



Centro Journal

ISSN: 1538-6279

[centro-journal@hunter.cuny.edu](mailto:centro-journal@hunter.cuny.edu)

The City University of New York

Estados Unidos

Ramos-Zayas, Ana Y.

All this is turning white now: latino constructions of "White Culture" and whiteness in Chicago

Centro Journal, vol. XIII, núm. 2, 2001, pp. 73-95

The City University of New York

New York, Estados Unidos

Available in: <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=37711308006>

- How to cite
- Complete issue
- More information about this article
- Journal's homepage in [redalyc.org](http://redalyc.org)

[redalyc.org](http://redalyc.org)

Scientific Information System

Network of Scientific Journals from Latin America, the Caribbean, Spain and Portugal

Non-profit academic project, developed under the open access initiative

**All This is Turning White Now:  
Latino Constructions of "White Culture"  
and Whiteness in Chicago**

ANA Y. RAMOS-ZAYAS

**Abstract**

In the past decade or so, scholars in white critical studies have focused largely on how whites have produced and redefined whiteness in their own terms as a means of preserving their social privilege and legal entitlements. Ramos-Zayas' article contributes to this literature, by examining how a subordinate population—Latinas/os in Chicago—construct and articulate whiteness and expose—even question—white normative privilege. Drawing from extensive ethnographic data, the article argues that, in varying degrees, Latinas/os in Chicago have developed complex conceptions of "white" culture and identity. These conceptions are rooted in dialectical racial perceptions shaped in the context of demographic and economic change, urban gentrification, everyday interactions, and Latina/o (largely Puerto Rican) displacement in the northwest of Chicago. In this sense, Latinas/os construed and articulated whiteness as a function of power and privilege, as a multitiered "ladder" of whiteness. Some Latinas/os position certain whites, particularly dispossessed or "ethnic" immigrants, more proximate to themselves in class and social values; although this proximity does not generate measurable class (much less ethnic) solidarity.

## Introduction

The three contiguous neighborhoods of Humboldt Park, Logan Square, and West Town are located to the Northwest Side of Chicago and together boast the largest concentration of Puerto Ricans in the so-called City of Neighborhoods. Until the early 1990s, Puerto Ricans in Chicago had the highest levels of residential segregation from both whites and blacks, with dissimilarity indexes of .89 and .81, respectively, than in any other U.S. city with significant Puerto Rican populations in the U.S. (Massey and Denton 1989:75). In the last decade or so, however, the area typically known as “Puerto Rican Chicago” has seen the increased presence of African American families; Mexican and Central American migrants and first-generation U.S.-born populations; and white artists and young professionals who commute to corporate downtown.<sup>1</sup> Despite the highly contested presence of various Latino nationalities and African Americans in a space traditionally marked as “Puerto Rican,” it is the white residents whom Latinos<sup>2</sup> see as the embodiment of rapid urban change, particularly in West Town. A proliferation of trendy coffee shops, art supplies stores, and music clubs are tailored to the expanding white population. The complex landscape of meanings attached to this changing urban topography serves as metaphor for the production of racial and class difference.

---

---

Mutations of urban spaces and cultural orders are interpreted through various contours of whiteness, a term which refers to the cultural web of assumptions of normality and invisibility that maintains the social privileges, power, and hierarchies typically associated with white skin (cf. Frankenberg 1997; Gallagher 1997; Hartigan 1999). Region or locality—in this case, the particular urban context of Chicago’s Northwest Side—has become a critical actor in the production and reproduction of a powerful language of social difference and racial formations or racialization.<sup>3</sup> Ricardo Gonzalez,<sup>4</sup> a worker at a Latino not-for-profit organization based in West Town, drew a map of “Puerto Rican Chicago” in a napkin to show me that there is “no Puerto Rican community here.” Ricardo comments:

This area has value. This is a great area. Here’s a train station. Here’s another one. A few stops from downtown. Three hospitals. There’s a nice park right here. Clemente, the third largest high school in Chicago, is also here.... You don’t see Puerto Ricans around here [West Town] anymore. You know why? Because this community has been shrinking and shrinking. Because whites want this area now, so the rents are going up and we are being kicked out. Gentrification. That’s what it’s called. All this is turning white now.

Discussions of the creation, production, and protection of space in an increasingly Latinized “Puerto Rican Chicago” invariably implicate understandings of racial difference, not only in relation to blacks and among Latinos, but specially in reference to whites. Ricardo was not the only person to comment that the “better areas” of Puerto Rican Chicago are sold to “*los blancos*” or “*los americanos*” under less stigmatized names like “Wicker Park” as a section adjacent to West Town is called. Ricardo was specifically referring to the white professionals and a crowd of young “artists” moving into an “enclave” of renovated buildings rehabilitated in the otherwise deindustrialized surroundings of run-down factories. Nevertheless, Latinos living in the Northwest Side of Chicago have also shared

physical—if not always social—space with ethnic whites and poor whites from the Appalachian region, as evidenced by the ethnographic data presented throughout this paper.<sup>5</sup>

This essay is an exploration into how Latinos in Chicago create “white culture” and generate ideas of whiteness in such a way that the identity of people racialized as “whites” are not guaranteed the privileged stand of securely being the racial norm. The intention here is to contribute to the literature on critical white studies<sup>6</sup> by changing the vintage glance that has characterized this relatively new academic field, and by expanding the field beyond concerns of how whites see racial Others or how whites see themselves also included is an understanding of how racial Others—namely, those racialized as “Latinos”—see whites, whiteness, and white culture. Likewise, valuable discussions of race in the field of Latino Studies have generally excluded the role of “white culture” and “whiteness” in processes of Latino racial formations. The scholarship on race in Latino Studies has adequately addressed—discursively and conceptually—the racial subordination of those considered racial Others. Nevertheless, analyzing race from the discursive standpoint of oppression and subordination must be complemented by a direct, scholarly interrogation of the underside of racism in the United States—namely, the role of white privilege, the normalcy of whiteness, and the invisibility of white culture in sustaining systems of racial inequality.<sup>7</sup>

This essay is an attempt to examine the success and limitations that Latinos face in uncovering the invisibility of privilege—particularly racial privilege or “whiteness”.<sup>8</sup> The first section of the essay examines the relatively new field of critical white studies in relation to Latinos. The second section focuses on how Latinos construct “white culture:” the moral, political, and cultural characteristics attributed to “white people.” The third section unpacks the essentialist notion of “white culture” by examining how Latinos construct “ladders of whiteness,” and recognizing instances in which there is not one “whiteness,” but several “whitenesses” that vary across social location and class. Finally, the paper recapitulates the political economy of unveiling racial privilege and the possible role that Latinos play in such processes of racial and class formations.

