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# Transracialized selves and the emergence of post-white teacher identities

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## Abstract

This article draws on two previous studies by the authors, both based on interviews with European-American individuals, to document white experiences with multiculturalism, race, and cultural differences. We consider recent developments in research on whiteness and offer a perspective on racial identities defined as discursively enacted identifications that are rooted in racialized discourse communities. We provide profiles of two white women who draw upon assets developed, in our view, largely through their successful negotiation of relationships with racially and culturally different members of multicultural discourse communities. Next, we demonstrate a methodology based on the narrative analytic tools of Stanton Wortham (2001, *Narratives in action: a strategy for research and analysis* [New York, Teachers College Press]) that was used to explicate multiple ways in which both participants narrated their identities during interviews. Our analysis demonstrates how these women enacted what we call “transracialized” selves, that is, ways of being white that transcend predictable performances of more typically racialized identities. We link transracialized identities to the notion of “post-white” identity. Finally, we close with comments about the implications of transracialized, post-white identities for the field of multicultural teacher education.

The future calls for each of us to become partners in the dance of diversity, a dance in which everyone shares the lead. And because we have been separated by race and ethnicity for so long, we may feel awkward at first with the new moves.... But with a little help from our friends in other cultures, even white folks can learn to dance, again, as we did among the great stone circles of ancient Europe. (Howard, 1993, p. 41)

## Introduction

How do teachers who nominally are white learn to hold their own among students and colleagues of color? Can white individuals ever “dance” their whiteness sincerely and convincingly in a manner recognizable and acceptable as non-racist by people of other races? To what degree can individuals of European descent meet others halfway to perform

harmoniously at their sides in a postmodern improvisation? While these questions may be read by some as rather indelicate, we are nonetheless serious about investigating the capability of—and vital necessity for—white individuals to learn to dance, following Howard's (1993) opening metaphor, to rhythms that may at first sound jarring and feel unfamiliar. Such questions are meant to challenge one-way assimilationist models of cultural pluralism that locate the "problems" of diversity in communities of color. By contrast, our stance is to turn such models upside down to suggest that those individuals who would "become multicultural people" (Nieto, 2004, p. 383) must dare to take risks and extend themselves dialogically with others who are racially and culturally different. For teachers who may not share the racial designation of their students, for example, in urban and rural schools, or for parents who are raising children of another race, dire indeed are the consequences of sidestepping metaphorical questions such as these.

We have followed with interest the expanding body of literature, especially in education research, about racial identities in general and whiteness in particular (e.g. Sleeter, 1992, 1993; Tatum, 1994; Nieto, 1995; Fine *et al.*, 1997; Giroux, 1997; Lawrence, 1997; McIntyre, 1997; McLaren, 1997; Clark & O'Donnell, 1999; Howard, 1999; Allen, 2001; Warren, 2001; Perry, 2002; McCarthy, 2003; McKinney, 2005). As men of color who are multicultural teacher educators and education researchers based in the USA, the authors of this article chose to use the shifting notion of white identity as a lens to focus on recent research, in an effort to offer preliminary comments on where this emerging literature may be taking the field of education. We decided to revisit the two studies with which we are most familiar, namely our own research that involves white individuals who are themselves immersed in minority communities. This article uses a framework that we have developed to analyze the multiple ways whiteness was enacted by participants in our respective research projects. We explain the framework as arising from innovative narrations of white identities, innovations that suggest unexplored implications for transforming the dynamics of racial inequality as teachers navigate/negotiate committed antiracist perspectives and lifestyles.

This article draws from our two earlier qualitative studies, both based on interviews with European American individuals about their experiences with multiculturalism, particularly with racism and cultural differences. We touch on recent developments in research on whiteness and current thinking about white identity, and offer our perspective on racial identity defined more broadly. First, we introduce profiles of two individuals who draw upon assets that develop largely as a result, in our view, of their intimate relationships with people who are racially and culturally different from each of them. Next, we demonstrate the methodology based on the narrative analytic tools of Stanton Wortham (2001) that we used to explicate the multiple ways both participants narrated various narrative selves during their respective interviews. Then we present our analysis and discuss what we can learn about both participants' enactments of what we call "transracialized" selves or "post-white" identifications. Finally, we close with further comments on transracialization (Raible, 2005) and its implications for teacher education.

### **Learning the dance of diversity: Original research featuring two white women**

This article aims to contribute to teacher education through the re-theorization of white identities based on narrative analyses of vignettes (Seidman, 1998) created from interview transcripts. Our perspective holds that updating racial identity theory by incorporating less dualistic, more complex, and perhaps postmodern understandings, particularly of whiteness, may contribute to new ways to imagine an interracial future based on egalitarian relations and mutual respect (Perry, 2002). We view the re-theorization of white identities as part of the scholarly response to what Michael Omi characterized as the “crisis of white identity” (Omi, 1996), a topic that concerns us as multicultural educators. We are nevertheless mindful of (and indeed concur with) some of the criticisms directed at the loose conglomeration of “whiteness studies.” For example, John Warren (2001) cautions against reproducing white privilege by applying simplified understandings from performance theory to bolster arguments that call for individualistic new performances of whiteness. We agree that what we call post-whiteness is not only a matter of choosing antiracism over racism (Clark & O'Donnell, 1999) or even becoming a “traitor” to the white race (Ignatiev & Garvey, 1996). Rather we contend that, since all identities, even racial ones, are enacted discursively and in dialogic relationships within the various discourse communities in which we participate, for individual subjects to transform their racialized selves requires the active participation of people of other races. We cannot simply will ourselves to be in new and different ways without negotiating and gaining the validation of others who differ from us racially. We argue that these negotiations occur primarily within multicultural discourse communities, where individuals of differing races can form long-term caring relationships.

