

# Alternative Futures of Whiteness

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## Abstract

*Although the origins of analysis of whiteness in westernised society stems from the non-white community, in recent decades "whiteness studies" has become an "official" area of research in the academic world and white mainstream. This shift is a turning point that affects the future of whiteness. Whether the future is violent or peaceful depends on the naming and displacement of whiteness through multiple levels of analysis that embrace the deep consciousness of racially oppressed communities.*

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As a significant turning point that affects the future of whiteness and white/non-white relationships, "whiteness studies" has recently gained momentum within the westernised academic world and white mainstream. Academic literature, journal articles, books, as well as conferences, in this research area are more common across the globe in fields such as cultural studies, critical studies, sociology, psychology, and education (Fine et al. 1997). Specifically, debates in feminist scholarship have stimulated discussions on whiteness (Phoenix 1997). In 1998 researchers in Australia took a major step in hosting the first Australian conference on whiteness, called "Unmasking Whiteness: Race Relations and Reconciliation." Also, in 2000 the first "White Privilege" Conference was held in the United States.

This facilitation of whiteness studies has made whiteness increasingly visible within the "white imagination" (Leonardo 2004), where white people are using institutions as a stage for naming their own privilege as connected in symbiosis to the oppression of black,

Indigenous, and other racially marginalised communities. Thus, because whiteness has become a significant focus within academic institutions that are often centred on a white worldview, social consciousness of whiteness is expanding past the margins to include the mainstream. Does this recent "innovation" in research mean that whiteness will inevitably be deconstructed? Will it lead to the transformation of racialised systems of power within westernised society towards a new social order founded on egalitarianism and harmony? Although this utopian vision of the future is a possibility, the study of whiteness by white people and/or within the context of white cultures and institutions is as problematic as it is hopeful. Whether the future is violent or peaceful depends on the naming and displacement of whiteness through multiple arenas and through multiple levels of analysis.

In this paper, whiteness is defined as a multi-layered construct embedded in the fabric of westernised society and centred on the way that white institutions, cultures, and people are racialised and ethnicised by history and society. Each layer of the construction of

whiteness manifests in different ways. Superficially, whiteness is evident in the division of colour/ racial/ ethnic categories and the statistical disparities between white and non-white community resources. The United States Central Intelligence Agency, or CIA (2005), divides people according to white, black, and Native American racial groups. These categories are then related to other statistics such as crime rates and economic status. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2005) classifies the "population" according to ethnic/ national origin and country of birth, with Indigenous persons as a separate category. Many analyses of "social problems" can therefore hone in on Indigenous experiences. Whiteness is also constructed as systemic and a central part of maintaining the status quo which privileges some racial, ethnic, and cultural groups above others. Invisibilised campaigns that promote and sponsor racialised national identities, such as the increase in images of white Americans that have come about after September 11<sup>th</sup>, perpetuate systemic whiteness (Osuri and Banerjee 2004). In addition, whiteness is constructed as a worldview in which the value system embedded in white culture is part of the mainstream. Family units, official discourses and communication methods, political organizations, and even hierarchies of human relationships are all linked to the normalisation of white values. For example, nuclear families, in contrast to extended families, and written English are centralised as westernised social values (Moreton-Robinson 2000). In its most metaphorical form, whiteness is a myth that constructs white people as heroes and non-white people as villains. Phrases such as "white knight" and "black sheep" are examples of the mythical binary of white as right and black as wrong. Each layer in the construction of whiteness work to facilitate and preserve a racist and inequalitarian society.

Social consciousness of each layer of whiteness varies. The white mainstream often overlooks the depth of its own racialisation by constructing whiteness as an invisible norm and white people as a neutral, non-racialised category (Hage 1998; Moreton-Robinson 2000). Alternatively, groups marginalized by white-

ness, such as Indigenous people and NESB immigrants in Australia, are aware of the multiple constraints of whiteness which contribute to their personal experiences of marginalisation. According to Moreton-Robinson (1998), an Indigenous researcher from Australia, "... discussions of 'race' [within the white mainstream] position whiteness as a cultural norm that does not require examination of the values and assumptions which maintain its dominance and oppression". As an invisible norm, whiteness can continue to discretely permeate white, mainstream westernised society, justifying both colonisation and the nationalisation. In order to pave the way for a harmonious and peaceful future, each aspect of the multi-layered construction of whiteness must be consciously challenged by all groups and communities.