### Literature on “Whiteness”

Race derives much of its power from seeming to be a natural or biological phenomenon or, at the very least, a coherent social category (cf. Mahoney 1997). Yet the meaning of race is defined and contested in everyday social practices and localities so that racial categories themselves are formed, transformed, destroyed, and re-formed (Omi and Winant 1986; Dominguez 1994). Race in the contemporary United States has typically being used in reference to Latinos, African Americans, and Asian Americans, as “non-whites.” Whiteness, acknowledged or not, has been a norm against which other races are judged. Critical white studies has examined whiteness along three main scholarly veins.

First, critical white studies has deployed various epistemologies to illustrate that the distinction between “whites” and “non-white” has never been transparent or fixed, but rather has changed historically and contextually at all stages in the construction of the “American Nation” (cf. Barrett and Roediger 1997a; Ignatiev 1996; Sacks 1994). As illustrated by Barrett and Roediger’s “How white people became white” (1997b: 402-05), the native-born and older immigrants often placed the new immigrants not only *above* African- and Asian-Americans, but also *below* “white” people.<sup>9</sup> The Americanization to which new immigrants were subjected was embroiled in the larger goal of creating a nation racially organized so that “becoming American” and “becoming white” were processes interwoven at every turn.

A second emphasis of the critical white studies literature is the recognition that whiteness has largely remained unmarked, neutralized, or taken-for-granted in social scientific and popular discussions of race.<sup>10</sup> Ethnographic works have shown instances in which whites have the always available choice not to look at the world through a filter of racial awareness. The power to ignore race, when white is the race, is a privilege, a societal advantage (cf. Waters 1990). This understanding of race has rendered whites racially invisible (Frankenberg 1997).<sup>11</sup>

While the power of whiteness largely relies on its invisibility, there are increasingly proliferating contexts in which the processes that allow for this invisibility or naturalization are very weak due to the numerical growth of people racialized as “non-whites”, particularly Latinos. Contexts in which whites are a numerical minority and racialized spaces (e.g. the “inner-city” or the “*barrio*”) are examples of this, since in such contexts whiteness cannot be unproblematically assumed as natural or invisible (cf. Hartigan 1997; Perry 1999).

For Latinos in Chicago, white privilege is neither transparent nor invisible, and its reproduction through many conscious and unconscious everyday acts is rarely mysterious. Nevertheless, the construction and invocation of whiteness and white culture—or more popularly of “white people”—among Latinos is revealing of the everyday processes by which racial formations become strategically essentialist in people’s conscious and unconscious efforts to elide or magnify ideas of power and privilege. Looking at the creation of these essentialist images is important, not because they accurately describe what “white people are like,” but because they reflect the interests and concerns of the Latinos responsible for producing the racialization. What are the instances in which Latinos evoke a “whiteness” or “white culture” as bounded? Likewise, in which instances or social locations do Latinos problematize whiteness or white culture and draw various whitenesses or hierarchies of whiteness? The remainder of this paper will address these questions.

#### **“Los blancos”: Racializing the “Invisible” Race**

Latinos almost unanimously perceived the term “American” or “*americano*” as invariably conflated with those individuals racialized as white, the “white people.” While Mexicans and Puerto Rican migrants in Chicago were more likely to use the term “*los americanos*,” second-generation, U.S.-born Puerto Ricans used the literal translation of “whites”—“*los blancos*.” Nevertheless, neither “white” nor “*blanco*” nor “*americano*” was ever used to designate someone who is Puerto Rican, Mexican, Cuban, or any other Latino nationality, regardless of individual phenotype. In fact, among U.S.-born and-raised Latinos, “*los blancos*” served to create a bond among Latino interlocutors—regardless of phenotype—to refer to non-Latino whites and draw distinctions between Latinos who may “look white” or even “act white,” and people who are “real whites” (*los americanos*).

Some of the Latinos with whom I spoke in Chicago described “whites” in ways that are illustrative of the continuously produced and reproduced constructions of white culture and whiteness.<sup>12</sup> Occasionally, the racial term “whites” is a strategically essentialist term, deployed as a means to create a bond among Latino interlocutors—a *Latinidad*—even in instances when they share very little in terms of personal history and social location. Most frequently, however, “white culture” was constructed through discussions implicating various forms of dangerous, imperialist, corporeal, and stylistic locations in the neighborhood.

For instance, it was about “*los blancos*” that Antonio, a high school student with whom I kept in contact after the end of my field work in Chicago, referred to in a phone conversation about the Columbine High School tragedy. Antonio commented:

You know how they say we are violent and have guns and gangs and stuff? Well, look at Columbine, look at all the massive murders in all those schools. Who are they? They're white people! They live in the suburbs! So they complain about Clemente [High School] this, Clemente [High School] that, and they talk about us. But serial killers are white!

Antonio's comment is not only a challenge to the popular media depictions of the local public school, Clemente High School, as a decidedly "Puerto Rican" (Ramos-Zayas 1997). Rather, Antonio's comment suggests a turning around of the logic of spaces racialized as white—in this case, the suburbs, suburban life, and suburban high schools. The underside of Antonio's statement is that "white people" possess the power to represent the "inner city" high school—an important cultural marker in the neighborhood—as a space of violence, which is of course racialized, while presenting the suburban high schools like Columbine as racially neutral. Antonio's comment speaks to this normalcy of whiteness. As suggested in Antonio's comment there is an ambiguous elision or drifting away from viewing whiteness exclusively as a racial category to viewing it as a cultural category, which also reifies and homogenizes white identity (cf. Frankenberg 1997).