The profiles presented below exemplify, in our view, creative approaches to being white or “doing” whiteness (Howard, 1999), approaches that we have come to characterize as “post-white” (Raible, 2005). The white women profiled here move in ways recognized in certain communities of color as culturally connected (Irizarry, 2007). We show how these women enact post-whiteness by experientially rejecting and transcending the standard roles for white individuals prescribed through racial socialization or racialization. Whereas we define racialization as the processes based largely on fear of alterity through which individuals are inducted into the codes of white superiority, transracialization signifies the transformation of the narration of typically racialized selves in ways that reject or transcend racialization.

It is important to bear in mind that we are not holding up these two women as models on a pedestal. Our intent is not to divide white people into two camps, those who “get race the way *we* get race” and those who do not “get it” (Thompson, 2003). In accord with McKinney's (2005) approach to studying whiteness, we maintain that our overall project is to document multiple approaches to doing whiteness:

The aim is *not* to characterize individual whites as having a certain type of identity, but to demonstrate the complexity of *collective* everyday whiteness. Perhaps in part because most whites have not given a great deal of thought to what whiteness means, white identity is, in a sense, a situational identity. That is, white people highlight various elements of whiteness depending

on what reactions are called forth by circumstances in which they find themselves. (McKinney, 2005, p. 204)

The two studies from which the following profiles are drawn address, among other issues, the identity development of individuals normally classified as “white,” and various ways in which participants enact new identities based on experiences that afford them heightened awareness of and deeper familiarity with diversity. Considered together, the similarities between the two women profiled in what follows caused us to wonder about the cross-cultural relationship building accomplished by these particular women. Therefore, we selected these participants from our larger studies for closer scrutiny because of their expressed commitment, as white women, to the ideals of multiculturalism. As multicultural teacher educators and researchers, we (the authors) understand the necessity for the teaching force—composed in the USA primarily of white females—to take up discourses of multiculturalism, moreover, by developing stances of explicitly antiracist orientations. We contend that the two cases presented here provide insights into the ways in which this can occur, resulting in transracialized (or post-white) identities. We conclude with a discussion of the possibilities for transracialization opportunities in teacher education.

### **Transracialized identities: Outside the racialization box**

The notion of transracialized identities implies an ontological break with normative whiteness, for individuals classified as white and for non-whites. Over time, such innovative enactments of narrative identities reveal patterns or tendencies that can be characterized as transracialized, in that the tendency toward racialization has been transcended or overcome. Whereas racialization ontologically positions whiteness as the norm and segregates individuals according to its logic of white superiority, the two individuals in this study represent ways in which individuals can transcend racialization’s hegemonic influence, to the point of enacting post-white identities.

This was accomplished in several ways, as we will show in the analysis of narrative identities presented here. By taking up subject positions that were explicitly antiracist—and, importantly, in conjunction with racial “others”—these individuals rejected the hegemony of racialization in and through their lived experience. Both participants were able to break out of the box that segregates according to race, for example, by choosing to date across the color line. They also benefited from the formation of interpersonal relationships (other than dating) that linked them to individuals of different races via other long-term caring relationships, as through the creation of sibling relationships in Ashley’s transracial adoptive family and in Jessica’s transcultural foster family.

#### *Profile #1: Ashley Bradford*

At age 28, Ashley Bradford (a pseudonym) grew up as part of the “hip-hop” generation in a small-sized city in the northeastern USA. Ashley has three siblings, two of whom were adopted transracially. She and another brother were, to use her words, “born to” the

family. Ashley, who has no children yet, currently resides in a multicultural metropolis on the Pacific coast of the USA.

Ashley's profile is drawn from a study of non-adopted white siblings in transracial adoptive families (Raible, 2005). In her interview, Ashley begins by explaining that she exercises discretion before disclosing that she has two African-American siblings. She says that people often make assumptions about her when they find out about her black siblings. She explains that she does not want to be seen as using their blackness as a badge to mark herself as "cool" or somehow superior. Neither does she allow others to use the fact of transracial adoption in her family to explain summarily what she calls her "sensitivities to race."

When asked about early memories of race, Ashley recounted several anecdotes of being with her adoptive sister and "sticking up" for her during teasing. Ashley described becoming particularly indignant at what she calls the frequent "Is that your real sister?" question. Ashley says:

I feel like transracial adoption was a big part of my growing up experience. I was proud of it. I mean, I loved my sister and I was proud to defend her. I didn't want her to get hurt. I was happy to do it, and ... I was not quiet about it. Now I feel really grateful just for having this experience, these different experiences. It gives you a different outlook on life. At the time, I felt an inkling of that. I knew it was challenging and that we were different. I knew our family was in its own category, a transracial adoptive family, and I was fine with that.

One major influence helping Ashley to feel "fine with that" is her parents' commitment to teaching all their children about racial differences and race relations. While other participants in the larger study of transracial adoption described their parents' attempts to help their adopted siblings to take pride in their heritage, Ashley reports how her parents went several steps further:

Race was also talked about a lot, often hand in hand with the adoption discussion. As soon as my brother was old enough to be racially profiled, even before that, there were family discussions of race, about being black in this society. We were exposed to a lot of different cultures, not just African American. My parents involved my siblings in black culture activities, so we were observing it by way of them being involved in it, and involved in it ourselves (we being my born-to brother and I). Around the house there was exposure to basic things like black images, books, toys, and TV shows. I later went to Africa with my parents when my brother was studying abroad there.

Ashley's response was thoughtful when asked about her racial and cultural identities:

Racially I identify myself as white. I guess I have a hard time with identifying myself culturally. I feel more comfortable around marginalized people. I consider myself a different culture than even just a white family, non-adoptee. I consider myself part of the transracial adoptive culture, really. I've identified it as that, but what does that mean to people who don't know anything about it? There were people in high school who had parents of different races, non-adopted. And I felt closer to them immediately, especially around people who have the same experiences as me, or similar. I feel that I'm not the same as the common, traditional white family.

