received numerous and persistent death threats of the sort the authorities call "credible." In his memoir, appropriately titled *Here Comes Trouble*, Moore sermonizes on the topic of bigotry in the first chapter:

> Only cowards use violence. They are afraid that their ideas will not win out in the public arena. They are weak and worried that the people will see their weakness. They are threatened by women, gays, and minorities – minorities, for chrissakes! You know why they're called "minorities"? Because they don't have the power – YOU do! That's why you're called the "majority"! (2011, 29; emphasis in original)

Moore is beseeching whites to relax and reconsider their fears because, after all, they vastly outnumber minorities.

This form of argumentation will soon have to end. Most demographers are predicting that by 2050, though the US Census Bureau says 2042, white European Americans will

slip below majority status in the United States. For the first time in its history, the US will be a majority nonwhite nation. Whites will have to jockey for position in a multi-polar nation, just as, since the end of the Cold War, they have had to negotiate a decentered, multipolar world. White people all over the world are coming to experience in both their national and global communities what some inelegantly call minoritized status. This demographic phenomenon is by no means restricted to the US: lower birth rates in Europe constitute what has been described as a voluntary demographic suicide. There too, immigrant fertility outflanks that of white Christian Europeans, leading to the prediction that Europe itself will become a majority Muslim continent in the next century. Given these trends, it is understandable if whites are apprehensive about the future.

Reports from the 2010 Census chart the national changes in the United States quite clearly. Between 2000 and 2010, the US population increased by nearly 10 percent to 308 million souls. Latino and Asian numbers jumped the most, with each group growing by a remarkable 43 percent. But African American numbers also climbed 12 percent, and even the category "American Indian and Alaska Native" jumped 18 percent. In contrast, the white population lagged markedly behind, increasing only by 1 percent. Hence, whites lost five points of their market share in the overall population, dropping from 69 percent to 64 percent in just one decade. But even this number is misleading, since the category of "white" used by the 2010 Census included both North Africans and peoples of the Middle East, hardly groups associated with the heartland of America.

The demographers making these predictions are taking all the variables into account, including the fluctuations of the birth rate. The white population is older, other groups tend to be younger, and most of the increase in the numbers of nonwhites are children born in the United States. Non-white babies already outnumber white babies. So even if

the birth rate were to change dramatically, and immigration was magically stopped, the deed is done.

I argue in this book that this impending change constitutes a specter haunting the United States as well as Europe, producing a white reaction that can take pretty hysterical forms, although it is often carefully cloaked to avoid the charge of racism. The demographic shift is obviously central to strategies of the right, such as the open fascists of Hungary and Greece, but also of centrists and moderates everywhere. It is not an overstatement to say that every major political issue debated in the public domain is affected by this specter, well beyond the immigration debates. In the United States, the changing demographics affects electoral politics at nearly every level, including general reactions to President Obama, as well as debates over tax policy, healthcare, and the purported problem of "voter fraud." Local and global demographic issues entwine over the concern about becoming a debtor nation to China, a nonwhite country. Since whites will retain economic advantages even after they lose majority status, becoming a minority with a majority of the country's wealth, increased inheritance taxes, and redistributive proposals can incite racial animus (Glaser and Ryan 2013). This combination of racial and economic differences is central to the debate over limiting the sale of guns. During Obama's presidency, sales spiked so much that some firearms manufacturers have wittily named him "Gun Salesman of the Year." But the truth is that Obama was a symbol for a larger issue: an impending white minority with a greater share of resources facing off groups whose long history of unfair treatment produced at least some of that collective wealth.

Beyond the economic issues involved in losing majority status, there is an important political one. Holding a significant majority within a nation had granted whites the ability to believe in the legitimacy of a white-dominated government. This apparent justification of white domination will soon disappear. For a long time the collective

imaginary of race in the United States involved a black/white binary: the image of a securely massive white population facing off against mainly a black population, with negligible numbers of other *others*. African Americans, the largest minority until 2003, were never imagined to balloon in numbers sufficient to unseat the white majority. This black/white imaginary has stymied race analysis and the maturation of antiracist politics: it is one thing to feel benevolent toward a minority who will always be a minority, but quite another to negotiate on equal terms with powerful groups who together hold the majority.