Whiteness as a "dangerous" location is a direct reference to the revision of the racial logic of space in terms of the "safe/law-abiding" suburbs versus "unsafe/criminal" so-called "inner city," as implicated in Antonio's purposefully counterintuitive views of the suburbs—and whiteness—as a site of ultimate violence. Moreover, the idea of whiteness as dangerous is further crafted in the daily practices in which Antonio, his classmates, and teachers constructed the racial and cultural identities of the white volunteers at their predominantly Puerto Rican high school. The dangerous location of whiteness was heightened or rescinded in individual negotiations of cultural spaces and territorial resources. However, Latino understood the "danger" posed by whites not only in terms of ideas of the false security of "white" places, but also in reference to a perception of white people's likeliness to monopolize relationships in the workplace.

At the time of my field work, there were five white volunteers at the popular education program where I met Antonio (see Ramos-Zayas 1998). Molly Anderson, a woman who had moved to Chicago from a small town in Wisconsin, was assigned to help me with the college counseling of graduating Seniors. Though both Molly and I were working together as college counselors, two Latino teachers at the school pulled me aside to warn me about Molly:

You are the one in charge of college and Molly needs to follow *your* instructions, not the other way around. You need to understand that that's something she's naturally bound to do, to take over. We've had that problem with some of the white people [volunteers] in the past. Look at how she told you to make that call, instead of asking you if you could call. It's that attitude that you have to be aware of. Molly is too white.

The insinuation that I was taking orders from Molly, and the specific instance of me making a call at Molly's request, acquired a decided racializing quality. The two Puerto Rican teachers interpreted Molly's request that I made a phone call as an enforcement of her whiteness. Rather than being neutralized away as just a request from one teacher to another, Molly's action was interpreted as something that Molly would be "bound to do" as a *white* person. The specific site in which Molly's request or enactment

of whiteness took place played almost as important a role in Molly's racialization as the Puerto Rican teachers' own homogenizing views of white culture as imminently imperialist. The fact that Molly's actions, perceived as emblematic of the ways in which whites are "bound to take over" or assume superordinate positions, took place in a context decidedly—and politically, strategically—marked as "Puerto Rican" (e.g., this particular Puerto Rican-centric high school). Moreover, the comment that "Molly is *too* white" insinuates a certain detachment of whiteness from white identity. Molly's white identity could experience different approximations to whiteness. In this particular case, Molly's identity as a white person making a request or demand of a Puerto Rican person in a context politically marked as "Puerto Rican" is read as a convergence of white identity and power based on racial privilege.

Locations racially marked as "Puerto Rican" or "Latino" act as a powerful, mediating agent between the Latino and white actors involved in the formations of whiteness, as well as in the challenges Latinos pose to the normalcy of white culture. Urban areas "in transition," such as the rapidly gentrifying Northwest Side of Chicago, are preferential sites for the examination of white privilege, as they are perceived as locations in which the connection between a marked culture and space are particularly volatile and frequently interrupted. In the case of Puerto Rican Chicago, *barrio* residents frequently evoke narratives of a "disappearing community," these stories draw from the continuous displacement of Puerto Ricans since the early 1960s (Padilla 1987; Ramos-Zayas 1997).

The greatest irony behind the characterization of whites as "dangerous," "bossy," and inclined to "take over" Puerto Rican agency, culture, and material resources is the general perception among Latinos that white people "lack a culture." The ambiguity of culture—and particularly "white culture"—is consistently deployed as explanation for the imperialist nature of whiteness. A commentary on white people's "lack of culture" by Elena Colon, a resident of Logan Square, illustrates Latino constructions of "white culture" as "cultureless." Born and raised in Chicago, Elena is a teacher at a popular education program for adults in West Town:

Look, my husband is white. And I love my husband. He loves anything that's Puerto Rican. He is learning Spanish. He wants to eat rice and beans all the time. We go to Puerto Rico and my family loves him, because he pays attention to the smallest little details of what they tell him or show him. They tell him, 'This is a pig or this is a cow' or whatever and there he is, paying attention...in awe [she laughs]. But, in a way, I resent his detached curiosity. It's detached, because he cannot be Puerto Rican as much as he may want to. Yet, I feel he uses my culture to satisfy his own curiosity. Through me he feels that he can sort of partake in this identity I'm starting to reclaim for myself. I resent that. I do, because it has taken me effort to be able to keep my culture. And now that I have a few potatoes, I'm not sure I'm ready to give one out to him. I think that now a lot of white people want to experience that...that sense of community...they're searching and searching. But they don't have a strong sense of identity based on community. I was invited to a Native American sweat ceremony, but that doesn't mean that I belong or am a part of that. In fact, I felt I was intruding, even though I was invited. But there were a lot of white people there. And they were like... 'ohhh'...all emotional [she mimics her point]. Because they don't have that, they don't.

The essentializing and totalizing aspects of Puerto Rican “culture” and white “culture” seem to dominate Elena’s narrative. She resents her husband’s exoticization of all things Puerto Rican, but not because she senses that he is misrepresenting her own view of Puerto Rican culture. Rather, she resents him for filling his own “cultural void” with the Puerto Rican culture that she, Elena, as a U.S.-born and raised Puerto Rican, has barely learned to claim.