## Genealogy of Whiteness

In recent decades, whiteness studies (e.g., Fine et al. 1997; Frankenberg 1993; Moreton-Robinson 2000), have become "official" and more widespread within academic communities in westernized nations where many researchers, both non-white and white, have begun to formally address issues directly related to the experiences of white people. This theoretical approach has impacted numerous research fields, including sociology, psychology and education, that, within westernized society, have been constructed on the norms and values of the white mainstream. Through their efforts to officially name and displace whiteness, many researchers describe the unequal distribution of/ access to resources among white and non-white groups. For example, the most commonly addressed issue in whiteness studies is white privilege, "an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions" (McIntosh 1992: 1) such as access to bank loans and flesh coloured band-aids. Additionally, some researchers analyse the white/ non-white dichotomous worldview that is embedded in the white mainstream. Efforts are made to name and displace the constraints of the white-based legal system in that force issues such as Indigenous land rights and migrant detention centres into the

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margins (e.g. Moreton-Robinson 1998). More and more, critical discussions of whiteness are gaining momentum as the white-based academic community begins the process of challenging the same worldview that has enabled the construction of academia.

Although this current officialisation of whiteness studies is linked to efforts from within the white mainstream, prior eras paved the way for the current movement. In the 1970s and 80s, whiteness studies was embedded more discretely within theories of race, ethnicity, and culture developed by both non-white and white researchers. During this era, multiculturalism developed as a worldview endorsed by the white mainstream to bring about an egalitarian, harmonious society to replace an overt campaign of white superiority. However, white leaders attributed to themselves the power to define and construct a multicultural world, therefore maintaining their own superiority in the centre of the mainstream (eg. Fine et al. 1997; Hage 1998). In response, many researchers criticised "superficial multiculturalism" and focused on the necessity of addressing deeper racial, ethnic, and cultural inequalities. Outside the white mainstream academic community, more peripheral areas of research such as critical race theory, critical cultural studies, and Indigenous epistemology developed and expanded to include analyses of many self-named white multiculturalists who were criticized for differing only superficially from overt white racists. Although whiteness studies was not established until years later, these earlier research areas worked as a core part of the naming and displacing whiteness. Additionally, through their development within the more peripheral areas of a white-based academic system and more direct links to the perspectives of groups marginalised by whiteness, these research efforts created a bridge between the white/non-white worldviews.

The discussions of whiteness among peripheral communities of researchers were significantly influenced by a small number of foundational non-white scholars who began the initial process of naming and displacing whiteness through published and unpublished academic

works. In 1920 as part of an unpublished book entitled *Darkwater*, W.E.B. Du Bois, an African American scholar, completed a widely circulated essay entitled the "The Souls of White Folk" in which he describes how white folk "clutch at rags of facts and fancies" in their efforts to hide their role as oppressor and related shameful emotions. Du Bois used metaphorical language that connected the scholarly frame of the written word with the deep understanding of whiteness in the more figurative "black imagination." Similarly, Carter G. Woodson, Founder of Black Studies and Black History Month in the United States, challenged whiteness through publications such as *The Miseducation of the Negro* (1933). In 1952 in South Africa, Nelson Mandela spoke out against whiteness within the white public arena of politics as a civil rights leader and legal scholar. Kwame Nkrumah also challenged white superiority in Africa during the mid 1900s during his development of an Afrocentric research methodology. As analyses of whiteness carried out by non-white, marginalised scholars, these foundational publications were overlooked almost entirely by the white mainstream. Non-white communities, whose resources and literacy levels were often restricted, were also unable to fully access and endorse studies of whiteness in the world of research and scholarship.

