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**Review of George Lipsitz's, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Phil.: Temple University Press, 1998).**

**by Marguerite Spencer**

Although a scientific fiction, “whiteness” has a social cash value, argues George Lipsitz in his work, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*. Lipsitz describes how whites are encouraged to “invest” in whiteness like property, giving them an artificial identity that ensures resources, power, and opportunity. This investment becomes “possessive” as whites hoard their privileges, denying communities of color like opportunities to accumulate assets and become socially mobile. As African American author Chester Himes—whose family was run out of a rural Mississippi county for owning the first car—writes in 1971, “I must confess I find white people just the same today, everywhere I have been, if a black man owns a big and expensive car they will hate him for it (163).” Discriminatory lending, opportunity-rich educations, insider networks, and intergenerational transfers of wealth maintain these racial hierarchies.

The whiteness that whites create and invest in can in turn come to “possess” them, unless they strive to develop antiracist identities and to disinvest in white privilege (vii-viii). As a white man, Lipsitz admits that he, along with white Americans generally, has “not yet come to grips with the structural and cultural forces that racialize human rights, opportunities, and life chances in our country (xv).” We imagine that we would have been active in the civil rights movement in the 60s, when our public policies and private actions are more in line with the oppressors’ of that time. Because of this disconnect, Lipsitz writes his book. In it, he attempts to expose the ways in which poverty, property, and the politics of race maintain white supremacy (xiii); and to take a small step towards eradicating the possessive investment in whiteness, “a poisonous system of privilege that pits people against each other and prevents the creation of common ground (xix).”

Lipsitz begins with a close look at this possessive investment. He recalls how historically it has been more than a white v. black issue, encompassing the conquest and extermination of Native Americans, the enslavement of African Americans, and the exploitation of Mexican Americans and Asian immigrants, with whites often maintaining their power by pitting one racialized group against another (2-3). However, whites have maintained their privileges long after emancipation, immigration reform, and the end of *de jure* segregation (4). Putatively race-neutral, liberal, social democratic reforms of the New Deal Era (e.g., the exclusion of largely non-white farm workers and domestics from coverage under the Social Security Act; or the overtly racist categories in the Federal Housing Agency’s loan allocations), along with race-conscious neoconservative reactions against liberalism since the Nixon years (e.g., regressive polices cutting federal aid to education) have increased

the possessive investment in whiteness by widening the gap in resources available to communities of color, particularly equity-building home ownership (5). Unfortunately, Lipsitz laments, the gap is also widening between minority experiences and whites' perception that non-whites have similar opportunities—if they only had the will power to seize them. As Gary Orfield of the Harvard Civil Rights Project points out, whites believe that blacks receive equal educations, but they “fiercely resist any efforts to make them send their children to the schools they insist are good enough for blacks (36).” This racialized situation is harming our society, as is manifest in an absence of mutuality, responsibility, and justice (20-23).

In the bulk of his book, Lipsitz sets out to explore what he calls a white problem from various vantage points, all aimed at awakening whites to their complicity. The first shock comes when he argues that civil rights laws have actually augmented the possessive investment in whiteness, while costing people of color greatly. Coordinated political efforts have supported massive white resistance to and renegotiation of these laws, particularly those that address fair housing, desegregated education, and equal employment opportunities (24-25). It is difficult to choose which egregious actions to feature here. In housing, they range from the exemption of federal programs from antidiscrimination requirements in the 1964 Civil Rights Act to Nixon's suspension of the enforcement of all civil rights laws for a year to study the situation. Although he concluded that housing discrimination was wrong, he opposed integrating housing by bureaucratic fiat. This pattern of whites abstractly supporting civil rights laws, while at the same time systemically undermining their implementation, recurs even today (25-33). In education, although we celebrate *Brown I*, we often forget that in *Brown II* the court allowed school districts to proceed “with all deliberate speed”, which meant subterfuge and postponement until at least the late 60s when the courts began to mandate action. This push was halted under Nixon, who appointed Supreme Court justices opposed to busing and inter-district remedies.<sup>1</sup> Whites also possessively invest in their jobs, backed by federal labor policies that systematically advantage them. Whites receive protection under the law for their investments, while non-whites are prevented from investing in the first place. Indeed, Derrick Bell argues that whites have become the protected “discrete and insular minority (45).”