The seeming dichotomy between Puerto Rican life as “culture” and white life as “cultureless” is ridden with slippage and contradictions in Elena’s description. While, the lack of culture equals lack of community, white culture is nonetheless reified—reified as devoid of community and even of culture. Thus, white culturelessness, and hence whites’ lack of a cultural community, only reinforces Elena’s enhanced sense of being cultural—both by “learning” about Puerto Rican culture and by participating in the Native American ceremony. Elena does not feel part of the Native American sweat-lodge, and so she focuses on how the whites at the ceremony try to find community in ways that Elena would never or could never do. Whites’ culturelessness actually allows white people easier identification with *all* cultures, something presumably not possible for people marked as Puerto Ricans or racialized as non-whites. Likewise, the fact that her white husband would want to be Puerto Rican is coupled with Elena’s suggestion that, since being Puerto Rican is for her a “learned” process, this Puerto Ricanness is potentially available for appropriation by any white person who learns enough about the culture. Equally significant is Elena’s view that Steve, her white husband, was drawn to her because of her culture, not in spite of it.

Despite the continuous assertions that whites are deficient because they do not have a culture and hence must appropriate other people’s culture to experience a sense of community, a “white culture”—flawed, inadequate, and infantile—is produced and reproduced in social practice and discourse among Latinos. Narratives of whites’ poor emotional balance and the location of whiteness in the body acquire particular prominence in my ethnographic data. Interracial relations are a primary medium through which Latinos construct white culture and talk about whiteness.

A gendered whiteness, located in the corporeal, was frequently evoked in discussions of white culture. Comments about how neglectful “white people” are of their hygiene and appearance were recurrent in my ethnographic data. For instance, Sandra, a first-year high school student, commented: “Whites never take showers.... Do you know Steve? I like Steve. Steve is cool... but even Steve.... Have you noticed how even he smell funny?” In contrast, these two perceptions of white culture seem contradictory: On the one hand, “white culture”—and white women, in particular—are constructed as too rigid, puritanical, and even sexually repressed; on the other, they are too loose and careless about their appearance. This simultaneous construction of white culture as “too rigid” and “too loose” point to the ambiguity and instability of Latino constructions of whiteness. Here Latinos display white culture as an essentialized, marked so as to advance specific, contextualized, every day racial formations.

The perception of whites as careless about their appearance was recurrent in my ethnographic data. In several instances white carelessness about fashion was described in opposition to a highly fashion-conscious blackness. While Puerto Ricans in Chicago, like Mexicans and other Latinos, tended to deploy a *Latinidad* precisely as a movement away from blackness (De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 2000), there were a few significant instances in which Puerto Ricans experienced a stronger movement away from whiteness and towards blackness. For instance, when I went to Navy Pier with Tamika Miranda, a light-skinned Puerto Rican law school student whom I met the summer of



1994, Tamika pointed out to me that there were certain areas of the Pier that had “nice” restaurants and others that were “sloppy.” It became apparent to me that by “nice” she meant places where people were more dressed up. After pointing out the nice areas and restaurants, Tamika stated, only half-jokingly: “Yeah, the areas where the grungy white people are are not that great.” In this sense, perceptions of “white culture” as deficient in aesthetics and fashion actually encouraged Tamika’s greater identification with blackness. Despite her very light skin, Tamika’s fashionable style led her into the areas marked as “black” in Navy Pier. An upwardly mobile young woman, Tamika associates style with social aspirations, even though she also insisted that “Blacks and Latinos dress better than whites do, regardless of how rich or poor they are.”

Latino constructions of white culture, as analyzed in this section, rely on ambiguous and ephemeral productions of “*los blancos*,” in which white identity is perceived as dangerous, imperialist, and capable of taking over Latinoness, both culturally and materially. In this sense, spaces marked as “Puerto Rican” or “Latino”—particularly the rapidly changing North West Side of Chicago—are always susceptible to appropriation by whites. Paradoxically, Latinos see white culture as the lack of a culture, a cultureless culture, which forces individuals racialized as “white” to develop complex identifications with non-white Others in order to gain a sense of community and collectivity. Racial formations in this sense depend on the context and on the significance people are interested in making out of racial difference, as well as the intermittent appraisals and reproductions of degrees of whiteness.

### Shades of Whiteness

Whiteness in one of Chicago’s largest Latino neighborhoods is the subject of frequent marking. As a cultural category, it is often chastised as being invasive or out of place in an area which many local activists and residents are trying to protect and culturally mark as Puerto Rican. The difference between whiteness and whites, in its continual repetition, assures an irregular terrain in which some whites always sit insecurely within the larger body of whiteness, while others have to struggle to create and enforce boundaries of exclusivity (cf. Hartigan 1997, 1999). When Latino residents invoke whiteness, they immediately mobilize class distinctions between themselves and the incoming whites, whom Latinos loosely categorize as “the yuppies,” “the artists,” ethnic whites and, in a few cases, the “*billie-billies*.” Rather than clearly bounded categories, these expressions of whiteness are malleable and contextual and are alternatively deployed to advance various grassroots agendas, including efforts to “reclaim,” “protect,” or “Puerto Ricanize” space. These categories of whiteness conflate race and class identities, and many Puerto Ricans tried to decipher the hierarchical orders and taxonomies that orchestrated the relationships among these “different” white groups, as well as between the multiple ladders of whiteness and Latino residents.

### Los Yuppies: Corporate Whites and White Privilege

For many *barrio* residents, the yuppies were the most enigmatic contingency of whites. Older Puerto Rican residents like Maritza Colon did not understand why would “rich white people” want to pay what seems like inordinate amounts of money for a small-to-medium-size urban apartment instead of buying a “big house in the suburbs.” Now that they are both retired, Maritza and her husband were thinking of moving back to Puerto Rico and they are waiting to sell their house. Their house had been valued at \$250,000—not because of the house itself, but because of the area. Like most other Latino residents with whom I spoke, Maritza expressed great concern and fear that

the Puerto Rican community was disappearing because of “gentrification” and “the yuppies.” As Maritza assured me, “no Puerto Rican would pay \$250,000 for a house in this area. For that amount of money they can move to the suburbs.” The different readings of the same area contribute to the racialization of whites by Latinos, who stressed the irony that an area into which Puerto Ricans had tried to flee in the past would then become highly desired by a certain population of young and wealthy whites. This astonished Latino residents.