Accepting her differences from other white individuals, as well as seeing her whole family as different, sets Ashley's approach apart from other participants in the study who



were raised with a more or less “color-blind” approach to racial differences. Rather than minimizing differences or insisting on being accepted as “just the same as” others, Ashley learned to notice, name and address explicitly the differences within her family and between herself and others who might look like her, but whose own family members racially “matched.”

Ashley expressed a personal investment in race discourse, for example, articulating an understanding of racism in personal terms, even though she is part of the dominant group: “It makes me really uncomfortable hearing people talking about adoption and race in offensive and uneducated ways. Mostly because if it’s about my brother and sister, it’s a direct offense against me.” She went on to describe hearing racist comments in the workplace:

It’s not directed towards me, because I’m white. I used to always challenge them. And then I started realizing *when* it will make a difference and choosing when I should challenge them. Generally, if I don’t say something, I always end up feeling like I should have.... Then there’s also the feeling of getting tired from having to always be the teacher.

When asked for recommendations for white parents who are raising children of color, Ashley stressed the importance of incorporating antiracism into one’s life:

You need to be able to—so much has to do with race—and you have to be able to be friends with people of color, and, I think, be an active anti-racist. I think it starts with something as simple as smiling to a black person on the street, and being aware of racist and prejudiced actions, like the cliché of grabbing your purse, and then not doing those things. [It involves] actively involving yourself in things that will expose you to people that are not white, learning about other people’s culture, or other cultures. Speaking up when you hear something racist... The first step is to acknowledge the fact that, as a white person, you have a privilege that a person of color doesn’t have. You have to know that, because society is not color-blind. That breaks it down pretty simply. How can you be color-blind if society isn’t?

### *Profile #2: Jessica Helmsley*

Jessica Helmsley’s profile comes from a separate study of how teachers become culturally connected to Latino students (Irizarry, 2005). Jessica (a pseudonym) was a 22-year-old middle-school teacher in a multicultural urban community in the northeastern USA. Jessica grew up in a predominantly white, middle-class neighborhood, and explains that part of her schooling was in a mostly white private school in a nearby suburban town. Jessica relates that her first significant encounter with children of color came when her parents began to take foster children into their home: “Most of them were kids of color. That is a big part of what has made me who I am.”

While the decision to welcome children of other races into their home impacted Jessica’s perceptions regarding race and her own identity, as was the case with Ashley Bradford, it was a choice nevertheless made by her parents. Even so, Jessica described how, on her own, she has actively sought opportunities to immerse herself in culturally and linguistically diverse communities, both in the USA and abroad. For instance, she has participated in mission trips to Latin America, and has worked directly with Latinos in the

USA through her church activities, and as a teacher in the bilingual program in the school where she teaches.

Jessica describes feeling very connected to Latino culture, having become fluent in Spanish even though no one else in her family speaks the language. She takes considerable pride in achieving near-native fluency, and articulates the ways in which her bilingual abilities have helped her in her work as a teacher. Not only did she strive to learn another language, but Jessica narrates herself as continuing to work at sounding like a native speaker in her second language. Her expressed desire to make her speech “sound native” reflects Jessica’s high level of investment in becoming not only bilingual but bicultural, as we shall see in the following section.

### **Methodology: Narrative analysis of race/culture vignettes**

After reviewing both interview transcripts to locate sections where each participant addressed explicitly their views of race and culture, the longer interviews were culled and edited to form condensed narratives, or what Seidman (1998) refers to as vignettes. The vignettes on race/culture were then analyzed in a methodology adapted from Wortham’s (2001) approach to the analysis of personal narratives. While there are a variety of analytical tools that we could have used, we chose narrative analysis because of the way it allows researchers to “freeze” discursive phenomena and create snapshots of language in use (Raible, 2005). We include excerpts from interview transcripts to illustrate how we arrived at our interpretations and conclusions, and to encourage readers to reach their own. To save time and space, we demonstrate the methodology by analyzing only one vignette in this paper, Jessica’s vignette (see Table 1) where she explicitly addresses race and culture. Bear in mind that the same methodology was applied to Ashley’s vignette, as summarized in her earlier profile.

The next stage in the narrative analysis methodology is a line-by-line reading of the selected text for key events in the narrative, along with the characters populating those events (see Table 2).

In Jessica’s narrative, we discern 16 discrete episodes having to do with race, culture and identity. Documenting each episode provides a way to check for consistency and ensures that we account for each line of text comprising the transcript. Episodic analysis also brings forth the relationships that influence the narrator’s sense of self. In Jessica’s vignette, we see numerous examples of interracial friendships (episodes 4, 8, 9 and 11–16). The next stage of analysis examines each episode for the kinds of selves (Wortham, 2001) represented in the text. In other words, we attempt to answer the question about Jessica’s identities: “Who (and how) does she narrate herself to be?” After a careful review of the data, we discovered four distinct, yet overlapping, selves enacted in Jessica’s narrative, namely what we have called her “reflexive,” “multicultural,” “evaluative” and “moral” selves (see Table 3).

Jessica’s reflexive self reflects on her own changing understanding of racial and cultural differences (episodes 1–3). The reflexive self also gives voice to her recognition of how other people react to what she says and does, particularly in response to her bilingualism and biculturalism (episodes 3 and 16). Jessica’s reflexive self is related to her evaluative