The “success” of California's Proposition 187 denying medical treatment and education to undocumented workers and their families is a case in point. The result of a demagogic, racist, and hate-filled public relations campaign that painted whites, the wealthy, and males as “victims’ of unfair advantage, Proposition 187 was not about respect for legality, Lipsitz argues, but about a “contemporary reinscription of the possessive investment in whiteness (48).” Whites masqueraded as powerless, at the same time as they took further advantage of low-wage workers. They also became more racially bold in proclamation and practice—clinics turning away all Spanish speaking women, state universities requiring all students with Spanish surnames to prove their citizenship etc...Meanwhile Democratic leaders did little to nothing, despite the fact that the undocumented benefit the economy (54). Bound

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<sup>1</sup> It appears that Bush appointees are going to weaken *Brown* even further, with their anticipated ruling (June, 2007) in two desegregation suits from Seattle and Jefferson County, Kentucky school districts. They will likely acknowledge the constitutionality of school districts adopting race-conscious “motives” to desegregate their schools, but the unconstitutionality of their undertaking race-conscious “means” to achieve this goal.

up in this anti-immigration sentiment, and further illustrated by the identification of Asians as unwelcomed foreign enemies during WWII, is the assumption that “true cultural franchise and full citizenship requires a white identity (71).” W.E.B. DuBois argued that after the Civil War white elites lured white workers into accepting this identity at their own expense, foregoing an interracial, class-wide alliance that would have secured higher income for all. DuBois called this “the wages of whiteness” (98).

Moreover, Lipsitz argues, whites fuse this identity with masculinity, patriarchy, and heterosexuality. Reagan formed a counter subversive coalition to protect these characteristics, which blamed the faltering economy and infrastructure on civil rights, antiwar, feminist, and gay liberation movements, not on the policies of transnational corporations and their government allies (71-72). Lipsitz links this identity with the “new patriotism” that emerged after Vietnam. After the “war” in Grenada, Reagan declared that our days of weakness were over. However, these new patriots ignored the ways in which race and social status determined who went to Vietnam and other arenas (86). Today many of the supporters of this movement collaborate with overtly white supremacist organizations, which invert the history of racial politics and mount successful campaigns against affirmative action and other race-based policies. Lipsitz emphasizes that not all white supremacists are white. He denounces Ward Connerly (224) and rejects the neoconservative glorification of baseball bat-wielding black high school principle Joe Clark, depicted in the film *Lean on Me*, who did nothing more than give whites more reasons to spitefully blame the victim (139-145). Lipsitz calls this pattern “meanness masquerading as morality (96).”

Using O.J. Simpson, Lipsitz argues that this meanness erupts into cultural expressions. The media in particular connects crime and family disintegration to nonwhite communities, while presenting whites as besieged (112). A guilty O.J. would have conformed to this story. Moreover, the media painted the racist, handsome, white police officer, Mark Fuhrman, as credible and distinguished, dismissing him quietly after his perjury was uncovered. Rather than acknowledging the institutional racism in the police force, the media accused Cochran of playing the race card (113). Music as a cultural expression often plays out in a different way. Without giving up their investment in whiteness, whites affectively invest in the primitive, natural and mystical domain of African American music. Rock guitarist Eric Clapton, for example, claims a psychic and spiritual connection to blues icon Robert Johnson. Lipsitz argues that this consumption of black culture “salves the alienations and identity problems of European Americans (119).”