Latino *barrio* residents recognize whiteness and racial privilege as evidenced in the image of the “yuppie” as the quintessential gentrifier. However, this recognition of privilege, rather than leading to any form of class-based alliance among the poor, actually severed ties between the Latino poor and working poor and the Latino middle class. Latino middle-class community workers analyzed the shifting demographics of the neighborhood in ways that failed to recognize the systemic aspects of whiteness, by focusing on the role of the Latino *barrio* residents, most of whom are poor and working poor, in perpetuating the “disappearance of the Puerto Rican community.” Latino professionals and community workers conflate the racial and class systemic privileges that allow continuous shifts in real estate values to favor a white corporate elite with a rhetoric that sees Latino area residents as responsible for “allowing” whites to take over. A worker at a community-based, not-for-profit organization in West Town, Ricardo Rodriguez describes his perception of the changing demographics of the area by turning the Puerto Rican *barrio* poor and working poor into the actors responsible for a disappearing community. Ricardo explained:

We only have a little area over here [in West Town]. There are plans for defining an area of Humboldt Park as the Puerto Rican Area by putting up some cultural symbols and make it nicer...the flags, all that. But the Puerto Rican who lives there is selling his property to whites who pay high prices for them. So Puerto Ricans get the money from their properties. They still think that this is temporary since they haven't given up on going back to Puerto Rico. Then, they don't go back to Puerto Rico, but move to the northwestern suburbs, the Puerto Rican Promised Land, where all these other Puerto Ricans live. That's how we lose those buildings. Puerto Ricans have never stayed put like other ethnic groups that have an area and they keep it and maintain it.

In Ricardo's account, “the Puerto Rican who lives [in the *barrio*]” is essentialized and othered in contradistinction to “other ethnic groups.” It is not clear from the account whether “other ethnic groups” specifically refers to the Greek or Italian enclaves that have become tourist spots of quaint restaurants and stores, or if the characterization also includes the areas marked as “Mexican” or “Indian” in Chicago. Nevertheless, in this instance, these “ethnics” are characterized as “good ethnics,” who have shown community commitment by defending their cultural spaces. In this sense, they are even more “cultural” than Puerto Ricans, particularly the Puerto Ricans who leave the area to go back either to Puerto Rico or, more commonly, to the “Puerto Rican Promised Land,” that is the suburbs.

The yuppies, however, are the most recent neighbors in a line of various kinds of white residents that share urban space with Latinos in Chicago. A Mexican woman in her early 20s, Sylvia, grew up in the South Side of the City and has shared a house with

three roommates in the Logan Square area. Sylvia notices how the so-called yuppies did not move into Wicker Park when the area was racialized as “Puerto Rican.” Rather, these white professionals moved into an area that had been “discovered” and inhabited by another type of whites: the white artists. Sylvia explanation is representative of what other Latino *barrio* residents have said about the gentrification process:

Wicker Park started a process of change in the past ten years. There live the children of the people that used to live there thirty or forty years ago. Whites who would leave to the suburbs when other groups started to arrive. They raised their children in the suburbs and now their children work in the City of Chicago. They like Wicker Park because it is convenient, close to downtown, good transportation facilities, hospital facilities. Most of these people are university students and professionals. So you see, white artist types move in first. Once the area is all white, then the yuppies start moving in. Then the yuppies have kids and move to the suburbs and other yuppies move in. And we keep being pushed west. They want to take us out of the State of Illinois!

In Sylvia’s view, the process of gentrification occurs as a gradual whitening. Some whites become pioneers and venture into the exotic territory of a racially marked area in which they are initially the minority. When the area has turned “more white,” then whites that are closer to whiteness start moving in as well. These white artist-pioneers have acquired a prominent symbolic and political role in everyday discussions about a changing space and the production of white privilege.

#### **“The white artists”: A Fashioned Whiteness**

From the very beginning of my fieldwork in Chicago, I was confused by consistent referents to “the artists” to designate a population of white twenty-somethings living in the Wicker Park area. At times I felt that “the artists” and “the yuppies” were confused and represented ambiguous categories that did not designate anybody in particular. After all, while Latinos denounced the takeover of West Town by “yuppies,” they also described the residents of Wicker Park in ways that seemed inconsistent with the popular views of young urban professionals circulating in the 1980s and early 1990s; a young Mexican woman in her mid 20s cleverly referred to them as having the “Harley Davidson Meets Morticia Adams” look.

Hilda Ayala emphasized the changing character of the West Town area where she lived before moving to a house in Humboldt Park. A few weeks after meeting her for the first time, Hilda insisted in showing me around Milwaukee Avenue and pointing out an aromatherapy shop, a cyber-café, various art supplies stores, and coffee houses that served as social spaces for the young white crowd. When I asked her to elaborate on the changes she noticed in the neighborhood, Hilda commented:

Well, you see, Latin stores and businesses out there [in West Town] are affected by these changes. There was a Mexican store out there that had to move out of there. I think they sold that store to an Arab. That Arab also lost money and had to sell too. That wasn’t a Latin store any more. Now they have no Latin products there, but the current owner is doing well. He serves the people that live there now.

They are like hippies or something. Not hippies like those from before. They are artists, some people say. But I've only seen them painting [tattoo] themselves here [points to arms and body]. They walk around unkempt, dirty, it seems. They live on the streets. I don't know if they're gay [*patos*] or what. I don't know because you see the girls and you don't know if they're a man or a woman. They are young. So they sell the sandwiches they like, their things. That affects the neighborhood, because the Latin business disappears. Those people don't buy from Latinos. Have you seen what the Milwaukee [Avenue] is like? Strange stores.

Hilda's characterization of the white artists is fairly comparable to those of the other Latino *barrio* residents with whom I spoke. In Hilda's narrative, the white artists and the urban spaces they occupy engage in a dialectical process of racialization, by which a given urban space, namely, the area surrounding the main commercial strip of Milwaukee Avenue in West Town encompasses the production of whiteness and white culture. Likewise, the young white residents racialize spaces by marking areas in transition with symbols interpreted by Latino residents as emblematic of "white culture."

