

The Contentious Field of Whiteness Studies

JUN MIAN CHEN

Brock University, St. Catharines, Canada

jchen@conestogac.on.ca

The field of whiteness studies is relatively young compared to other well-established disciplines, including critical race theory. On its trajectory to carve out a new academic niche, whiteness studies is challenged with, and must therefore negotiate, a wide range of criticisms intended to dismantle the enterprise. This synthesis paper inspects the literature on whiteness as an analytical concept and showcases a catalogue of critiques against the field. Despite various complaints that cast doubt upon the legitimacy of the subject, whiteness studies does make a substantial contribution to the study of contemporary racism and the processes of racialization, albeit usually from a white person's perspective. The paper concludes with a discussion on the relevance of whiteness studies in today's context and future prospects for racial equality. I suggest that whiteness studies offers a distinctive epistemological standpoint to explore racism, which provides the potential for this field to contribute to our understanding of racial justice in ways that warrant its emergence.

KEYWORDS: Whiteness studies; Critical race theory; Criticisms; Historical approach; Experiential approach; Racialization

INTRODUCTION

Whiteness studies emerged as a widespread field of study in the early 1990s. To date, there are two umbrella approaches under which whiteness studies has evolved: historical and experiential. Historically-oriented scholars examine the historical roots of whiteness and tend to understand whiteness as fluid and subject to transformation (Satzewich, 2007). Today, the majority of scholars who study whiteness are themselves white; they tend to adopt the experiential approach in which they view and analyze whiteness as a social condition of white people that needs to be acknowledged, exposed, and ultimately resisted (Satzewich, 2007).

An exemplar of the experiential approach is from Peggy McIntosh (1995) in her often cited paper *White Privilege and Male Privilege* (first published in 1988). Her work has inspired many people, who are socially identified as white persons, to explore the effects of their privileged status in a white supremacist society. Anti-racist discourses often encourage white people to recognize themselves as privileged members of society, and that acknowledgment is presumed to be enough to move white persons to combat racism. However, various criticisms have been directed at whiteness studies, with the general theme of questioning its legitimacy on several fronts, including the conflation of histories

and situations of all people who are not white, and that whiteness is a much more fluid category than people tend to think (Blum, 2008; Bonnett, 1996; Satzewich & Liodakis, 2010). The objective of this paper is threefold: to provide an overview or synthesis of the two dominant approaches to the study of whiteness, to survey some noteworthy criticisms facing whiteness studies, and to also highlight a positive feature of whiteness studies despite oppositions against this emergent and growing field.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: THE SOCIAL EVOLUTION OF WHITENESS AS AN ANALYTICAL CONCEPT

One of the earliest scholars of the historical perspective on whiteness is David Roediger. Roediger (1991) asserts that the term *white* emerged as a socially constructed identity for European explorers and settlers when they came into contact with other ethnic groups, specifically the Africans and the Indigenous inhabitants of the Americas. Satzewich (2007) underscores a modern propensity to equate whiteness, or the white race/people, with those of European origin or ancestry. This is, in part, due to what scholars claim to be a drawn racial colour line that demarcates Europe as the land of white inhabitants (Omi & Winant,

1986). Many European groups who are now regarded as white were not considered white just a few generations ago (Bonnett, 1998a). Bonnett (1998b) has found that there existed pre-modern ideas of non-European (and non-racialized) white identities in China and the Middle East, but these were eventually overtaken by the development of whiteness as a racialized and exclusively European attribute. In the case of European immigrants, the state created conditions that rewarded the abilities of euro-ethnics which paved the way for an expanded notion of whiteness that enabled European immigrants and their children to secure white status (Harrison, 1995; Sacks, 1989). Hence, the common assertion that whiteness or white people originated from Europe is mistaken because there was never a homogeneous white group in Europe, nor anywhere else. That said, there were certainly differences within groups and the Europeans are a case in point.

The notorious categorization of people into binary groups of whites and blacks historically stems from representations of the Other, which can be conceptualized through the *experienced* Other and the *imagined* Other (Miles & Brown, 2003). The literature often explains how European travellers and explorers encountered the Other—people of a different pigmentation—who have skin tone ranging from a darkish-brown to black in colour, as a way to depict people in Africa (Miles & Brown, 2003). Direct encounter and interaction with the African populations generated representations of the African as an experienced Other. During European expansion and colonization, Africans were subjugated when they were captured and enslaved as prisoners of war. Incidentally, the situation was most intense in the United States, when the legal sanction of the Supreme Court in the 1857 Dred Scott decision made it legally permissible for the enslaved population to be treated as property, to be bought and sold by their owners (Hirschman, 2004).

The concept of race was developed as a direct consequence of slavery and the slave trade. Such historical conditions laced the social fabric that make up the ideology of white supremacy. In consequence, the Africans did not find themselves in a position to affirm/deny or negotiate the characteristics attributed to them by the Europeans. The European discourse spotlighted African skin colour as the primary basis to signify differences in status, value, and worth (Miles & Brown, 2003). In doing so, African populations were evaluated in the light of so-called historical 'evidence'. This 'evidence', of course, is the fabrication of the Europeans' representations of the experienced Other.