However, previous to the emergence of analyses of whiteness by researchers and scholars, the origins of whiteness studies stem from the centuries-old consciousness of non-white communities that is beyond publications, copyrights, and academic language. Artists, musicians, writers, sages, and thinkers within these communities who "have lived within the constraints of whiteness" (Moreton-Robinson 1998: 12) and are personally affected by being defined as "others" outside the white mainstream have illuminated whiteness from a marginalised perspective that is often overshadowed by the mainstream. During slavery in the United States, African Americans communicated their experiences of white oppression metaphorically through song, with the intent of passing on multi-layered information that could help foster escape for some members of the community.

Indigenous art, music, and oral stories across the globe have depicted emotions of hopelessness and tales of abuses from foreign white invaders. These accounts of whiteness move past the white imagination and into less comfortable yet deeper viewpoints.

The less official, metaphorical descriptions of whiteness that have come about through non-white community consciousness continue to be evident in resemblance of their original form. Across the globe, community-based axioms and expressions include the naming and displacing of whiteness as part of their own non-white cultural traditions. Musicians, including Blackalicious, Run DMC, and G. Love, address whiteness through song lyrics such as "Blackness is blackness, Whiteness is whiteness ... Avoiding contact, Oblivious to others, This is the social contract" (G. Love and Special Sauce 1997). Artists, whose pieces were on display in 2004 at the International Center of Photography in New York, name whiteness through works like "Untitled [Men Who Look Like Jesus]", which questions the white construction of Jesus. In Indian culture, whiteness is described through a saying that describes how after Indian independence the "elephant's tail" still looms. In this saying Britain is the (white) elephant. Each of these efforts to challenge whiteness is focused on the "root level of questioning" (Inayatullah 2004).

The metaphorical naming and displacing of whiteness within the margins as well as more "official" studies of whiteness both work toward the same goal of paving the way for a transformed, more harmonious society. Yet, their connections to whiteness are very different. As directly linked to the consciousness of non-white communities, analyses of whiteness through metaphorical expression are centred on the perspectives of those who have been forced to understand whiteness as a means of endurance in white dominated, westernized society. Thus, whiteness is uncovered as grotesque and monstrously dehumanizing. Studies of whiteness within the academic world, though, are more contradictory. On one hand, whiteness is challenged through a body of research and academic literature that thor-

oughly explains the impact of whiteness on westernized society. Yet, on the other hand, whiteness is at the heart of academia and perpetuated by its expansion. Whiteness studies research and the challenging of whiteness through community based metaphors both affect the construction of whiteness in the future.

### Examining Alternative Futures of Whiteness through Causal Layer Analysis

In this remainder of the paper, I will explore the future of whiteness through discussing three scenarios based on the above genealogy. Each scenario involves social transformation on different levels, as outlined through causal layer analysis, or CLA (Inayatullah 2004; Milojevic 2004). Because it is designed to investigate multiple levels of consciousness and understanding, CLA is fitting in analysing the multi-layered construction of whiteness. The white mainstream and non-white communities differ in their consciousness of the four different levels layers of CLA. Whereas the white mainstream operates on the litany and systemic levels, the emotive consciousness of whiteness within non-white communities is most often at the myth/ metaphor level (Inayatullah 2004). In addition, because the layer of analysis emphasised in each effort to challenge whiteness often reflects its genealogical links, CLA is useful in examining the future of whiteness as connected to the past and present. Thus, CLA provides an expansive framework for examining alternative futures that stem from paradoxical efforts to name and displace whiteness.

Each future scenario is based on four main drivers of change that stem from the attempts to name and displace whiteness in westernised society. The first driver is the recent officialisation of "whiteness studies" in academia as a specific, separate research area. This driver is significant in that different layers of the construction of whiteness are more visible than others, such as whiteness as litany and system, within the white academic world. Second, movements

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that originate more directly from marginalised communities, who challenge whiteness metaphorically, impact the future. Third, whiteness is driven by tensions between those who discuss whiteness within mainstream academia and those who prefer to operate within more peripheral areas. The deep white/ non-white binary embedded in whiteness echoes this mainstream/ peripheral binary. Fourth, an increase in racial blurring, which relates to the inclusion of marginalised perspectives in the white mainstream research community and involvement of white groups/ people in efforts

to challenge whiteness led by non-white communities, affects whiteness. This driver is reflected in integrated movements that, through increased consciousness, work to replace whiteness, racism, and other divisive constructs with peaceful alternatives. Each of these drivers is interrelated and indicative of the current turning point for the future of whiteness.

