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Review of *Shades of White: White Kids and Racial Identities in High School*, Pamela Perry, Duke University Press (2002).

by Stephen Menendian

Contemporary theories of race and ethnicity argue that race, culture, and identity are not static, immutable concepts. Nor are they illusory, meaningless constructs; they are social processes that are created and recreated by people in their daily lives and interactions.[1] Much of this research has focused on the long-term changes over time and the influence of historical, political, and economic factors.[2] In the winter of 1994, Pamela Perry undertook an ambitious two year study tracing the formation of white identity at Clavey and Valley Groves high schools. The sites of study were chosen to illuminate the meaning of whiteness under the revealing light of contrast. Clavey High is a large, urban public school with a majority African American student body in a metropolitan area on the Pacific coast of California. Valley Groves is a similarly sized, suburban public school located less than twenty miles from Clavey with an 83 percent non-Hispanic white student body. Perry's study fills a gap in our understanding of whiteness by focusing on how "more intimate, everyday processes" participate in the meaning and construction of whiteness (p. 3).

In Part I, Perry provides a backdrop for her study by drawing an ethnographic and social map of school life at Valley Groves and Clavey High Schools. White students at suburban Valley Groves organized their social world through a race-neutral, norm-other logic.[3] This logic "was at least partially constituted and reinforced by, on the one hand, little face-to-face association with racialized "others" and, on the other, a … school culture … derived from white European American culture but experienced as natural, commonsense, and normal" (p. 33). These influences were mutually reinforcing as well as multidirectional. The absence racial and cultural difference to whiteness assisted in the effort to ensure that white European-American norms were both ubiquitous and yet unmarked. The interpretation of those norms as "normal" was actively achieved through collective approval and reinforcement from white students and adults alike.

In contrast, at Clavey high, a minority predominant school, race was the primary social organizing mechanism of the high school. Not only was youth culture at Clavey divided and categorized with race as a primary referent, but sports, school space, club activities and even the curricula structure itself was racialized. Although whites

[1] Pamela Perry, Shades of White 3 (2002).
[2] *Id.*
[3] *Id*. at 42.

constituted 24 percent of the student body, "accelerated" classes such as advanced placement and honors classes were 80 percent white and Asian.[4] Persons of color were frequently victims of tracking despite their numerical advantage. Associational stereotyping pervaded the construction of whiteness at Clavey high. For instance, "the territories at Clavey took on racial meaning in part because one racial group or another was numerically predominant, but also because certain use values of the space or practical behaviors within them simultaneously reproduced and constituted particular racialized styles or stereotypes" (p. 63). The "Lawn" was marked by whiteness, the lower-lawn was marked by blackness, and the 70 building was marked by asian-ness.[5]

The implications of these observational differences are profound. Whiteness becomes more central and more salient to *whites* in a world in which whiteness is rendered visible. Perry is aware of the slowly changing demographic reality in which whites in the United States are projected to be a minority by 2060.[6] In such a context, norms are no longer subsumed under the meaning of "white" nor taken for granted as white, opening up a social space of meaning and struggle not found in a predominantly white context. Perry's ethnographic and social mapping therefore suggests an opportunity that we must be poised to grasp at the same time that it warns us of potential pitfalls. As whites begin to inspect the meaning of whiteness in the context of a more clearly observed multi-racial society, the meaning of whiteness grows malleable, fluid, and open to re-interpretation.

The danger to be avoided is the social fact that a multi-racial context also appears to rigidify and reify associational stereotyping and racial cohesion. The social organization of Clavey by race may open up a space for whites to engage in a dialogue over the meaning of whiteness, but it also may tend to increase social cohesion among whites, make whites more protective of their identity, and less open to coalition building. This danger is not limited to whites. The rigid racial structure of the highly diverse Clavey high school may paradoxically inhibit coalition building between all races. This hypothesis has been anecdotally confirmed in other contexts. New York City's non-Hispanic black, Hispanic, and Asian populations grew to 57 percent by 1990. Despite having a robust history of mobilization for electoral politics and protest and a generally more liberal white voter base, New York City has been unable to form a durable multi-racial coalition.[7] John Mollenkopf notes that "the case of New York City shows that whereas a city can become less white, it does not necessarily become more black. [ ] More broadly, urban politics is no longer a simple matter of black and white, where black political leaders can consolidate minority empowerment primarily on appeals to black solidarity." (p. 111). Perry's study confirms such claims and reminds us that such an approach is unlikely to lead to durable coalitions.