The African populace was already represented as an imagined Other long before the European expansion. When European travellers returned from their ventures to Africa, they supplied information about populations they had encountered, with heavy emphasis on the cultural and physical differences of the African populations (Miles & Brown, 2003). Thereafter, lay people uncritically took up the literature and narratives about the African Other and began to mentally construct representations of the Other as 'blacks', 'savages', and 'barbarians', who were of a lower capacity of intellect, speech, and reason (Miles & Brown, 2003). In this way, subsequent European travellers had expectations of the Other, solely derived from both verbal and written accounts of the Other, which distorted and influenced their representations of the African as an experienced Other when they did encounter African populations.

Evidently, there is a problem with how African populations were represented or constructed. The problem is that the representation of Africans as blacks was constructed not by Africans themselves, but by Europeans, colonialists. Such representations, resulting from the experienced and imagined Other (e.g., savages, wild man, and barbarians) were used to denote their subordination to Europeans and colonialists. In consequence, blackness as an identity, characteristic, or quality, has been ascribed to African populations, based on phenotypical characteristics such as the social interpretation of pigmentation and melanin. This may constitute a reason to discredit whiteness studies since whiteness is also, arguably, created by those (i.e., Europeans or colonialists) who constructed blackness.

White and black racial identities are constructed simultaneously. The characteristics and qualities of people with white skin are reinforced as positive, which is in direct response to European travellers' negative portrayal of people with dark skin (Miles & Brown, 2003). The thought process would look something like this: *If I am not that (black), then I am this (white)*. This thought process establishes a self-Other dialectic, where the negative representation of the Other simultaneously and positively represents the self, and vice versa (Miles & Brown, 2003). Hence, whiteness co-emerged with the concept of blackness; yet, whiteness is the invisible while blackness is that which is visible.

Furthermore, Guillaumin (1995) argues that changes in class structure in the post-Revolution era in France altered the meaning of race, namely the social usage of the term. Whereas the term race was once used in the legal sense to refer to people of a common lineage, the advent of the bourgeoisie yielded social

labels, including 'Negroes', to define and dehumanize Africans (Satzewich & Liodakis, 2010). This constitutes an exemplar of how race is historically specific and culturally contingent.

Like race, the concept of whiteness is neither static nor monolithic; rather, it is also historically specific and culturally constructed (Satzewich & Liodakis, 2010). This means it can undergo further transformation, hence the recent surge in the experiential perspective among scholars.

EXPERIENTIAL PERSPECTIVE: WHITE SCHOLARS' APPROACH TO WHITENESS AS AN ANALYTICAL CONCEPT

Peggy McIntosh's work is considered to be a highly representative example of the experiential approach to whiteness and has inspired many others toward a critical analysis of whiteness (Dei, Karumanchery, & Karumanchery-Luik, 2005; Frankenberg, 1993; Jensen, 2005; Kivel, 2002). A central tenet of the experiential stream is the belief that the purge of racism requires a dual process of recognizing the effects of white privilege and overcoming whiteness as a social condition (Satzewich, 2007). Broadly defined, white privilege refers to the many resources that benefit people who are socially identified as white (Jungkunz, 2011). Another way to conceptualize white privilege is the bundle of unearned resources carried in an "invisible weightless knapsack", a term coined by McIntosh (1995). It is certainly illuminating that whites, such as Peggy McIntosh, expose their own white privilege; however, it is arguable whether the acknowledgment of one's own whiteness alone is enough to move (white) people to resist whiteness (i.e., the effects of white privilege) in what is still a white supremacist society. Here, contentious issues regarding the experiential approach begin to surface, which will be addressed in subsequent sections of this paper.

The suspicion that white people take their white privilege for granted is a fairly recent development. McIntosh (1995) contends that "whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we [whites] work to benefit others, this is seen as work that will allow 'them' to be more like 'us'" (p. 78). Rothenberg (2004) also recognizes the normative matrix of race (whiteness), as white people learned to remark on differences by noticing who was not like them. From this assumed and unquestioned perspective, white people

are not different from African Americans, but it is always African Americans who are different from white people (Rothenberg, 2004). Herein lies the problem of the usage of the term 'the Other' because it presumes whites as the benchmark group by which other ethnic groups are measured against, thereby creating an *us vs. them* mentality. White people are also racialized, but this process is often rendered invisible to those designated as white (Frankenberg, 1993). Historically, white people have not been thought of as having a race—race is something for the Other, who is not white (Katz & Ivey, 1977). As Frankenberg (1993) rightly notes, "white people are 'raced', just as men are 'gendered'" (p. 1). Hence, there is a growing body of literature on exposing whiteness as a racialized identity.