**Table 1.** Jessica's race/culture vignette

Line	Transcript text
1	So when we talk about race or ethnicity or whatever, I am the typical American girl.
2	Where did I come from? I don't know. Do I care? Not really, but it is funny because I
3	think that when people see me now and see who I am they get very confused sometimes.
4	Like the kind of music I listen to ... I listen to a lot of Black gospel. I go to a Spanish-
5	speaking church. I speak Spanish fluently. I don't have a typical American accent that
6	everybody makes fun of.
7	I can cook a lot of Puerto Rican meals. I can hold my own in the Puerto Rican
8	community. Most of the people that I hang out with now are Hispanic. The guy I'm
9	dating is Puerto Rican. I speak a lot of Spanish outside of school. I feel like I am a
10	bilingual quote unquote like they say. "Mad bilingual."
11	I'm white. Ethnically, both my parents are from the south so our food is southern,
12	talk at home is a bit more southern. Neighborhood-wise it was a mostly white
13	neighborhood. I said I had gone to a private school that was also mostly
14	white. After that, I went to Chestnut in sixth grade. A lot of culture shock. A lot of
15	whoa... I think that is really the first time that I started to notice cultural differences and
16	racial differences and stuff like that because I had never really thought about it before.
17	My best friend from elementary school was black, but we were never really like "Hey,
18	you're black and I'm white." It was never that type of thing.
19	It was she was Nina and I was Jess. In middle school that
20	is when I started thinking about it. I also spent 2 months in Puerto Rico. I also had a
21	friend in high school who spoke a Spanish to me all the time. We just had fun with it.
22	The church that I attended growing up was predominantly white and most of the
23	people had a lot of money. We did foster care and had every color, every race, every
24	background that you could imagine. That is a big part of what has made me who I am.
25	Coming from the home that I come from and having foster children that was a huge
26	experience that has impacted me and has prepared me for what I am doing today.
27	I'm really active in the church—La Iglesia Apostolica Ronovación. In the last four
28	years or so is when we made the change of churches from an English-speaking church
29	to a Spanish-speaking church. Being fluent in Spanish has definitely helped me. Going
30	on mission trips really opened my eyes to a lot of things. I went to Costa Rica.
31	I do a lot of mission trips to Spanish-speaking countries, and I love to travel.
32	The community that I deal with more, as far as church, we are the only white family in
33	the church. So that's fun. I am also involved with the youth of the community through
34	church. I talk to them a lot and we go and make home visits. The kids always say,
35	"Dag, Miss, can you just speak one language?" I'm like, "I don't know?" [laughs]
36	Spanish just goes through my head all the time.

self, which comments on the racial, class and cultural composition of her own family (episodes 6 and 11), and the two church congregations she describes (episode 10). She evaluates her own changing perceptions of differences and how she began somewhat naively downplaying them, and her evolving awareness beginning when she changed schools as a young adolescent (episode 9).

**Table 2.** Episodes in Jessica's race/culture vignette

Episode	Lines	Narrated events	Characters
1	1	Labeling herself for others in racial/ethnic terms	Jessica (J), other generic people
2	2	Downplaying her heritage	J
3	3–6	People's reactions to her	J, other generic people
4	7–10	Claiming bicultural I.D.	J, Puerto Ricans
5	11–12	Claiming southern I.D.	J, family members
6	12–14	Describing racial environment in childhood	J, neighbors
7	14–16	First noticing differences	J, schoolmates
8	17–19	Downplaying differences	J, black best friend
9	20–21	Noticing differences	J, PR associates, bilingual friend in HS
10	22–23	Describing childhood church	J, wealthy white parishioners
11	23–26	Describing family composition	J, parents, foster siblings
12	27–30	Church activities	J, Spanish-speaking parishioners
13	30–31	Mission trips	J, Spanish-speaking associates, parishioners
14	32–33	Being a "minority" white family	J, parents, parishioners
15	33–35	Involvement with youth	J, youth & their families
16	35–36	Reactions to her bilingualism	J, bilingual youth

**Table 3.** Jessica's four narrative selves

Type of self	Episode	Narrated events
Reflexive self	1	Labeling herself for others
	2	Downplaying her heritage in a wistful way
	3	People's reactions to her
	7	First noticing differences
	16	Reactions to her bilingualism
Multicultural self	4	Claiming bicultural identity
	5	Claiming southern identity
	8	Downplaying differences between J & black best friend
	14	Being a "minority" white family in her church
	16	Reactions to her bilingualism
Evaluative self	6	Describing racial environment in childhood
	9	Reflecting on changing perceptions of differences
	10	Describing childhood church parishioners
	11	Describing family composition in racial terms
Moral self	12	Church activities
	13	Mission trips
	15	Involvement with church youth & home visits

Her multicultural self narrates the ways she labels herself ethnically and racially (episodes 4 and 5), and voices her thoughts on diversity. For example, Jessica describes the pleasure she takes in being part of the only white family in a predominantly Hispanic church (episode 14), and also the fun she had learning a second language by speaking Spanish with her friends (episode 9). Finally, her moral self is concerned with her religious commitments, which she narrates as being put into action through her mission trips to Spanish-speaking countries. Similarly, her involvement with the youth members of her congregation is an extension of her moral self (episodes 12, 13 and 15). When considered together, Jessica's multiple selves narrate what we call a transracialized approach to enacting her identities, in that her narrative selves transcend more typical and predictable ways of narrating whiteness.

### **Contextualizing narrative selves: Theoretical framework**

Based on our analysis of the interview data in our two larger studies, only two of which were presented here, we tentatively surmise that such personal transformation among whites (as well as among people of color) may lead to the emergence of hybrid identities that draw from multiple sites, and that are enacted through "discourse" (Gee, 1999). The concepts of hybridization, unstable and shifting identities and contested, negotiated discourses from disciplines such as philosophy (McIntyre, 1997; Foucault, 1980), critical applied linguistics (Gee, 1999; Fairclough, 2003; Pennycook, 2000; Barker & Galasinski, 2001), and cultural studies (Hall, 1992) help to supply the rationale for a social constructionist, anti-essentialist and narrative understanding of identity.

The view of identities adopted in this study includes insights from across various disciplines. For instance, narratology maintains that through our relationships and interactions, that is, through discourse, our sense of self emerges (Gergen & Gergen, 1997). From a narratological standpoint, a coherent sense of self emerges from an individual's experience of life as a storied ordering of that life emerges. In other words, narrative selves are enacted discursively and understood narratively (Wortham, 2001). Even if we accept theoretically the postmodernist challenge to the notion of fixed, unitary selves, a concern for narrative identities provides a way to think and talk about the meaning we make of our individual experiences and interactions with others.