That Hilda perceives these residents to "live on the streets," yet also having the power to alter the commercial order of the *barrio* is indicative of the anxieties generated by white youth. These anxieties and Latino contours of whiteness and white culture become even more evident in Hilda's insistence on the artists' lack of hygiene and their sexuality. The oversized, grungy look, particularly that of the women, is the physical expression of sexual personas along the virgin/whore axis Latin American sexual discourse (Bergman et al. 1990). When this axis is projected onto the white artists, it results in the inability of Latinos to locate white youths' sexuality leading to a Puerto Rican construction of white culture as simultaneously asexual and promiscuous. The extremely thin bodies and boyish look of white girls, along with the association of certain "white" music styles with (f)rigidity and control, was racialized in opposition to Puerto Ricanness, which was associated with highly valued rhythm, sensuality, and hyperfemininity.

The ambiguous sexuality of the white youth living in el *barrio* is also perceived as a "desire to have all sexualities." Brenda Ramirez, a Puerto Rican woman in her late 20s who joined in my conversation with Hilda, added: "These whites want to experience everything. All sexualities. All backgrounds." Like the yuppies, the white artists are seen as imperialists, as able to manipulate at whim even "essential" traits like their gender identities and sexualities. Interestingly, of the people I met in Chicago, Brenda and her group of friends frequently socialized with these artists. While Brenda and her best friend, Elisa, often criticized the gentrification process and perceived whites as intruders in West Town, in their daily social practices the young women inhabited particular localities that admitted frequent interactions with the white artists. They even perceived these white artists to be somewhat "closer to" themselves, as race acquired a more passive presence and style, musical taste, age, and, in contradistinction to the yuppies, non-corporate inclinations took precedence.

Nevertheless, not unlike older Latino *barrio* residents, Elisa, Brenda, and their friend Tamika continue to perceive white youth not only as cultural imperialists, but also as "poor wannabees." In their view, these young white artists chose to be poor and even faked their poverty. "These white kids think that living in poverty is cool," commented Tamika, a young worker at a not-for-profit organization and part-time social work student. Elisa added: "They want to be friends with Latinos to pretend they are

homeboys and homegirls themselves. You know, they go to the West Town clinic, eat at Ibis [local Puerto Rican-Cuban restaurant]. They're always asking for something...for a quarter, a cigarette." Most significantly, this white artist "poverty" is perceived as chosen. The seeming inconsistency between being able to afford an expensive loft on coffee house wait-staff wages, while continuing to wear grungy clothes, evokes these white artists' privileged past and family background. This is not a past rooted in collective accomplishments or a national history, since the Latinos with whom I spoke insisted that whites—with the exception of "ethnic whites" (discussed below)—were so present oriented that they "lacked a history."

One evening in September 1994, I attended an informal fundraising party organized by the friends of Delia, a Latina who works at a grassroots popular education program in Humboldt Park. As we walked into the dark West Town loft where the party was held, Delia pointed out that most of the people at the fundraising event were the "white artists." Wanting to have a better idea of why were people referring to these white twenty somethings as "the artists," I asked Delia about this. Delia explained:

Well, many of these artists.... They come from small towns in the Midwest. They lived their whole live in those small towns, never got out of there. But then they grow up and they want to try their luck in the Big City. So they just pick up and go. The Big City is where they want to get their big break. Some of them know other people from their towns that live here now, but many of them don't know anybody. When they arrive in Chicago, they feel freedom, and they overdo it. They want to be so different, to be so individualistic, that they end up looking like a caricature. They end up all looking the same. They live with other people that look like them too. They think they are very city, you know, like a big shot because now they are in Chicago. That's their small town mentality.

The idea that the artists are out of place in Chicago resurfaced in the narratives of many of the Latinos with whom I spoke. The displacement or out-of-placeness of the artists suggests that their whiteness is not as taken for granted or secure as that of the "yuppies," for instance. Emphasizing the artists' out-of-placeness and "small town" background also legitimates Latinos' own pride in a locality-based identity as urban, "streetwise." In this sense, urban space is claimed in ways that accentuate the decidedly Latino identity of the North West Side, while unsettling or destabilizing dominant racial hierarchies.

Latino residents perceived these artists as superficial. They are thought of as blank-slated individuals clumsily trying on different identity costumes, rather than having a historical, emotionally grounded, community-committed consciousness. The artists' adventurous incursions into the City are perceived as evidence of an unencumbered, "individualistic" existence particularly condemned by Latino activists; these artists are able to "just pick up and go" on impulse. They can engineer—simply pick and choose—communities based on factors like style and musical taste, meanwhile maintaining their identity as "artists." By comparison, Latinos are almost inevitably committed, by themselves and others, to communities based on racial identity or nationality. Yet Latinos also construct these artistic communities as decidedly racial communities, and the racialness of these artists is always at the forefront of Latino understandings of white youth's lifestyles and interests, of their "white culture." Despite these generalizations around white culture, there are instances of

momentarily racial passivity in which the racialness of whites is understood through more salient class identities. The rest of this article will consider Latino constructions of two such images of whiteness: the “ethnic whites” and the “*billie-billies*.”

### The Ethnic Whites: Whites Who Do Have a Culture

While the yuppies and the artists are perceived as “new” to the neighborhood, Puerto Rican *barrio* residents oftentimes distinguished these “gentrifiers” from oldtime white residents—the “ethnic whites.” Whereas the artists and the yuppies represent a cultural void or culturelessness, the ethnic whites—particularly, the Polish and Italians—are perceived to “have a culture” in ways similar to the ways in which Puerto Rican or Mexican residents “have a culture.” Latinos’ racialization of these ethnic whites involve an emphasis on symbolic rituals and cultural markers, such as festivals, foods, music, migration tales, etc., as evidence of the existence of an “Italianness” or “Polishness” in the North West Side. What determines whether a white person is identified as “ethnic white” rather than as “just plain white” is the intensity of the social contact between the Latino interlocutor and the white individual in question. Hence in individual situations in which whites had a direct, frequent, and ongoing relationship with Latinos—as landlords in their buildings or as owners of local restaurants and stores, for instance—they cease being “just whites” and become characterized by their ethnicity. If these white people had a relationship with Humboldt Park and vicinity that required their social or commercial engagement with Latino *barrio* residents, they are somewhat “darkened” or distinguished from the cultureless whites.