The invisibility of whiteness is rather problematic because it gives off the impression that whites are non-raced (Dei et al., 2005), which translates to the absence of reference to whiteness in everyday language of white people, particularly in the West (Dyer, 2004). It is in this sense that whiteness is a peculiar concept because "it appears to be both everywhere and nowhere, simultaneously a pervasive normative presence and an invisible, largely undiscussed absence" (Bonnett, 1996, pp. 97-98). As a method to expose the invisibility of whiteness and an earnest attempt to combat the power of invisibility, scholars, often writing from a white perspective, encourage white people to start thinking about their attitudes and behaviours as embodied white persons and how their privileged status affects non-white people in a white supremacist society. A case in point is Kendall (2013), who recognizes that all white people have white privilege, although the extent to which they have it is shaped by other categories, including gender and socioeconomic status.

The body of work from white scholars in recent years aims to acknowledge and expose whiteness in hopes of correcting a racialized world. However, whiteness studies can be a very contentious terrain in which one must tread prudently. While a white person may have good intentions to work toward racial justice, the outcome may not always match one's intentions. For instance, Alcoff (1991) cautions that the practice of speaking for others is inherently problematic because when privileged persons speak on behalf of less privileged persons, it actually goes to reinforce the oppression of the group. Instead, it is much better for privileged persons to engage in the practice of speaking with, or speaking in support of, racialized persons (Weir, 2013). The following sections survey similar criticisms against whiteness studies as a legitimate area of study.

SURVEY OF CRITICISMS: WHITENESS AS PROBLEMATIC

Despite the large body of literature using the study of whiteness as a catalyst for social justice (particularly those in the experiential approach to whiteness), some scholars suggest that the concept of whiteness is problematic because it is principally a racist concept, perpetuating the racist regime (Satzewich & Liodakis, 2010). Whiteness is socially constructed with the agenda of talking about race, yet seemingly not talking about race at the same time; that is, whiteness has emerged in the literature as an innovatively disguised racist concept, rather than an overt racist concept (Satzewich & Liodakis, 2010). The extent to which it is problematic has a lot to do with its subtlety and the presumed innocence of whiteness. In other words, the emerging field of whiteness studies has created categories of its own, including the notion of white privilege, which some scholars claim redirects our attention away from whiteness as a racist concept to one viewed in a more favourable light in which genuine attempts are made to expose these white privileges (characteristic of the approach taken by experiential scholars). Satzewich and Liodakis (2010) argue that whiteness is anything but neutral or innocent, for it has a racial undertone.

Consider for a moment the question, *Where are you from?* On the surface of things, it appears to be a perfectly genuine question to ask of someone out of sincere curiosity as to their ancestry, but the question carries a bundle of assumptions, negative stereotypes and prejudices. It allows the person who asks the question to be in a position to apply standards against which to judge the person asked as inferior or as a second-class citizen. This constitutes subtle racism, also known as “microaggression”, a term first used by Chester M. Pierce in 1970 (Pierce, 1970). Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Willis (1978) later refer to microaggression as “subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are ‘put downs’” (p. 66). Of the three forms of microaggression, the *Where are you from?* question is a form of microinvalidation, a process whereby the question negates the non-white person of their Canadian heritage, for instance, and to subtly convey that they are perpetual foreigners (Sue et al., 2007).

Racial microaggression constitutes a powerful contemporary form of subtle racism or discrimination because it is often unintended, often goes undetected, may sometimes stem from ignorance, and is built into our social and everyday language (Sue et al., 2007). Derald Wing Sue is one of the major scholars of racial

microaggression, and its study is in a nascent state, even newer than whiteness studies (American Psychological Association, 2013; Sue et al., 2007).

According to Satzewich and Liodakis (2010), the rise of whiteness studies, like the inclusion of a measure of race in the Canadian census, plays an important role in perpetuating the biological basis of race. Specifically, they argue that it is problematic that Statistics Canada attempts to measure the racial makeup of the population because this practice essentially reproduces an outdated biologically-based understanding of race. When the Canadian government includes race within policy, they are “putting the stamp of officialdom on race consciousness”, which ends up perpetuating the salience of racial distinctions (Bourhis, 2003, p. 18). For Satzewich and Liodakis (2010), census-taking is anything but an innocent exercise of simply counting people because censuses actually shape racial discourse that affects public policies in ways that can either positively or negatively impact the experiences of people. In this way, the authors insinuate that the use of the concept of whiteness in whiteness studies is anything but neutral or innocent—it is a racially charged term.

Another concept associated with the experiential approach to whiteness is the unified *white gaze*, which refers to all white people sharing the same set of attitudes toward racial issues (Kendall, 2013). In simpler terms, it refers to “a ‘white’ way of looking at the world” (Satzewich & Liodakis, 2010, p. 30). A survey study on the perceptions of a group of Chinese, whites, and blacks found that there is diversity in the gaze among the respondents, such that there is no unified gaze shared by any one particular group (Satzewich & Liodakis, 2010). The problem with the condition of a white gaze is that it conflates a diverse set of attitudes toward various issues of racism and racial inequality (Satzewich, 2007).