Psychologists Kenneth Gergen and Mary Gergen (1997) offer a useful definition of narrative identity. They contrast their view with more traditional psychological accounts, which, to their way of thinking, view identity as an achieved "state of mind":

The mature individual, on this [traditional] account, is one who has "found," crystallized," or "realized" a firm sense of self or personal identity.... However, from the present vantage point, the individual does not arrive at a stabilized state of mind. Rather, he or she develops the capacity for understanding him or herself in this manner and to communicate this understanding creditably to others. One does not acquire a state of "true self" but a potential for communicating that such a state is possessed. (Gergen & Gergen, 1997, p. 173)

According to Gergen and Gergen (1997, p. 179), "This delicate interdependence of constructed narratives suggests that a fundamental aspect of social life is a reciprocity in the

negotiation of meaning.” One of the tensions in the narrative view of the self is between, on the one hand, a fairly consistent, repeatedly enacted self-narrative, and on the other, the way self-identity remains in flux because it responds to the narratives of others with whom we interact. Complicating a narrative sense of ourselves is the fact that we do not simply arrive at self-understanding via our own agency or authorship. Our self-narratives are informed by the self-narratives of others in which we may find ourselves playing a role. Furthermore, not only are we scripted through their use of language into the personal narratives of individual others, we are simultaneously subject to (and subjects of) the larger narratives at play within the cultures we inhabit. All individuals can be said to enact narrative identities within the discourses circulating throughout the cultures in which they find themselves embedded. Chief among the discourses that concern us here are those pertaining to race, culture, diversity and antiracism.

### **Racial identities as narrative identities**

Because we share an understanding of identity that views it not as a static entity possessed by individuals, but rather as a dynamic, shifting, contested process of multiple identifications over time (and, of course, understood to be contingent on the changing specifics of the social contexts in which those identifications become enacted), we have opted to apply analytical tools which can help explicate the “how” of those racial identifications. Hence, this paper intentionally parts ways with earlier studies (often quantitative in design) of the racial identity formation of individuals, which tended to focus on personal psychological factors. Such studies often represent identity in the form of stage models where individuals progress through stages over time (see, for example, Demo & Hughes, 1990; Helms, 1990; Cross, 1991; Harris, 1995). Instead, our qualitative approach attempts to examine racial identities as discursive phenomena that are accomplished in large part by language in use. In this sense, identities might be understood better through inquiry into the sociopolitical contexts in which—and the social practices through which—multiple identifications are negotiated. Informed by a postmodern concern for subjectivity and the subject positions made available through discourses (Henriques *et al.*, 1984), our work applies a sociocultural perspective to examine simultaneously the experience of individuals with discourses of race and the narrative construction of specifically white identities.

Although we do acknowledge both racialization as an ongoing process and the durability of institutional racism, we concur with current views of race that reject it as a reified marker of some personal essence (i.e. as an immutable quality of an identity possessed by individuals). However, we do not suggest that individuals can somehow sidestep their bodies and skin colors and arbitrarily will themselves “de-racialized.” We have found that race is better understood as it has been defined by scholars such as Henry Giroux (1999), and Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1993), among others. Giroux (1999, p. 234) describes race “as a set of attitudes, values, lived experiences, and affective identifications, [which] has become a defining feature of American life,” at least in the USA. Consequently, we recognize and accept that race continues to hold social and political

significance throughout society, even if it has been generally discredited as a biological fallacy by physical and social scientists (Omi & Winant, 1993). Yet even as we distance ourselves from more traditional views of race and racial identity, we maintain a scholarly interest in documenting the enduring sociopolitical influence of race.

From the field of multicultural education we draw a pedagogical concern for understanding the processes through which individuals learn to develop multicultural and explicitly antiracist perspectives, which we view as a necessary aspect of personal identity work, particularly for those of any race who are committed to egalitarian interracial relations. Our research is broadly concerned with how individuals come to know themselves as “raced” beings and, more specifically, as beings committed or uncommitted to antiracism. We define antiracism as “the intentional and learned effort on the part of individuals to resist and actively counteract the discursive process of racialization and its resultant behaviors that privilege the lives, needs, and experiences of one race above all others” (Raible, 2005, p. 67).

### **Supporting literature: Current thinking about whiteness and racial identities**

Characteristic of many studies regarding white identity, particularly in the USA, is a demonstration of the ways in which “whiteness” is commonly denied or downplayed, and the role such denial plays in the construction of one’s self as a white person. For instance, Rebecca Powell (1996, p. 12) maintains that frequently “whiteness is perceived as both neutral and normative.” As the dominant racial group, white people often fail to acknowledge their identities in racial terms. Katz and Ivey (1977, p. 486) explain, “Ask a white person what he or she is racially and you might get the answer “Italian,” “English,” “Catholic,” or “Jewish.” White people don’t see themselves as white.” Joe Feagin (2005) explains the educational value of addressing white denial in the following terms:

Most whites exhibit an uncritical cast of mind that not only asserts the existing racial order as normal but also resists questioning other types of oppression in society. Cultivated unthinking on matters of “race” is often associated with thoughtlessness about sexism, classism, and heterosexism. This is a huge price for continuing racism paid by a society faced by many serious societal problems that demand much new critical thinking. (Feagin, 2005, p. xiv).

Consequently, scholars of whiteness have begun to address the importance of owning and embracing one’s whiteness as a step toward personal transformation and, moreover, as indispensable when addressing race-based inequality.