While Latinos still perceived these ethnic whites to be financially better off than themselves, they also recognized the class mobility that marks the difference between the ethnic whites who stayed in Humboldt Park, West Town, and Logan Square and those who left for the suburbs along the Milwaukee Avenue corridor. Latinos are aware that those ethnic whites who stayed may have done so for economic reasons, rather than for a sense of urban adventure as the artists did, or for geographical convenience as the yuppies did. For instance, multiple narratives of older ethnic whites who are never visited by their suburban children abound in my interviews with Latino *barrio* residents. Latino interviewees recognized that their white ethnic neighbors are somewhat disconnected from those whites who left the North West Side for reasons involving the racial composition of the area and who moved to the suburbs in search of a more homogenous zone.

Carmen Santiago, a 43-year old Puerto Rican woman who moved to Chicago from Puerto Rico when she was four years old, recalled that the Polish store owners in the Logan Square area where she grew up always tried to prevent her mother from buying at their stores:

They didn’t want other customers to think that this was a store that tended to Hispanics, because they would lose too many customers. They would scream racial slurs at my mother, at us. Back then that area was predominantly Polish and Italian. We were one of the two Puerto Rican families living there. I also remember there was a woman who lived next to us. I think she was Italian. She used to have an annual scavenger’s hunt for the neighborhood kids. She would give coins for the team winning the scavenger’s hunt. I think she used to do this for Easter...or maybe it was the summer. Now that area has changed. There’s still some Polish, some Italian...well, not very many Italians...some whites, yuppies, have moved in. There’s also a lot of Latino families. Mexican, Cubans, some Puerto Ricans.

Carmen's description of Latino relations with ethnic whites is emblematic of the many memories of incidents of discrimination many interviewees described. As newcomers racialized as being similar to blacks, Puerto Ricans in the largely Polish and Italian areas of Logan Square had very limited positive memories of these interracial encounters. A critical aspect of Carmen's narrative is that "Polish" and "Italians" are decidedly different from "whites," despite preserving some of the local commercial power oftentimes associated with whiteness. Like other Latinos, Carmen views the incoming "yuppies" as responsible for shifting whiteness away from the old-time ethnic whites, in ways that unsettle these Italian and Polish residents' whiteness. The ethnic whites become more similar to the Mexican, Cuban, and Puerto Rican residents precisely by the incorporation of the upwardly mobile white yuppies into the racial order of the area.

It is important to emphasize that the consistent distinction between unmarked whites and ethnic whites does not suggest that ethnic whites do not share in the privileges of whiteness. Rather, it shows how, for ethnic whites, an unmarked whiteness is something to be earned. Most significantly, ethnic whites seem to earn this unmarked whiteness precisely by distancing themselves from those people racialized as non-white, particularly Latinos. Moving out of the neighborhood or emphasizing dominant class identities are means by which "Italians" and "Polish" move closer to being white. Yet Latinos do recognize that the ethnic whites in the neighborhoods of Humboldt Park, Logan Square, and West Town share some of the privileges of whiteness at the most immediate, localized level. For instance, Libertad Negroni, the director of a faltering community-based organization, described the situation of her agency:

The land next to [the building where the agency is], that land was ours, because we wanted to expand eventually. Well, for us to have that land we would have to have a property built on the land, or at least put a fence and platform around it. In this state we can't have land. Only property. Well, we didn't have the money for the fence and platform, so the Polish that own the building to the other side of the property built the fence. That space is theirs now. You see how there are so many empty buildings around here? [I nod] Well, that's because Illinois has a 'secret owner' law by which owners don't have to disclose their names. They act through realtors. So, if anything deteriorates in the building, there's nobody to contact directly. These owners are waiting for the market prices to go up, rather than rehabilitating the buildings and selling them to Puerto Ricans. Little by little, these buildings will be sold at market value to rich whites.

Evidently, the bureaucratic complexity framing the land tenure process Libertad describes is glossed over in the narrative. However, what is telling here is the contradistinction between the very specific, localized power of the "Polish" to claim the land next to Libertad's building, on the one hand, and the more totalizing power to be a "secret owner" or to buy a market-priced building, on the other. When pinning down who is able to participate in the selling or buying of the building at market value, the implication is that only "rich whites" would be involved in these transactions. The Polish owner, while having the power to physically build a fence and platform about the property, is ultimately left out of the more systemic power structures in which "rich whites" are implicated. These class identities shape the sites in which Latino *barrio* residents ethnicize whites as whites whose whiteness is incomplete and characterized by elements similarly present in the racialization of Latinos and blacks. While class is always the already present thread in narratives

involving Latino ethnicization of whiteness, class identities as cultural identities become even more salient in Latino descriptions of the white poor or "*billie-billies*."

**Los "*hillie-bilies*": Whites with nothing but whiteness<sup>13</sup>**

There are some kinds of whiteness that lack power in the eyes of Puerto Ricans and Latinos—the whiteness of the poor whites. Yet despite the common economic deprivation that Latinos may share with poor whites in Chicago, the two groups are kept apart by the meanings of whiteness. Latino *barrio* residents hold on to their cultural and urban savviness as assets, while poor whites hold on to their whiteness as a valuable possession and oftentimes their sole property.