A further critique against the concept of whiteness comes from Bonnett (1996), who looks at the social construction of whiteness within the anti-racist discourse and discusses how whiteness is a myth. Bonnett (1996) articulates the myth:

This myth views ‘being white’ as an immutable condition with clear and distinct moral attributes. These attributes often include: being racist; not experiencing racism; being an oppressor; not experiencing oppression; silencing; not being silenced. People of colour are defined via their relation to this myth (p. 100).

This myth exposes the tendency for advocates of whiteness studies to homogenize white people as one group that does not experience racism, as they are always doing the oppressing and never racially oppressed by other racial/ethnic groups. They silence others and are never the ones who are silenced. Hence, those who hold the myth as true are simply mistaken. The critique is that white people are not a homogeneous group—they do not all share the same language, accent, cultural background, heritage, values, and morals. Whites can certainly be racially oppressed as well (e.g., the pejorative term ‘white trash’ directed at white people who are poor, or white job seekers who are racially discriminated against in applying to an ethnic restaurant that prefers to hire from their own ethnic group). In essence, not all white people are racists simply by virtue of their whiteness. By the same token, not all blacks are equally and racially oppressed and they do not have the same set of experiences.

Being critics of whiteness studies, Satzewich and Liodakis (2010) are in agreement with Bonnett (1996), as they argue that there is heterogeneity, especially variations in earning, among and within groups, including whites, blacks, immigrants, and women. Li (1992) explains income inequality in Canada as largely based on social class, with race and gender playing an interactive role in dividing earnings within the broader class structure. Race or whiteness, then, is not the fundamental basis of income inequality in Canada; rather, it is merely one among many other factors such as age, class, gender, education, occupation, and number of weeks worked.

Also, even though immigrants in general tend to make less than those who are born in Canada, there are exceptions (Satzewich & Liodakis, 2010). Some immigrants, though few in numbers, do earn more—and sometimes significantly more—than Canadian-born workers. In his magnum opus, *The Vertical Mosaic: An Analysis of Social Class and Power in Canada*, Porter (1965) found that the charter groups (British and French) held higher positions of power and advantage, socially, economically, and politically than entrance groups, which were the less preferred groups subjugated to assimilation processes fashioned by the charter group. This argument no longer holds as strongly as it once did because evidence suggests that in 1971 the British earned lower incomes than entrance status groups, particularly the Jewish and Italians (Satzewich & Liodakis, 2010). It is important to note that the Jewish and Italians (as well as the Irish) were not considered white at one point in Canadian history—they all became white (Steven-

son, 2014). The example of earning differentials among whites and the case of immigrants both emphasize heterogeneity among and within groups.

Moreover, Satzewich and Liodakis’ (2010) polemic against whiteness studies argues that not only is no group ever homogeneous, but that whites are just as diverse as blacks and other racial and ethnic groups. Therefore, whiteness cannot alone account for white privilege, seeing that race cannot fully be understood or analyzed apart from class and gender. This is precisely the area in which the literature on whiteness fails to adequately address. For instance, the study of white privilege is often admired, in part because scholars of the experiential approach aim to help whites acknowledge their whiteness and the inner-workings of white supremacy. However, it is assumed that this acknowledgment and exposure will lead whites to fight against the unearned white privilege they have. This represents a narrow view of fighting back, or resistance, because it suggests that only whites are in a position to resist their unearned white privilege, and that white privilege is a white problem. It is important to pay attention to how it is called white privilege rather than race privilege—it puts whites at the center of the problem, in part because it aims to expose whiteness. It leaves out other dimensions or possibilities to resist, such as a collaborative approach between whites and blacks or other racial/ethnic groups. Additionally, Blum (2008) contends that we “should always include issues of class privilege in [our] discussions of race privilege” (p. 315). Hence, whiteness is not an all-encompassing concept to explain (white/race) privilege; rather, it is one among many.

Put in other terms, the advent of the concept of *intersectionality* (Carastathis, 2014a; 2014b; Crenshaw, 1989; 1991) proved to be a rival to whiteness studies. The framework of intersectionality discredits the idea that the single axis of race—whiteness—can capture the multidimensional nature of oppression and experiences. Specifically, intersectionality is the theoretical position that emphasizes the “simultaneity of [race, gender, and class] intersection in people’s lives” (Carastathis, 2014a, p. 304).

To elaborate, if a raggedly dressed white homeless woman, for example, enters a convenience store, she may be watched because of her perceived low socioeconomic status. Watched is used here in the sense that it is suspected a customer might steal something. In this particular example, her whiteness no longer exerts the same kind of symbolic power and status as a well-dressed white woman. Here, class becomes a more

significant factor than race in explaining oppression and discrimination.

In modern society, the intersections of race, ethnicity, class, and gender are important in grappling with the complexities of social inequality. Indeed, many scholars and writers have drawn reference to white privilege as it relates to class and gender:

Whiteness does not confer on all White people the same access to privilege. The White mother on welfare, the homeless White male do not form a homogeneous community with White journalists, judges, educators, and CEOs and clearly do not enjoy equal access to White privilege (Henry & Tator, 2006, p. 46).