Arguing along those same lines, Christine Clark and James O’Donnell (1999) assert that “becoming white” and owning one’s white racial identity involves recognizing and accepting the existence of racism, acknowledging who benefits from race-based privileges and recognizing racism as an institutional rather than a solely individual form of oppression. Clark and O’Donnell caution, however, that making white identity a focal point of researcher interest can serve to re-center whiteness and provide agency for whites to claim more terrain in the discourse regarding multiculturalism. From an

antiracist perspective, re-centering whiteness runs the risk of reinforcing the ideological hegemony of white domination.

In addition to problematizing the issues in researching white identity, some scholars call for the creation of “oppositional spaces” (Giroux, 1997) where whites can engage in discourse aimed at personal transformation, moving from racism to antiracism. Christine Sleeter (1993) underscored the importance of such transformation, particularly among teachers. Sleeter argued that teachers bring into the classroom their own understandings about race that are derived largely from their own life experiences. Her work highlighted the fact that the overwhelming majority of teachers in the USA are white and enter the profession having had limited exposure to people of color; if they as a group are not engaged in the process of examining their own racial identities as whites in a multicultural society, then it will be difficult, if not impossible, to reform schools so that they “reverse rather than reproduce racism” (Sleeter, 1993, p. 157).

Similarly, Rebecca Powell (1996, p. 14) contended that one of the primary functions of multicultural education, in contrast to focusing exclusively on the education of students of color, is to “make whites aware of their own cultural identity, so that they might begin to take seriously the perspectives of others who differ from themselves.” Sonia Nieto (1995) points to “arrogance reduction” as another aspect of the development of multicultural teachers. Joe Feagin (2005) offers one take on the roots of white arrogance:

Living lives apart from people of color is common for whites outside big central city areas.... Thus, they often record their first contacts with people of color as dramatic if not painful. They have lived lives of great isolation, which tends to breed ... white arrogance. (Feagin, 2005, p. xiii)

A number of scholars have observed how personal awareness of dispositions such as “white arrogance” is just the beginning, rather than the ultimate goal. For example, Sleeter’s (1992) study of staff development in multicultural education pointed out its diminished impact when white teachers are not intimately connected to social movements in communities of color. She argued that white teachers in the USA “acquired first-hand experience with Americans of color mainly by having children of color in class” (Sleeter, 1992, p. 190), hardly sufficient contact to spur individuals to transform their racial identities.

We understand the process of personal transformation as both a highly individual and simultaneously social endeavor. Consequently, as researchers and teacher educators we are interested in investigating the sociocultural conditions that lead individuals to take up (or not) antiracism, to form interracial relationships and to enact transformed racial identities.

### **Narrating post-white identities**

We use highlights from the cases of both Jessica and Ashley not only to illustrate some of the ways their experiences have shaped their identities around issues of race and culture, but also to demonstrate the fluidity of identity development. In their interviews, only a portion



of which we can present given the limited space of this article, both Jessica and Ashley exemplify ways they participate in race discourse in innovative ways. Both women own their whiteness and reflect on how others view them racially and culturally. Moreover, they acknowledge implicitly their roles in race relations, for example, as sisters to siblings of different races. Yet, instead of performing good deeds for others in some paternalistic stance, their involvements with race discourses are as much on behalf of themselves as for people of color. Indeed, we contend that both women have made antiracist struggles their own. To quote Ashley on racism, "If it's about my brother and sister, it's a direct offense against me." Ashley's comment expresses how she feels personally responsible for educating others in the use of adoption-sensitive language and for interrupting racial jokes and slurs. She explained how her parents modeled how to take an antiracist stance, and adoption and race were topics of frequent conversation in her household. From this, we surmise that a long-standing investment in combating racism is a key aspect of post-white or transracialized identifications, in that such an investment signals a break with the norms of racialization.

Another important aspect of post-white identifications is a sophisticated recognition (although not necessarily articulated) of the discursive negotiations of socially constructed identities. Both Ashley and Jessica commented on times when their idiosyncratic enactments of whiteness were challenged. Jessica, for instance, alluded to such negotiations when she described herself as having worked to become so fluent in Spanish (and specifically vernacular used in Puerto Rican communities) that she no longer speaks with "a typical American accent that everybody makes fun of."

Similarly, Ashley described the caution with which she broaches the topic of her transracial adoptive family, first assessing the knowledge base of her interlocutors before disclosing that she has African-American siblings. She goes on to explain,

I don't just throw out the fact that my brother and sister are black, because I'm not trying to use it as a badge or anything. If I just threw it out there I'd feel like I was just trying to gain something.

These comments from both women reflect their concern for negotiating responsibly in cross-cultural discourse communities that are rife with opportunities for misunderstanding.

We can, of course, imagine both Ashley and Jessica coming up against resistance to their attempts to narrate identities in post-white ways, for example, in conversation with an individual who may resent what they view as their rejection of their whiteness, or perhaps as an unwarranted appropriation of more typically "colored" ways of thinking and behaving as they attempt to transcend their white privilege. However, we propose that both Ashley's and Jessica's immersion in discourse communities where they interact frequently with people of color have allowed them to develop a more nuanced understanding of the circulation of power (Foucault, 1980) when individuals of different racial designations interact. More to the point, as white women, they take responsibility for signaling discursively their rejection of the unearned privileges doled to them simply because they inhabit white skins (McIntosh, 1992). That is, rather than insist simplistically on their individual rights to "be" however they want to be—whether others are offended or not—they take seriously

the multiple ways their narrated identities may be perceived in interaction with diverse others. This we take to reflect their transracialized selves, that is their lived commitments to antiracism and egalitarian social relations that are rooted in their immersion experiences and cultural connectedness (Irizarry, 2005) to and friendships with people of color.

It is important to bear in mind that transracialization does not occur quickly or after a single antiracist encounter or episode, however dramatic or significant to the individual. Racialization as a social process is accomplished over time and through repeated and consistent experiences that typically follow and reinforce the segregating rule (Raible, 2005). Similarly, transracialization is better understood as a habit evolving over time, a tendency that can be observed in an individual's cumulative pattern of interactions within interracial and intercultural contexts. That is, through repeated antiracist acts that transcend the racializing tendency, one's multiple identities may be enacted anew within multicultural discourse communities.