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[4] *Id.* at 54.
[5] *Id.* at 64.
[6] Frank Pellegrini, The Coming of the Minority-Majority, Time.com, Aug. 31, 2000, at http://www.time.com.
[7] *See* JOHN MOLLENKOPF, NEW YORK: THE GREAT ANOMALY RACIAL POLITICS IN AMERICAN CITIES 123-24 (Rufus Browning, Dale Rogers Marshall, & David Tabb eds., 3d ed.) (2001).

In Part II, Perry moves from the descriptive to the analytical. She delves more deeply into the meaning of whiteness. Perry suggests that the context in which this construction occurs becomes a pivotal factor in determining the particular narrative of whiteness espoused. White youth at Valley Groves experienced what Perry calls a "cognitive gap" when asked about their understanding of white American culture. The blank stares and quizzical expressions underscores the fact that white identity as norm is a stable narrative of whiteness. With little to no association with racial difference, there was no mechanism or perspective from which white youth at Valley Grove would be in a position to see "white" as anything other than norm, and hence, white students at Valley Groves were less reflective about the meaning of whiteness.

As Perry traversed the cultural poles, she found that white students firmly situated within mainstream American culture at Valley Groves had the most difficulty articulating what they thought was meant by "white." Carli, a Valley Groves student who positioned herself outside of the mainstream, could more easily objectify the mainstream culture and was able to talk about some of the common practices, habits or characteristics of white American culture. Similarly, white youth at Clavey did not fall into a cognitive gap. They were more reflective on the meaning of whiteness because of their close association with marked racial-ethnic differences, which challenged them to define white culture and identity. Whites at Clavey did not experience whiteness as an empty cultural category. Instead, they defined whiteness as either European American ethnic or post-cultural. These different meanings of white cultural identity or narratives of whiteness tended to correspond with sentiments or experiences associated with particular racial-ethnic relationships. When reflecting upon their relationships with Asians, Native Americans, and, to a lesser extent, Latinos, white students at Clavey embraced a symbolic ethnicity.[8] A symbolic ethnicity is a way in which "white Americans will choose an ethnicity and embrace it in name only for the purpose of providing meaning and a sense of community," something which was a valued social good and a source of esteem at Clavey (p. 92). The other salient narrative of whiteness was post-cultural, an identity which dismisses the contemporary significance of ethnic identity and the past. Most significantly, this identity was triggered by relationships with African Americans. In the minds of white students at Clavey, Asian, Native American or Latino students were more legitimately "culturally" different to whites than African Americans. African American students, in whom white youth saw no vestiges of African culture, were defined by white students less by cultural differences and more by power differences, particular white domination, past and present.[9] African American students saw slavery as a painful issue which they believed impacted their lives today. Whites could only see that slavery was something "in the past" that no longer existed. Debates about slavery and white oppression triggered the post-cultural response in some whites.[10] In sum, Perry discovered that differences in the definition of white identity are shaped by the types of interracial association the youth were most familiar with and how they experienced and defined a particular white-other relationship. The important lesson from this work appears to be that the colorblind ideology is difficult to dislodge in both a multi-racial

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[8] PERRY, *supra* note 1 at 95.
[9] *Id.* at 102.
[10] *Id.* at 103.

setting and in a predominantly white context. Both the post-cultural response and the narrative of whiteness as normal are narratives that fit well within the colorblind ideology.

In chapter 4, the second chapter of Part II, "Doing Identity in Style," Perry begins to piece together the way in which Whites construct what we call "whiteness" by examining the indirect and implied ways in which whiteness is expressed and bounded. Chapter 3 articulated the predominant cultural narratives associated with whiteness and the mechanisms which make a given narrative salient. Chapter 4 provides a snapshot of how whiteness is in fact constructed in everyday processes. Perry begins by observing that American youth are engaged in popular culture at a level of intimacy that surpasses any other age group. Most of us sense intuitively how strongly acculturated youth seem to be. In passing, Perry provides a compelling explanation for this social fact. "If adults define identities around their occupations, parenting, and/or civic responsibilities and political affiliations, youth today, who have limited if any access to those spheres, explore and define who they are through their leisure activities."[11] As such, Perry narrows her focus to learning racial meaning through expression of popular culture as well as trace the development of those meanings in that context. To acquire the vernacular necessary to make these connections, Perry immersed herself in the culture of her subjects, listening to various music, attending school dances, and even going so far as to attend a rave.

Perry's observations lead her to argue that cultural forms take different meaning depending on their proximity to a sustained "us-them" relationship. At Valley Groves, "whites adopted certain cultural forms associated with African American people and identity, but because of the students' distance from a black community" they were empty of racial meanings per se (p. 105). For example, rap music, hip-hop clothing, and other cultural forms and practices originating from black youth culture and identities were not linked to black "identity" or black identification, but linked to stereotypical or putative qualities of blackness such as being tough or cool. Moreover, black students at Valley Groves were active participants if not complicit in this race-neutral understanding.