Simply being white is insufficient to account for the operations of white privilege and the broader understanding of systems of oppression and social inequalities. It is important to note that Henry and Tator are among scholars who capitalize the word ‘White’, perhaps to denote respect and equity among groups. This paper does not capitalize black or white because they are adjectives (even though no one is actually black or white) to describe the imaginary colours of so-called races, which do not refer to a nationality or ethnic group. What Henry and Tator (2006) emphasize is another shortcoming of whiteness studies, as intersectionality is able to account for more interlocking systems of oppression than one single axis alone.

Although intersectionality has its advantages, so does whiteness studies. This can only be discerned if we are to not judge them comparatively, but rather as separate enterprises with different values. The juxtaposition of intersectionality and whiteness studies is beyond the scope of this paper; however, one concluding note is that both fields have their own merits. Accordingly, with intersectionality multiple axes of oppression can be analyzed, while whiteness studies

meticulously examines one single axis of oppression (i.e., race/whiteness). Studying one single axis of oppression has not at all been futile because a wealth of knowledge has been produced as a result. Thus, rather than looking at what whiteness studies is not fulfilling or cannot accomplish, the majority of scholars from the experiential approach focus on the benefits of whiteness studies, including a kind of transformative effect on white people.

SURVEY OF CRITICISMS: CONTESTED PATH OF WHITENESS STUDIES

Whiteness studies and critical race theory are sometimes conflated as being the same, which is a common mistake that needs some clarification. Burton (2009) provides a useful table to distinguish the two (see Table 1). Critical race theory was developed out of legal scholarship in critical legal studies, and thus focuses on the intersection of law, race, and power through the application of critical theory. Whiteness studies, on the other hand, grew out of the ambition to purge racism and white privilege. While there are differences between the two, they also share some similarities, including an emphasis on white supremacy and a common goal to achieve racial equality. Nonetheless, whiteness studies is a distinct area of inquiry.

Burton (2009) ascertains that there is an epistemological distinction between whiteness theory and critical race theory—whiteness is the center of the former, while race is at the center of the latter. Burton says:

Whiteness theory and critical race theory are parallel discourses but should not be confused. . . they are two separate theories representing two epistemological standpoints, two somewhat different but overlapping methodological traditions, comprising two broad communities of researchers and two different literatures (p. 177).

Table 1: *Typology of whiteness theory and critical race theory as methodological domains*

	Critical Race Theory	Whiteness Theory (Studies)
Date emerged as a distinct theoretical approach	1970s	1990s
Initial “host” discipline	Legal studies	Labour history
Research focus centres	Race/ethnicity	Whiteness
Race/ethnicity of researchers	People of colour	White
Race/ethnicity of researched	People of colour	White
Methodological tradition	Storytelling, counter-stories, oral history, ethnography, participatory action research	Textual analysis, discourse analysis, in-depth interviewing

Source: Burton (2009, p. 178)

Burton's distinction helps to deconstruct a common assumption: when scholars are studying whiteness they are at the same time studying race/racism because whiteness has a lot to do with or is race/racism, which is a conflation of whiteness studies and critical race theory. Scholars in whiteness studies generally advocate for the separation of whiteness studies from critical race theory instead of incorporating whiteness studies into the larger framework of critical race theory. However, by doing so, Burton (2009) points out that critics might argue that this symbolically privileges the ideology of whiteness.

As a case in point, many scholars of critical race theory have issues with this separation. One such opposing scholar emphasizes that "the need for change is immediate and people of colour do not have the time to wait for whites to take some slow, bourgeois journey of white self-discovery" (Allen, 2004, p. 133). This constitutes a sharp criticism against the study of whiteness as its own category outside of critical race theory because, as Burton (2009) explains Allen's position, "critical race theorists can already identify the multiple sources, manifestations, and power of whiteness, making whiteness theory and its distinctive epistemological approach adopted by white scholars an unnecessary division" (p. 177). The alleged unnecessary division expresses a conceptual inflation of race and racism by whiteness studies.

For instance, one of the issues scholars have with whiteness studies is that it principally focuses on racism perpetrated by white people, otherwise referred to as white racism. D'Souza (1996) accentuates how white racism is a redundancy of racism, and black racism is simply an epiphenomenon of white racism. According to this line of reasoning, a deflation of the concept of racism has sometimes been attributed to the idea that the (re)definition of the concept has rendered it exclusively a white phenomenon (Miles & Brown, 2003). Katz and Ivey (1977), for example, see racism as a disease that runs deeply through white people and distorts their sense of reality. This conceptual deflation of racism is often considered problematic for those critiquing whiteness studies because it suggests that only whites can be racist since they are thought to be at the root of the problem: racism. Additionally, this view assumes that whites are at the top of the racial hierarchy and that those who they oppress are subordinate to them, thereby perpetuating whiteness as a racist concept (Satzewich & Liodakis, 2010). Because whiteness studies focuses on white racism, it is assumed that whites are the more or most autonomous group that

has the capacity to understand, analyze, and ultimately explain racism.