In many ways, Jessica evidences a commitment to performing whiteness differently (Warren, 2001), for example by learning another language, immersing herself in culturally and linguistically diverse communities and working as a bilingual teacher. Even so, Jessica provides an example of a postmodern view of identity in which one subject can be said to occupy multiple, even competing or contradictory, subject positions at the same time. During her interview, Jessica at times positioned herself and her experiences as a white person as the normative or default category against which non-whites are compared, even though at other times she enacts a post-white identity as a white person that challenges more predictable ways in which whiteness is enacted (e.g. remaining monolingual, participating in "white-flight" (from the city to the "safer" and whiter suburbs) and xenophobia, fearing the racial Other). In other words, we are not arguing for a view of her identity as having arrived developmentally at some enlightened stage, but rather, as navigating through various discourse communities where she faces opportunities to negotiate multiple identities, some of which transcend typical ways of doing whiteness.

Jessica's understanding of her racial identity and those of her students goes beyond using static categories to describe identity and includes an appreciation of the complex and fluid nature of culture and identity. She explained that her students' identities are influenced by more than just race or ethnicity; her students draw from many sites to create hybrid forms of identity and culture.

There is more than racial and ethnic culture. There is urban culture, too. You can definitely see urban/popular culture in the class and the community. There are different levels of culture. A lot of these kids speak Ebonics or a Puerto Rican form of Ebonics. The kids sometimes call it "ghetto-Spanish." Like an Ebonics in Spanish.

Jessica's identity as a white teacher is connected or tuned in to the various ways that young people in her classroom express themselves based on their complex identities.

Because of the multiple sites from which Jessica draws to create her identifications, her students often have difficulty identifying her as a white person. In a story about how her students struggle to figure out "what she is" she comments:

It is funny because I think that when people see me now and see who I am they get very confused sometimes. Like the kind of music I listen to ... I listen to a lot of black gospel. I go to a Spanish-speaking church. I speak Spanish fluently. I don't have a typical American accent that everybody makes fun of. So if people look at me they are kind of like ... "Miss, you're white?"

Jessica's personal experiences with friends and associates who are people of color help to construct a counternarrative that challenges the stereotypes that serve to marginalize racial, ethnic, and linguistic minorities. Instead of viewing the failure of some individuals through a deficit perspective that blames the individual or their families, Jessica forwards a critique of the structural impediments that hinder the progress of many people of color in the USA. Commenting on the marginalization of many students in her urban school, Jessica says, "I have seen how kids are capable of great things, but the [bilingual] program isn't set up to help them do that. I think the system is set up for failure."

Jessica's journey of cultural connectedness is not just an intellectual or professional one but a very personal one. It is how she lives her life.

When I'm not working in school, I hang out with my friends. Most of the people that I hang out with now are Hispanic. The guy I'm dating is Puerto Rican. I speak a lot of Spanish outside of school. Inside of school, forget about it. The kids always say, "Dag, Miss, can you just speak one language?" I'm like, "I don't know?" [laughs] Spanish just goes through my head all the time.

Similarly, Ashley reports that she has friends of a variety of races, and is mainly attracted to men of color. When asked to describe her dating history, Ashley says she dated "someone who was of Latin descent" in high school, and that currently she is involved with another man of color. Whereas several participants elsewhere in the study of non-adopted siblings described their discomfort with being stared at or challenged in a hostile manner when they became romantically involved with people of color, Ashley deals with others' reactions from a position of poise and self-confidence. She, like Jessica, chooses to live her life in a post-white fashion that breaks with the typical segregation imposed by racialization, and that connects her culturally to the people of color she has come to know and love.

If we accept that the emergence of post-white identities is a potential resolution to the "crisis of white identity" (Omi, 1996), or at least an informed response to it, it is important to bear in mind that it involves far more than attending staff development workshops that address cultural diversity or merely reading about the experiences of people of color. Rather, such identities are rooted in active relationships based on mutual caring between members of culturally diverse communities. While Jessica had positive interactions with her students, she also engaged in relationships with adults of color outside of school, through her involvement in church activities, as well as in relationships with potential life partners who were people of color. Immersion in significant relationships that crossed lines of race and culture influenced Jessica's identity on many levels, including her language, personal interactions, values, world view and emerging sense of self.

It is worth mentioning that many of the adults with whom the two women in this study developed relationships often gave them “feedback” regarding their enactment of their identities. Ashley’s experiences with dating across the color line shaped her understanding of the identifications she makes as a white person. Similarly, Jessica noted that the parents of her middle-school students often corrected her pronunciation of Spanish to help her sound “more native.” Enacting one’s identity in a post-white fashion, therefore, requires “border crossing” (Giroux, 1992, 1993; Rosaldo, 1993) where individuals allow themselves to be taught by people different from themselves. Because many neighborhoods and social networks remain racially and culturally homogeneous as a function of *de facto* segregation, individuals who are willing to cross tangible geographic and less palpable cultural borders facilitate opportunities for interactions between members of diverse discourse communities.

### **White teachers, antiracism and implications for teacher education**

Many white teachers enter pre-service education programs with little knowledge of cultural differences. They often possess stereotypes about students of color in urban schools, and they have little knowledge of multiple forms of oppression such as racism and classism (Sleeter, 2001). To address issues of diversity, many teacher preparation programs require teacher candidates to complete fieldwork in “diverse” settings which typically consists of a placement in an urban school (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Such fieldwork placements in urban schools, when conducted without a systematic analysis of race and class, have been shown to do more to reinforce stereotypes held by white pre-service teachers than to increase their knowledge or skill level for working with students who are culturally different from themselves (Vavrus, 2002). Furthermore, many white teacher candidates view diversity as a deficit or hindrance to a student’s academic and personal success, and they may hold low expectations for students of color (Gay, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999). Additionally, white pre-service teachers’ exposure to “diverse” students typically consists of interacting with school-aged children of color rather than with peers. Certainly, there is much that can be learned from children of color; however, we argue that white pre-service teachers also need to interact with, and be challenged by, peers of color in order to experience a more complete personal and professional development. The experience of having meaningful interactions with racial others has the potential to serve as a powerful counternarrative to the negative perceptions regarding people of color held by some white teachers.