Below is Table 1 which briefly outlines and compares the three futures of whiteness scenarios using CLA:

Table 1: Comparison of Futures of Whiteness Scenarios

	<b>Scenario 1: Tokenised Displacement of Whiteness</b>	<b>Scenario 2: Whiteness “Owned” by the White Mainstream</b>	<b>Scenario 3: Westernized Myths Replaced by Peaceful Alternatives</b>
<b>Litany</b>	White mainstream addresses whiteness/ racial tensions; policies must be followed by all racial groups to solve problems	Anti-racism/ whiteness unacceptable according to white mainstream and non-white communities, who should support the white mainstream	We (all communities) are the world; learning from one another; inter-consciousness through sharing stories and experiences
<b>Systemic</b>	Non-white communities given some recognition/ resources, but white mainstream must be accessed to retrieve most resources; “race problem” still in margins	Non-white communities emerge as voices within the white mainstream; centralisation with some programs/ resources in blurred margins	Decentralisation; multiple communities advocate inter and intra peace through networking and mutual support
<b>Worldviews</b>	Tokenised inclusion of marginalised cultures in white mainstream; white norms and values continue as central in western world	White mainstream expands to normalise some aspects of non-white cultures; definitions of family, government, discourse, etc. redefined/ more inclusive	Multiple worldviews based on core belief in egalitarian human relationships; harmony and interconnectedness
<b>Myths</b>	“Us vs. them” kingdom for white mainstream; tyranny for non-white communities	“Us vs. them” kingdom for white mainstream; tyranny for non-white communities	Web of life; river of life; tree of life and healing

As described in the table, the first scenario is a response to change in the litany, and to a lesser degree, systemic layers of the construction of whiteness. In the second scenario, the change deepens to also reflect a shift in the white, westernised worldview. The third scenario involves transformation at all four levels outlined by CLA, including the myth/ metaphor level where the metaphorical construction that sustains whiteness is replaced by an alternative myth. Each of these scenarios are possible visions for the future and are closely linked to the directions of whiteness studies/ analyses in the next decades. In addition, the scenarios reflect the construction and weighting of each of the levels within the white mainstream and communities marginalised by whiteness. Because westernized society operates consciously through litany and systems, the naming/ displacing of whiteness at these levels is more likely yet not enough to facilitate deep social transformation (Inayatullah 2004). The construction of whiteness at the worldview and, most notably, myth/ metaphor levels must be uncovered to lay the foundation for a harmonious future.

### Tokenized Displacement of Whiteness

The first possibility for the future is the most unsettling. As a scenario impacted most intensely by the first and third drivers, it is fuelled by the mainstreaming of whiteness studies as well as the mainstream/ peripheral academia binary reflective of the deeper white/ black binary. In this scenario, whiteness studies as an official academic discourse becomes nothing more than a trend among the white mainstream community of researchers for the purpose of publications, grants, and notoriety. These researchers study whiteness as part of their careers and a superficial campaign to gain acceptance in mainstream academia, but they do not have personal interests in the deconstruction of whiteness and transformation of race relationships. Within this group, whiteness studies do not work to deeply address or trans-

form racialised privilege and oppression. Although non-white researchers, and a few white researchers, continue their efforts to visible and displace whiteness, they are marginalised by the same systems of power that guarantee the continuation of whiteness. After a few decades of research and little transformation, studies/ analyses of whiteness fade away from the white mainstream and remain as the oppressed voices of non-white communities.