Reminiscent of Satzewich and Liodakis' (2010) earlier contention that whiteness is a disguised racist concept, others also note that the definition of whiteness itself is racist, let alone white racism. While there are many competing definitions of racism, D'Souza (1996) offers a clearly defined conventional definition:

In order to be racist, you must first believe in the existence of biologically distinguishable groups or races. Second, you must rank these races in terms of superiority and inferiority. Third, you must hold these rankings to be intrinsic or innate. Finally, you typically seek to use them as the basis for discrimination, segregation, or the denial of rights extended to other human beings (p. 28).

Whiteness, on the other hand, can be defined as the standard against which other groups are judged as inferior (Henry & Tator, 2006). Whiteness can also be defined as "the processes through which whites acquire and deploy social dominance" (Levine-Rasky, 2002, p. 2). By these definitions, whiteness is alleged to be a racist concept because the utilization and application of whiteness in whiteness studies necessarily requires the belief in the existence of biologically distinguishable groups, or races. Without this prior condition, historical and experiential scholars of whiteness alike would scramble for a brand new standard upon which to categorize the Other as (racially) inferior.

Critics of whiteness studies complain that rather than seeing whiteness as building from a racist undertone, whiteness scholars ignore or fail to examine whiteness as a racist concept, thereby creating a void in the literature as well as increasing the gap between whiteness studies and critical race theory. Such complaints not only criticize the experiential approach but also attack the historical approach to whiteness. In this sense, critics seem to suggest that historically-oriented scholars, in their attempt to figure out how certain groups have become white and their ensuing consequences, fail to analyze the racist aspect of whiteness.

Another critique of whiteness studies rests on the idea that whiteness hinges on the notions of identity and agency (Fields, 2001). Fields maintains that whiteness replaces racism with race, and equates race with racial identity, which reduce race and racial identity to empirical data and tools of analysis. This critique aims to disparage whiteness studies on the basis that

it often looks at white identities by exploring what it means to be white in a white supremacist society at a specific historical period, from a white person's perspective (Guess, 2006). McIntosh (1995), with her essay on white privilege and male privilege, is a pacesetter for what whiteness studies is about. In uncovering daily white privileges for being a white person, McIntosh conceptualizes whiteness as a recognized identity or social position that has a symbolic authority or privilege to it; for example, silently demanding not to be watched when walking into a convenience store like a black person might be. Hence, the critique is that race and racial identity are being reduced to empirical data—McIntosh's list of white privileges—and tools of analysis (i.e., the method of analysis being through a white person's perspective).

As a white person, Kendall (2013) agrees with McIntosh's claim that whites rarely think about their own skin colour and that non-whites rarely write about whites. However, similar to Alcoff's (1991) caution of the problem of speaking for others, Kendall (2013) cautions that if whites begin to write about themselves through their white perspective on the subject of whiteness, in order to balance out perspectives from blacks and other racial groups, then whites may consequently begin to believe what they say is true and that everyone shares their views. This is a perspicacious thought because what you say/write about yourself is often taken as more legitimate and true than someone else who writes about you. This also reinforces the dichotomy of the self-and-Other; that is, by defining yourself, you will simultaneously define the Other.

As Blum (2008) notes, the focus on white privilege conflates the situations and histories of all groups who are not white as being essentially similar. The implication of whites writing about themselves as whites is that it will have a tendency of being looked upon favourably because other whites can relate, whereas if blacks write about whites, white people may think: *What do they know? They are not us. They don't experience having white privilege!* Hence, the study of the privileged white social group is a complex and sensitive area of study that requires a diplomatic approach (Alcoff, 1991; Kendall, 2013).

While critics of whiteness studies have their fair share of discontent toward the burgeoning field of whiteness, there are good reasons why whiteness studies has emerged as a separate field of study apart from critical race theory and the fact that scholars of whiteness studies are overwhelmingly white. To elaborate, white privilege (and whiteness studies more broadly)

is usually written from and through the perspective of whites. A white university professor writes:

When I walk into the classroom as a white professor, my whiteness brings with it a series of assumed characteristics (such as intelligence, academic relevance, legitimate authority and so on) among the students that sit in front of me. These assumptions act as resources not available to my non-white colleagues. One aspect of white privilege, maybe the most important aspect of its continued existence, is its lack of visibility for those who have it (Jungkunz, 2011, pp. 9-10).

This insight leads to the idea that whiteness is transparent. Transparency here refers to a tendency among whites not to see racialized aspects of their identity (Haney López, 1996). Transparency is another peculiar aspect of whiteness, contributing to the lexicon of terms developed through whiteness studies. In view of this, the stack of whiteness studies is staggering in its achievement to boldly isolate the axis of race—whiteness—and to turn the invisibility of whiteness into a visible and operationalized form: white privilege.