Lipsitz is skilled in pointing out connections such as these. In discussing the racialization of life chances he links Dizzy Gillespie’s song “Swing Low, Sweet Cadillac,” which he used in his parodic campaign for president in 1964 with the call to “agree” whites to death in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*; George Washington’s purported racist death bed wish, “Forever keep the niggers down;” and U.S. Postmaster General Gideon Granger’s 1802 letter to James Jackson banning blacks from being carriers to prevent them from subjugating their masters (158-168). Not surprisingly, such connections escape whites, who consider their investment in whiteness as a natural development. Lipsitz incisively reminds his readers that, whites “relegate black grievances against whites to the past while situating white complaints about blacks in the present (222).”

Lipsitz provides some hope in disinvesting whites of their investment in whiteness. First, he shifts the terms of the racial debate away from why blacks

aren't more like whites toward what we can learn from the work that reflects the experiences of non-white intellectuals, artists, and marginalized. Lipsitz draws on Paul Gilroy, David Theo Goldberg, and Cornel West, who offer concrete programs for antiracist thought and action. Gilroy employs a hermeneutics of suspicion to guide intellectual critique; Goldberg offers a program of pragmatic antiracism that repels color-blind thinking; and West calls for intellectuals to become "critical organic catalysts" who blend paradigms and methods with the insights of aggrieved communities. The significance of these communities lies not in their marginality, but rather in the role that marginalization plays in shaping categories that affect everyone (179).

Lipsitz also reconfigures identity politics (which he argues whites practice in a possessive way without acknowledging it) by stressing mutuality. Ethnic groups have different histories and experiences, which leads them to organize in useful ways to counter the politics of whiteness. However, this should not preclude them from forming multiple strategic and philosophical alliances with other groups, for ethnicity is far more hybrid, heterogeneous, mutually constitutive and multiple than we acknowledge—particularly when gender is taken into account. Lipsitz employs The Bus Riders Union in L.A. as an example of a political project that created identities based on politics, rather than politics based on identities. There, in an effort to secure more bus routes in segregated areas, members of various races and income levels, 10-20% of whom were white, united in a common struggle for social justice (63-68). Later Lipsitz describes the richness of the interethnic solidarity between African Americans and Japanese Americans during the war (195-200). He ends by likening California to the Mississippi of the past, with its anti-immigration and affirmative action ballot initiatives that fortify the investment in whiteness. Lipsitz urges antiracist individuals and groups there to form interethnic coalitions that attend to the international, intercultural, and intersectional quality of contemporary race relations that they may "save themselves, their state, and their nation from the dreadful polarization already well underway (232)."

Lipsitz succeeds in meeting his first goal, to expose the possessive investment of whiteness for what it is. Whether he meets his second, to move towards eradicating it, I cannot say. The effect his work has on me is not representative as I am aware of the origins and realities of white privilege. However, the connections he makes do enrich my understanding of it and provide me with more material with which to communicate its danger to others who may not share my background, particularly the imagery of investment. Lipsitz might have been more ambitious in outlining what steps might be needed beyond attending to the experiences of non-whites and forming interethnic antiracist coalitions. What else are whites to do exactly? Nonetheless, I enthusiastically recommend this book to those open to self-criticism, but worry that those who are not will wince at and dismiss it. This is truly a war, as Lipsitz points out. The best I can do is to try to demilitarize it by engaging in a discourse of mutual respect and contributing to policy change efforts. I would certainly assign this text to undergraduates to work through openly but unrelentingly.

### **Substantive Questions for Discussion:**

1. How do we successfully convey to whites that, although whiteness is a biological fiction, it is a socially constructed reality that privileges them? What types of efforts have been undertaken? What are their strengths and weaknesses? Might engaging a Christian anthropology help? Catholic Social Teachings?

2. Lipsitz writes, "White racism is pathology looking for a place to land, sadism in search of a story (71)." When is it appropriate to call the possessive investment in whiteness a "sin?" Which models of sin might be the most appropriate to explore in addressing this question?

3. What does it mean to be possessed by our privileges? How can we develop antiracist identities? Disinvest in white supremacy? Could a Christian model of redemption play a role in this development? How? Which strains of the Christian tradition could we turn to develop this model?