To avoid directly addressing issues of race, many whites have been taught to ventriloquize a “color-blind” discourse (Rist, 1978, p. 161). That is, they claim to “only see kids” without noticing racial and ethnic differences (as if their perceptions can alter these characteristics and will the target identities out of existence). As teacher educators, we have also heard white students proclaim that “there is only one race—the human race” in efforts to mystify and distort the power of racism in contemporary US society, thus allowing them to eschew the implications of their whiteness and the role they play in perpetuating racialization. Teacher education has an important role to play in addressing this tendency. Pearl Rosenberg (2004) stresses how race is often “white-washed”

within teacher education and concludes “the tolerance of many White students for learning about those different from themselves in race, culture, and ethnicity appears to be dependent on the extent to which they can reconstruct those others in the image of themselves” (Rosenberg, 2004, p. 259). She notes how many of the pre-service teachers with whom she has worked are simultaneously claiming to be color blind, yet they are acutely aware of race and racial differences when they are placed in school settings with students, faculty and staff of color, thus stressing the need to connect teacher education to the broader society.

Similarly, Christine Sleeter (1993) studied a group of 30 teachers (26 of whom were white) engaged in professional development related to multicultural education over two years. She found that while many of the participants made strides toward incorporating some of the new knowledge into their practice (e.g. cooperative learning and the need to communicate with parents), they made considerably less progress in incorporating multicultural concepts into their curriculum in meaningful and respectful ways. As a result Sleeter underscores the need to attract more people of color in the teaching profession for the knowledge and perspectives they bring to the classroom, and also to create opportunities for white teachers to inform their practice through their interactions with non-whites. She calls for the transformation of multicultural teacher education to better address the preparation of teachers, and specifically white teachers, to work with learners of diverse backgrounds. Sleeter argues compellingly:

What I am suggesting goes beyond interaction patterns in classrooms, role models or linking home and school cultures. I am suggesting the need to populate the teaching force with people who bring diverse worldviews and discursive fields of reference, including those that expose, challenge, and deconstruct racism rather than tacitly accepting it. (Sleeter, 1993, p. 168)

Based on his review of five studies that address whiteness within teacher education, Cameron McCarthy (2003) warns researchers not to examine teacher education as if teachers are prepared in a vacuum separate from larger societal issues. On the contrary, teacher education must be grounded within its larger sociopolitical context if it is going to be a vehicle to challenge racism and improve race relations. Therefore, we assert that our work, which frames white identity development in the context of teacher education with a focus on how participants constructed identities outside of the teacher preparation classroom, presents significant implications for the ways that teachers (particularly white women such as Ashley and Jessica) are prepared to work with students of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Our findings have significant implications for institutions of higher education that prepare educators who will teach in increasingly complex, diverse classrooms. Since in the USA the majority of current and future teachers (those currently enrolled in teacher preparation programs) are white, and almost half of all students enrolled in PK-12 public schools are students of color (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002), there is a definite need to modify the preparation of teachers to facilitate border crossing, which



in our view has become a necessary condition for post-white identity development. Modifying teacher education necessarily includes significant immersion experiences in diverse communities. Teacher education programs can simultaneously recruit more people of color as well as transracialized whites who already demonstrate a commitment to cultural connectedness and transforming their identities. The question remains to be explored as to how teachers in more or less monocultural school environments can create and sustain relationships of caring with those who are racially different.

In addition, teacher education can focus on providing access to discourse communities for people who do not have ready access to diverse communities, as well as encourage pre-service teachers to reflect on their racialized identities, with the intent to raise awareness of how they may have been circumscribed through the processes of racialization. However, we believe that these consciousness-raising experiences must be accompanied by an ongoing and serious structural analysis of race, class, gender and other variables that can influence teaching and learning in a cross-cultural context (Sleeter, 1992). Without such an analysis, consciousness-raising and border-crossing experiences run the risk of reinforcing stereotypes, ultimately doing more harm than good.

In conclusion, post-whiteness as we have described it here is not meant to supplant white identity, but rather to bring it forward in response to the postmodern conditions of the twenty-first century. Post-whiteness signals a break from normative whiteness as prescribed by racialization. Post-whiteness comes not necessarily “after,” but builds on and transforms whiteness in innovative ways in conjunction with racial others, ultimately rejecting white superiority. Post-whiteness refers not to some enlightened state finally arrived at by individuals, but rather it is conceived as intentional movement towards the enactment of transracialized selves through active identifications with racial others made in interracial discourses.

There are also broader implications of this work that go beyond teacher preparation. In order for us to live, work and dance together in a multicultural society that promotes equity and social justice, it will be necessary for increasing numbers of individuals to become willing to engage in relationships that cross racial and cultural lines. The discourse regarding racial identity in general and more specifically post-white identifications can expand to include multiple perspectives. Commenting on North American demographics, McKinney reminds us of the rapidity with which each new generation will face greater opportunities to re-think racial identities:

In 1990, for people 70 years of age or older, there were more than seven white people in the population for every person of color. In contrast, for those younger than ten, there were only about two white people for every person of color—making it much more likely for a typical white young person to have contact with people of color. (McKinney, 2005, p. 217)

As the pivotal year 2050 approaches, opportunities for border crossing increase exponentially.<sup>1</sup> We suggest that teacher educators can play a significant role in exploiting such opportunities and cultivating the potential for cross-cultural relationship building.



## Note

1. 2050 is the year when demographers project that people of color will equal or outnumber whites in the USA.

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