TODAY'S RELEVANCE FOR WHITENESS STUDIES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR RACIAL EQUALITY

On August 11-12, 2017, members of white supremacist groups joined the 'Unite the Right' rally to protest against the removal of Confederate monuments and memorials from public spaces, which resulted in deadly violence on the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia, United States. On Saturday, August 12, 2017, a car plowed through a crowd of people that killed one woman and injured 19 people (Stolberg & Rosenthal, 2017). Anti-white supremacy rallies were promptly held in several cities across the United States in response to the casualties of the activists who were in opposition to the 'Unite the Right' rally (Hecimovic, 2017). On Monday, August 14, 2017, demonstrators gathered in downtown Toronto to stand in solidarity with the residents of Charlottesville, and to protest against the white supremacist movement in the United States (Cheng, 2017). The white supremacist rally in the United States is part of a much larger history of racism and racial discrimination, and it highlights the

importance of whiteness studies in the year 2017. While race/racism continues to be a salient problem in the United States, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau wrote on Twitter on Sunday, August 13, 2017, that Canada is not immune to the type of racist violence and hatred that occurred in Charlottesville, Virginia (Paling, 2017). Whiteness studies in the Canadian context is particularly important, as it allows us to tease out the differences in the lived experiences among those living in Canada's cultural mosaic versus those living in United States' cultural melting pot.

Another 21st century example is the formation of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) social movement in 2013, which has now gained international recognition. The BLM movement in part accentuates the whiteness ideology as a perpetual social problem in need of a collective solution. The fact that there are such movements along racial lines speaks volumes to the continual racial inequality, namely the cloaked white supremacy.

Today, many post-secondary institutions express on their websites a commitment to diversity and equal hiring practices. While this is heading in the right direction, progress toward racial equality in the academy is slow. Ng (1994) contends that power, status, and privilege in higher education are still largely assigned based on race. Henry and Tator (1994) highlight a lack of representation of racialized persons at the administrative levels in Canadian universities. Nakhaie (2004) further shows that the presidents, vice presidents, and deans of the Canadian universities are overwhelmingly of white ethno-racial origins. Despite the widespread implementation of Employment Equity programs in post-secondary institutions that aim to achieve equality in the workplace and to eliminate obstacles to employment opportunities among racialized individuals, racialized groups still experience significant barriers and discrimination (Nakhaie, 2013). Rhode (2016) affirms that while the advancement of women is much better in the academy than in other sectors, racialized groups continue to lag behind.

Whiteness studies might be an area of scholarship that could help further academic understandings of such racial inequalities, as it offers a unique epistemological standpoint for understanding race and racism. However, Garner (2017) suggests that it is generally difficult to create new spaces within the academy for a subject matter as contentious as whiteness studies. There is also a critique that whiteness literature and racism literature are too intertwined to clearly draw where one field ends and where the other begins, which

suggests that whiteness studies is more appropriate as a subfield within studies of racism, especially given that they share concepts and strategies (Garner, 2017). Therefore, Garner thinks the onus is on academics to make a convincing case to justify establishing whiteness studies as an academic discipline, which has the potential to further racial equality. However, due to the current resistance against whiteness studies, a possible first step forward would be to introduce and offer courses specifically for the study of whiteness, which some post-secondary institutions have already done.

At times, the conversation around whiteness is difficult to have because not everyone agrees with the existence and effects of white privilege, akin to how not everyone agrees on the existence and effects of global warming. Carroll (2014) points to a need to discuss white privilege and whiteness ideology more sufficiently in the Canadian education system, in order to start deconstructing the whiteness ideology which continues to afford white persons the upper hand in practically all spheres of life. As a case in point, racialized persons of the second generation in Canada have overall higher education attainment than do the majority population despite cultural and racial biases in post-secondary education, but the education levels attained do not always reflect equality of opportunity among racialized persons (Reitz & Banerjee, 2007).

To begin to change the way we think, we would do well to change the way we use language because language shapes our thinking. It is common for scholars to use the term *non-white* when examining issues surrounding whiteness, but it may sometimes get interpreted as a pejorative term for bracketing all ethnic groups into one. While the term *visible minority* emerged in the 1970s in response to the controversy around the usage of 'non-white' and was employed by activists and scholars in the fight against social inequality (Satzewich & Liodakis, 2010), the term gained official recognition in 1984 as one of the four designated groups in the Royal Commission Report on Equality in Employment (Minister of Justice, 2017). Currently, the usage of *people of colour* is widely adopted as the preferable replacement over its predecessors because different racial/ethnic groups consider it more inclusive than the category of non-white and it is thought to frame people positively as opposed to visible minority, which implies a sense of inferiority and is imbued with a subordinate connotation. Some members of racial/ethnic groups commonly describe themselves as persons of colour, often with a sense of empowerment in that identification.

However, in a discussion of whiteness, there is a dangerous implication of placing too much emphasis on the abstract colour of one's skin, which is symbolic of the oppression, and may thus take the focus away from white people. Drawing from Foucault's examination of Bentham's Panopticon, Dei et al. (2005) caution that visibility is a trap: "We (the oppressed) are confined to a 'cell' that has been fashioned from our skin and our culture in contrast to those same properties of our oppressor" (p. 90). The focus on skin colour is not a wise tactic for non-whites due to its tendency to trap non-whites in racial categories. While there is a sense of empowerment that comes with wielding the term people of colour, it is important to recognize that a focus on skin colour—as a vehicle for advocacy or inclusivity—may further perpetuate the complex nature of contemporary racism, which operates in subtle ways that can make racial discrimination undetected. Surely we can collectively move toward racial equality without employing terminologies that are rooted in out-dated biologically-based ideas of race.