While the impending demographic changes have unleashed a *Sturm und Drang* among the white right (including neo-conservatives, Tea Partyers, neo-Nazis, and everything in between), the white-dominated left, from liberal to progressive, including even the moderate wing of the Republican Party, has been mostly reticent to speculate publicly on what this future will mean for the United States. As Desmond S. King and Rogers M. Smith (2011) have noted, "on race, the silence is bipartisan." Everything from the economic crisis to the political divide demands an analysis of race, as they point out, yet white liberals remain uncomfortable in broaching the topic, while conservatives generally try to disguise their racial references, though the disguise is often so ineffective as to be a joke.

Opportunities abound for a serious discussion of how the changing demographics may change this country, but are too often deftly sidestepped. Major left-wing public intellectuals, including Francis Fox Piven, analyzed Occupy Wall Street movements as transcending the era of identity politics to place class front and square, as if class could be understood separately from race. So the result is that the extreme unabashed right wing dominates race-talk, while all others, including the left, the liberals, and the moderates, largely maintain race avoidance.

This may be motivated by the idea, or the worry, that if we talk about demographic changes directly, we invite

reprisal, feeding the flames of white reaction. We should not, some reason, portray these impending changes as important to discuss. Some whites may fear that a focus on demographic changes will appear to be intrinsically racist, since this would be to acknowledge the importance of a category – race – that we should, they think, be trying to overcome. Such avoidance strategies may also be motivated by white liberals who have become too accustomed to placating the racist in the family gathering, thinking that if they avoid the subject, he (or she) won't have an excuse to spout idiocies. And there is also a recurring concern that race-talk can be overplayed, that the mainstream's late acknowledgment of "dog-whistle politics," or the fact that our public discourses are peppered with covert appeals to race, has lately become an overused explanation, a distortion of legitimate debates about fiscal policy, or a defensive maneuver of Obama defenders (Chait 2014).

Yet clearly, we cannot even engage in the debate about when race applies and when it doesn't while there is so much energy spent preempting the discussion. Unless we talk about these demographic changes up front, we cannot plausibly claim to know how they affect social trends and political debates.

Much of the mainstream left, which has long been white-dominated (simply because of demographics, but also because of its tendency to separate class from race), has made a frontal assault on identity politics for decades, making life uncomfortable for anyone daring to defend the relevance of identity to politics. This assault, together with the academy's skeptical disclaimers about the concept of race, has left many unable to analyze or even address the imminent demographic changes in the racial make-up of the country and how this is impacting our public culture. If race is basically an illusion – or a mere ideological overlay that mystifies reality, as it is on this mainstream left view – then the demographic changes make no real difference, only a difference at the level of ideology. Marx sarcastically accused Hegel of portraying

social antagonisms as mere battles of ideas fighting it out in the air. If one thinks "race" is nothing but an illusion, one might well apply this charge to the fights over race.

For decades now, some of the most radical white theorists have been arguing for the abolition of whiteness, given the illusory nature of racial categories (see Livingstone 1962; Warnke 2007). If race is illusory, then the coming changes in population distributions should be treated as meaningless. If, as influential historian David Roediger puts it (1994), race concepts of all sorts are "ontologically empty," then the task is not to take the coming changes seriously but to show why they make no difference.

The racial identity we call whiteness has been especially disavowed by some quarters of the white left on the grounds that it is a political construct that does nothing more than cloak the plutocracy. We should be tearing away the cloak, they argue, not giving into the idea that whiteness is real.

Yet this sort of approach simply bolsters the avoidance of race-talk or of engaging with the critical question of the demographic shifts. Further, as I will argue in this book, this repudiation of race-talk may in actuality be an indication of a basic discomfort with being white. Whiteness is not cool, it is not on the right side of history, and it is associated with many troubling dispositions, most importantly racism. If one doesn't want to take the chauvinist route of defending whiteness against these charges, then why would anyone in their right mind want to be associated with whiteness?

But we need to find out whether the actual politics of white identity and of white people fits the stereotype. Is it really the case that the main response of white people to a loss of majority status will be racism, fear, anger, and violence – in short, reaction? That economically struggling whites will forever identify more with the 1 percent than with the multiracial majority? Such fatalistic responses may seem to gain credence from new social histories

tracing the lineage of the very concept of white identity to racism and white supremacy, portraying whiteness itself as a plot to demobilize class consciousness. If white identity cannot be separated from this foundation in white racial dominance – if to avow one's whiteness is to buy into the ideology – then whites who convert to an antiracist social view have no other option than to disavow their white identity.