In contrast, at Clavey, majority "minority" population made dominant "a discourse of racial-ethnic distinction in which popular culture was the language of choice" (p. 127). The "same cultural forms that Valley Groves youth freely sampled were charged with racial-identity meanings and usually used selectively by whites to signify African American identity in some way or another" (p. 105). Racial organization and ascription created a context in which activities which would be otherwise innocuous at Valley Groves became socially significant actions in Clavey. The fact that social and cultural spaces were marked by race and imbued with racial meaning created boundaries, that "when crossed, placed youth within territories by which others claimed a group identity." (p. 122). Whites at Clavey avoided rap music, speaking in black slang, or wearing hip-hop styles unless they wanted to mimic a black person or were trying to relate to an African American friend. (p. 112). Similarly, African American youth at

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Clavey were forbidden from speaking Standard English, listening to rock, and playing lacrosse.[12] The boundaries were internal as well as external.

Perry was struck by the recurring notion that an internal force was operating as well intrigued by the recurring suggestion that there was an internal force playing some role in the boundaries of racial meaning. This internal operating force is what is referred to as "the multiracial self."[13] Perry defines the "multiracial self" as referring to the "interdependent nature of racial-ethnic identities and the many ways that the self and 'other' are one and the same" (p. 128). For example, at Clavey, where students confronted daily racial difference and contended with racial diversity on a social and cultural level, each group defined themselves both with respect to how others viewed them and how they viewed themselves. Their group definition, although dynamic and imbued with meaning by the group being defined, was constrained by what others ascribed or left available to them. In short, the cultural identities of white, black, and other students at Valley Groves and Clavey were dialogically shaped by every other group.

In part III, Perry shifts from explaining the construction of whiteness to exploring how students at the high schools experienced whiteness and understood whiteness as social identity. In Chapter 5, Perry presents a very different response in both schools to the Million Man March on Washington, which took place ten years ago. Valley Groves students tended to be unaware of the March and its purposes as well as unable to relate to it. Importantly, this was true of African American students as well. However, at Clavey, Whites had greater exposure to the March and tended to support it. These differences are explained by the knowledge and experiences youth acquired through their differently composed communities. The factors which rendered whiteness invisible at Valley Groves influenced the awareness of African Americans to the March. By the same token, the stark relief with which whiteness existed at Clavey similarly affected the opinions of whites on the Million Man March by making them supportive and understanding of it and its purposes.

Although Perry does not discuss this issue directly, her study implicates scholarly work on framing. I suspect that the emphasis on racial solidarity and perceived racial difference at Clavey, which contributed to racial awareness generally, made it easier for students at Clavey, both white and non-white, to absorb and digest information about the March through their internal interpretive frameworks. By the same token, the dominant colorblind ideology which pervades Valley Groves may have created a dissonance with the information floating about the community and media about the March which did not fit well into the interpretive frames of students, both black and white, at Valley Groves.

In Chapter 6, Perry argues that white students at Valley Groves felt that they were the disadvantaged group, while at multiracial Clavey, white student's social identities were messy and contradictory. While they felt that they carried the mantle of

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[12] *Id.* at 130.

[13] john powell, The Multiple Self: Exploring Between and Beyond Modernity and Postmodernity, 81 Minn. L. Rev. 1481 (1997).

"oppressor," and saw in full bloom the accrual of white privilege, they either tended to support programmatic change designed to address that problem or tended to channel this guilt into negative outlets such as victim blaming. The particular reaction tended to correlate with the rigidity of the social space in which they were reflecting. Because of the intense racial meanings found at Clavey, where stratification existed, stereotypes tended to provide a feedback loop in which racial identity became "proved" making many whites at Clavey feel more racist. At the times in which youth were doing the same things – in which the context was not polarized or stratified, whites at Clavey tended to support efforts to dismantle white privilege with programs such as Affirmative action.

The contrasting settings provided a social science Petri dish to make sense of observational difference. The argument that the construction of whiteness is determined by proximity to racial difference has broad ranging policy implications, from housing to school integration to progressive coalition building. Perry's work is an important step in understanding whiteness. At the same time that her work demonstrates the opportunities that will and are currently arising in the social fabric of the United States for challenging and re-imagining whiteness, there are also important stumbling blocks that might otherwise have gone unforeseen until faced. Any progress that is to be made in dismantling white privilege should take account of this work and its many implications.