The commonly used term people of colour thus creates a tendency for us to think of racial oppression as a problem for people of colour and something that we should be concerned about for their sake, more so than the sake of the privileged white social group. Instead, there is a need to frame issues of whiteness (white supremacy, white privilege, white ideology, and white nationalism) as a collective problem with a collective solution that involves both parties. Scholars like Cynthia Levine-Rasky (2002) prefer the terminology of *racialized group*, to draw attention to the social processes and relationships of domination and subordination. For these reasons, the term *racialized persons* is most ideal within whiteness studies literature because it identifies racialization as both a process and a social problem from a particular angle within whiteness studies. While recognizing white persons are also racialized, whiteness studies tends to focus on the racialization of people who are not white. Terms and concepts reflect the spirit of the time in which they are situated. As times change, it is important for us to refine our colloquial language, as well as academic language, by adopting the usage of racialized persons, rather than some of the more politically correct terms such as visible minority or people of colour (Levine-Rasky, 2002). Twine and Gallagher (2009) envision a racially just world as one in which terminologies of racism and white supremacy have become archaic, such that the children of tomorrow will need to look them up in dictionaries if they want to understand their meaning.

CONCLUSION

In this synthesis paper, two principal approaches to the study of whiteness were showcased: historical and experiential. A survey of criticisms against the rise of whiteness studies points to several things. Firstly, whiteness studies has been accused of using whiteness as a disguised racist concept. Secondly, critics assert that white people are not a homogeneous group with a unified gaze. And thirdly, intersectionality seems to be able to capture more aspects of the oppressed person's experiences than does one single axis of oppression.

Other complaints range from a critique of whiteness studies' methodological approach to the legitimacy of whiteness studies since it is principally studied and analyzed from and through the perspective of white persons. Burton's (2009) clarification of the distinctions between whiteness studies and critical race theory helps to set the former apart from the latter, which is supported by advocates of whiteness studies. In their attempt to fashion their own safe spaces to study race via whiteness, various white scholars have produced insightful work that builds upon our current knowledge and have also provoked a wide range of critiques. The nature of critiques operates to test the strength of a field of study as it progresses into a more stable and matured form. The contributions of whiteness studies in recent years have made it a thriving field of study, albeit a contentious one, as indicated by the catalogue of critiques.

Incremental changes toward racial equality involve a shift in the way we use language and terminologies around sensitive issues regarding whiteness. Another viable tactic to maximize racial equality is to harness education as a powerful agent of social change. One reason to incorporate whiteness studies courses more widely across post-secondary institutions is the potential to critically inform students of the effects of the dominant white ideology that infuses society and everyday experiences. Whiteness studies courses can also hone in on the theoretical and practical implications of whiteness to decipher subtle forms of contemporary racism, as well as to understand how it is perpetuated, how people are affected by it, and how we can then resist/challenge/deconstruct it. The caveat of offering courses on whiteness is that this requires a carefully crafted curriculum that takes into account sensitivity, along with the political nature that is attributed to whiteness.

Higher-level positions and leadership roles also need more racialized occupants so that racialized stu-

dents have more role models with whom they can identify. Diversity in leadership is essential for creating role models and nurturing the aspirations of today's diverse student body. However, this should not simply be about achieving quotas. Instead, employers would do well to actively seek and reach out to racialized persons in order to build a large pool from which they can extract large numbers of qualified racialized persons to increase representations. In other words, it is about improving the opportunities and life chances of those whose opportunities and life chances are the most limited (Fishkin, 2014). The underrepresentation of racialized persons in leadership roles is a significant problem for which administrators are responsible for correcting (Rhode, 2016). Rhode suggests that it is part of the professional responsibility of educational leaders to mentor and sponsor the next generation of leaders, as we must be able to count on them as a catalyst for positive social change toward racial equality.

Despite recent rhetoric that criticizes the study of whiteness as a legitimate line of inquiry, a substantial body of knowledge has been produced by both historical and experiential scholars who help us to better understand the nuances of the racial world in which we live. Overall, the catalogue of criticisms against this field is a strong indication that continued dialogue is beneficial for both advocates and critics of whiteness studies.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Jun Mian Chen completed a combined BA (Philosophy and Sociology) at Wilfrid Laurier University where he also attained a MA in Sociology and a second MA in Philosophy. Jun Mian's research with international students has appeared in the *Journal of International Students*. His other research stream has investigated the ethical and epistemological dimensions of race, wherein he has developed a normative ethical model to guide members of society to reduce racial inequality in our everyday lives. Furthermore, he completed the TESL post-graduate certificate program at Conestoga College, where he is now an instructor. He is currently studying education, on a part-time basis, at Brock University.