The unsettled future depicted in this scenario results from the inability of whiteness studies to penetrate beyond the litany and systemic levels within the consciousness of the white mainstream. In other words, many white, and some non-white, researchers take superficial, immediate solutions to whiteness on board. Adjustments in the litany and presentation of whiteness by public officials lead to anti-discrimination policies that name white privilege as illegal and unjust. In response to a slightly deeper investigation of whiteness, businesses and organizations encourage, even require, staff members to participate in a course that talks about whiteness as something the company or group stands firmly against. This course explains how a lack of understanding and acceptance of diverse "others" is the underlying social cause that must be addressed to move beyond whiteness. Most researchers within the white mainstream of whiteness studies will be satisfied by this, attribute such success to their own research contributions, and eventually move on to the next trend in the academic community. The deeper myth and worldview that perpetuate whiteness will be preserved.

In contrast to this comfortable maintenance of whiteness within the white mainstream, communities marginalised by whiteness will become even more alarmed and outraged by this superficialisation of whiteness within the mythical world of white people. In the world of marginalisation, people are disillusioned by the self-absorption of whiteness and continued legitimisation of white privilege by tokenized responses. This disparity between the white and non-white communities facilitates the already in-place "us vs. them", binary mentality



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which ultimately leads to a future of violent conflict. Gender, class, caste, national, and religious categories are also fuelled by this underlying binary, creating a future of divisive complexity. Democratic nation-states fend off terrorists, while freedom fighters work to resist the horror of the white machine. The construction of events like September 11<sup>th</sup> and the war between western and Islamic nations are current indicators of the possibility of this future.

### Whiteness "Owned" by the White Mainstream

In the second scenario, which is stimulated by all four drivers, the academic community takes whiteness studies on board more fully. Organizations, journals, and movements grow steadily across the globe with the purpose of naming and displacing whiteness. At first, this future is driven by combined efforts, and much of the leadership among whiteness studies researchers is concentrated among non-white community consciousness and people, who are more fully aware of whiteness. The once definitive binary between white and non-white communities begins to blur as partnerships emerge. Then, as whiteness studies continue to gain momentum, the institution of academia increasingly includes whiteness studies in the white mainstream and drives the construction of whiteness in the future towards racial division. As an "official" theory of the mainstream research community, white people, cultures, and institutions begin to take ownership of whiteness studies and assume the right to decide what counts as white. Although more peripheral literature and perspectives continue to be available, they are marginalized along with their authors by the flood of what whiteness has decided counts as whiteness studies.

Perhaps this future is the most likely, in that whiteness studies partially embraces the consciousness of non-white communities through facilitating change at the worldview level where whiteness is revealed as embedded in the cultural values and behaviours of the white mainstream. Yet, simultaneously the

naming and displacing of whiteness is controlled by white people, cultures, and institutions which operate under the assumption that whiteness is being fully challenged. Non-white viewpoints are sought after and revered as paving the way, until white people take on these viewpoints as their own, causing whiteness studies to cease being about deep social transformation towards a harmonious future. Instead, by placing itself in the centre of whiteness studies, the white mainstream, which is influenced by its own superficial construction of whiteness studies, preserves whiteness and the deep binary between white and non-white communities. This claiming of whiteness studies by white people is a symptom of incomplete analyses of whiteness within the mainstream research community, where the myth underlying whiteness remains hidden in the white imagination. Through a deficient analysis, whiteness perpetuates the construction of the white mainstream community and its unconsciousness of the myth on which the white worldview is founded.

At the same time, communities marginalised by whiteness are conscious of this whiteness-preserving embracement of whiteness studies by the white mainstream. On some levels, whiteness is being named and displaced by white people, culture, and institutions, fostering hope and paving the way for a peaceful future. Yet, on another deeper level, whiteness has once again mutated into an even more complicated construction that conceals the preservation of whiteness at its core. This internal conflict placed upon non-white communities gives way to strong emotional responses against whiteness, leading to violence less obvious than that of the first scenario but just as dangerous. Within current society, the sudden increase in whiteness studies literature, and specifically the inclusion of whiteness in the white imagination and less peripheral journals, is a possible red flag. In order to construct a peaceful future vision, whiteness studies researchers and activities must consider their motivations and biases as well as the depth of their analyses.