Whiteness As Real, and Really Open-Ended

This makes no sense to me. Even in the far distant future, when we might imagine white supremacy as a material and ideological practice to have come to a long-deserved end, whites may well still exist, at least for a while. Whiteness is, after all, produced by a complex of historical events, rather than a single originary moment (see e.g. Cash 1941; Frye 1992; Delgado and Stefancic 1997; Domínguez 1997). And history has a long reach. Thus, whiteness is far from ontologically empty: it is a historically emergent lived experience, variegated, changing, and changeable. Being white is a powerfully important element in one's life, just as is not being white. But in the view I will develop in this book, whiteness as a term is not coterminous with dominance, but with a particular historical experience and relationship to certain historical events. Among other things, every white person in the Americas or Australia has some relationship to a family history of immigration, and the large majority of this immigration was economically motivated. This formative aspect of whiteness is hardly unique, and thus should raise questions about the boundaries as well as the content of whiteness, given the similarity whites have with most other immigrants (Jacobson 1998). Against Bonilla-Silva's (2006) influential claim about the expanded borders of whiteness today, however, I want to insist that whiteness has a very particular and unique relationship to historical atrocities such as slavery and the genocide of

native peoples. Even though whites differ widely in their affective orientation to these events, there is a distinction between their likely assorted affective responses (such as shame, guilt, denial) and those whose families were indigenous and subject to genocide or to slavery or to imperial wars in which the US played a leading part. This produces a content to whiteness despite its immense variety and moveable boundaries.

But it is one thing to say that we need a radical re-understanding of what whiteness means, and what whites have in common with many nonwhites (such as immigration histories), and another altogether to say that whiteness has no meaning at all. If our image of an antiracist future is a future in which white identity no longer exists, this means that whites will no longer know who they are. And the claim that they have abolished their whiteness may well provide an alibi for the mistaken belief that the unearned social and economic advantages accrued by white skin are a thing of the past.

A more reasonable approach is to understand whiteness as an organically emergent phenomenon. Its economic and political power can be measured by social scientists, its arrival as a commonly used term can be dated by historians, and its characteristic subjective contours can be discerned through the experiments of social psychology. There is a facticity of whiteness, whether or not it factors into a person's self-ascription. Whiteness is lived, and not merely represented. It is a prominent feature of one's way of being in the world, of how one navigates that world, and of how one is navigated around by others.

Whiteness should not be reduced to racism or even racial privilege, even though these have been central aspects of what it means to be white. No social identity can be defined by a single vector across every possible context, and even white identity constitutes a social disadvantage in some situations. Moreover, today, perhaps more than ever, whiteness has a variegated relationship to avowed racism. About half of whites agree with most people of

color on many issues related to race, including the claim that antiblack racism is still a large problem, that racism infects the criminal justice system, and that immigrants are treated unfairly. For example, according to Pew Research Center data from 2014, only 48 percent of whites believe that "a lot" of progress has been made on racism; that leaves 52 percent who believe that either little or no progress has been made. Only 35 percent of whites have "a great deal" of confidence in the police. Now this leaves a more than 20-point gap between how black Americans respond to this question, but the interesting point is that 65 percent of whites disagreed with this claim and, in fact, only 36 percent of whites say they have a great deal of confidence that police officers in their community will not use excessive force and will treat blacks and whites equally. We focus too often on the gap between white and black and brown, and miss the growing gap among whites. The nation is increasingly politically polarized on a number of critical issues, from guns to healthcare, and that polarization is mainly due to the polarization occurring among whites themselves.

The question is how to understand this phenomenon. Historical and sociological work in whiteness studies has built up a strong case for the constitutive relation between whiteness and racism. Besides Roediger, there is the work of W. E. B. Du Bois (1986), Langston Hughes (1933), George Lipsitz (1998), Joe Feagin and colleagues (2001); Feagin (2013), Bruce Baum (2006), Jessie Daniels (1997), and others who have persuasively traced the historical formation of white identity to the political ploys by elites to divide and conquer the working masses. More recently, social psychologists and sociologists such as Claude Steele (2010), Charles Gallagher (1994), Michael Tesler and David Sears (2010), and Jennifer Richeson and Sophie Trawalter (2008), as well as philosophers Shannon Sullivan (2005), Charles Mills (1997), and George Yancy (2008), among others, have begun to measure the legacy this long history has wrought in the unconscious habits as