## Westernized Myths Replaced by Peaceful Alternatives

In the third vision for the future, whiteness studies moves from an academic discourse toward embracing the origin and depth of analyses of whiteness from the perspectives of non-white communities. The most harmonious of the three scenarios, this future is driven by racial blurring and a combining of official whiteness studies with the metaphorically naming of whiteness by marginalised communities. It is a future where whiteness is fully exposed and westernized society is transformed. White people move past their comfort zone of analysing litany, social causes, and even worldviews explained through complicated language. White/non-white partnerships begin to develop as whiteness moves back from centre stage in response to the voices of non-white communities. Through the stories and outcries of people marginalised by whiteness, the heart/emotional level of human experience is revealed. As the depth of whiteness is uncovered, meaningful relationships begin to blossom and egalitarian futures without a white vs. non-white binary are consciously envisioned. A world of peace between the two communities emerges.

Unlike the previous scenarios which are focused on analysis at the litany, social causes, and worldview levels, a future of peace results from transformation at all four levels, including the myth/metaphor level. This transformation means that white and non-white people join together, along with the development of unity between men/women, city/country, etc., to challenge the mythical world of whiteness and work towards construction of a new myth. At the myth level, whiteness is currently part of the ever-flourishing kingdom of westernized society, where white people are members of the elite decision making sector. Other divisive binaries, such as maleness, facilitate the sovereignty of white kings along side their often subordinated (white) queens. Through an analysis at the myth level centred on the perspectives of communities marginalized by whiteness, white people realize that this kingdom has unfairly regarded white people as the self-named

"natives" in a land where non-whites are permitted or excluded from various sectors according to a white will. The myths of democracy and justice are also challenged as meant only for members of the white decision-making sector, while non-white "others" are like the bones and flesh of the kingdom, hidden yet foundational, and with a clear view of whiteness from the inside out (see Du Bois 1920).

In addition, the myth of constraint, which underlies the worldview of non-white communities, surfaces in the imaginations of the white mainstream community. Those who have constructed themselves as rulers of their own kingdom recognize that, for non-whites, there is no glorious kingdom but an oppressive world of tyranny and distortion, where white people are the grotesque tyrants. It is the non-white communities who are the protagonist in this myth. They are the underdogs, intimately conscious of whiteness and deeply disgusted, even embarrassed, by it, and, in the case of males, often driven to gain status in the kingdom/tyranny through development of a gendered non-white identity. In fully naming and displacing whiteness, both the myths of the kingdom and distorted tyranny are transformed at their core by an alternative myth of peace, harmony, and egalitarianism.

Through a foundation driven by racial blurring and laid by white/non-white partnerships, such an alternative myth is possible. Researchers and activities expand their worlds to include community elders, philosophers, artists, and visionaries who work towards this mythical/metaphorical transformation. Bridges are formed to join the studies of whiteness within academia to more metaphorical analyses at the heart of black, Indigenous, and racially oppressed communities. Spiritual harmony and peaceful interconnectedness are envisioned to replace the kingdom and tyranny myths, as white/non-white partnerships are transformed into deep human relationships. In symbiosis, these relationships foster and are fostered by spiritually and peacefully centred myths and metaphors, such as a web of life or tree of healing. An egalitarian, harmonious future is brought to life.



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### Implications for the Present

Although the third scenario is the most peaceful vision for the future, it also requires the most effort in the minds and hearts of westernised communities. Continued partnerships and deep relationships are central. Most importantly, the white mainstream must open up its heart to the inevitable flood of emotions surrounding whiteness. A future that challenges whiteness is dependent on uncovering the racialised myths on which westernized society is founded, thus centralising on non-white consciousness. Through explorations of whiteness by transformed partnerships between academic and marginalised communities that embrace the origins of whiteness far outside the bounds of the white mainstream, all communities can work together to form a powerful bridge that challenges all aspects of the multi-layered construction of whiteness. The next few decades are crucial.

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