The people my interviewees called the "*billie-billies*" or "*bilbilos*" (as a Mexican woman Pérez (2000) interviewed in Chicago called the urban Appalachians)<sup>14</sup> are perceived by Latinos as the lowest echelon in the ladder of whiteness. These are whites who are rejected by "their own people"—that is, the more affluent whites who avidly attempt to draw the boundaries of whiteness by using terms like "white trash" or "trailer trash."<sup>14</sup>

The first time that I heard the term "*billie-billie*," a derivative of "hillbilly," was from Cristina Rodriguez, a Puerto Rican parent-volunteer at the local high school. When I arrived at Cristina's house to interview her and help her son with a Social Studies project, I saw that Cristina had just said good-bye to a young woman who had been visiting with her. Cristina mentioned how the woman's uncle had just returned to Cincinnati, leaving the young woman with the responsibility of paying the rent of their apartment all by herself. Cristina mentioned that she had met this woman, whose name was Betsy, because Betsy's uncle, Gary, used to work with Cristina's brother as an automechanic in a neighborhood garage. Cristina commented: "Betsy's uncle...he couldn't get used to the city. He was here for a few months. He lived in Cincinnati before Chicago, but he couldn't get used to that either. They are originally from Kentucky, I think. They are *billie-billies*, you know. That's what people call them here. It's hard for them to get used to the city, so they come to try, but then they end up going back." At the time, I found the term "*billie-billie*"—or for that matter "hillbilly"—odd, and just disregarded it as an offhanded characterization of someone who was perhaps from a rural area of the Midwest. Cristina suggested that the "*billie-billies*" had a hard time adjusting to city life because of their rural origins. While this may be similar to the predicament of other migrants in the city who come from rural areas, the distinction is that these Appalachian-descent migrants never get to adjust; thus, they remained permanently "out-of-place" and unencumbered.

A few months later, I was talking to Roberto Pérez, a young Puerto Rican volunteer at the local AIDS education clinic. I asked Roberto how long had he lived in Humboldt Park, and he said that it had been five years since he had come back, after many years of living in an area further north. Roberto commented:

I had friends up there. I lived near Palmer and Kedzie, in a building that was owned by a Polish couple. I went to the local grammar school, Darwin, and to middle school there. A lot of Puerto Ricans went there. You also had poor whites...you had ethnic whites and poor whites that are Appalachians. So it's almost like two different groups. Some people call them white trash, trailer trash, hillbillies, all that. One of the kids in the school, I can't remember his name, but some kids would tease him because his mother would roll-up tobacco and chew it and stuff. I don't know if that was true or not, but kids would say that. People would say stuff like that, because they were poor, they were from rural areas, from West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee.



Like Cristina, Roberto recognized that the poor whites Latinos called the “*billie-billies*” did not participate in the same order of power and racial privilege typically associated with whiteness. In fact, while Roberto still considered the white Appalachian poor as a “type” of white, it was evident from his narrative that these whites were subjected to forms of prejudice and stereotyping which rendered their racial identity a matter of shifting, everyday contexts.

Latinos did not reject these poor whites necessarily for their rural background, since many Puerto Ricans and Latinos in general harbored very positive, even idyllic, views of the rural landscapes and lifestyles of their respective countries of origin. In fact, Puerto Rican quintessential image of national character and authenticity is the *jíbaro*, a member of good-natured countryfolk residing in the mountainous areas of Puerto Rico. Nevertheless, whenever Latinos referred to “hillbillies” or “Appalachians,” the terms carried social contempt and inscribed particular class inflections that divided these poor whites from the yuppies, the artists, and the ethnic whites in the neighborhood. Oftentimes, passing comments, jokes, and forms of ironic humor, as well as an implicit emphasis on the lack of social skills or cultural capital were used in conversations among Latinos to express views of the hillbillies largely influenced by Hollywood’s characterization of Appalachian populations.

A critical aspect of Latino constructions of whiteness is that distinctions among whites are made in sites characterized by poverty and marginality, such as the high-poverty North West Side neighborhoods that constitute “Puerto Rican Chicago.” Likewise, the whites are essentialized in sites associated with racial privilege or whiteness, such as Chicago magnet high schools or the “better” areas of the neighborhood. The concept of “poor white” implies both race and class, while the concept of “working class” could imply an approach across racial and ethnic lines. These poor whites are noted for their marked difference from the older generation of “working class” ethnic whites, “corporate” yuppies, and “bohemian” artists.

### **Conclusion: Whiteness, Privilege, *Latinidad***

The vocabulary around “racism” creates a discourse of discrimination and oppression, but generally hides the systemic and ideological everyday mechanisms that makes racial oppression possible and efficient. “White supremacy” is associated with a “lunatic fringe,” not with the everyday life of well-meaning white citizens. Most significantly, discussions about “racism” that center exclusively on how oppression operates oftentimes conceal the existence of specific, identifiable beneficiaries of oppression, who are not always the actual perpetrators of discriminatory acts. This essay has attempted to broaden discursive engagements of “racism” that undermine or altogether overlook the aggressive new nativism in the United States, and the particular interests at play in maintaining the nation as predominantly white. This is especially the case at a time when the media and popular speculation about “the browning of America” has acquired paranoid proportion. Evidenced in fiscal measures directly implicating Latinos, such as the explicit battles over migration and citizenship rights and the dismantling of social welfare programs, this new nativism relies on the consistent concealment of the operations of racial privilege, even in the post-Civil Rights era, when racial bigotry is publicly condemned.

An examination of Latino constructions of white culture and whiteness facilitates the process of making systems of privilege visible by exposing how Latinos navigate the ideological, systemic, and material conditions that, along with subordination, sustain racial discrimination in the United States. As evidenced in Latinos’ production

and reproduction of white culture through everyday social practices and local narratives in the context of rapidly changing demographic and cultural spaces, Latino *barrio* residents recognized the multiple elements of the power structures responsible for reconfiguring resources and benefits. Among the Latinos with whom I spoke, the complex links between domination, subordination, and the resulting privilege were articulated through the seemingly counterdirectional tendencies of formulating essentialist notions of “white culture” and simultaneously recognizing the gap between a white identity and whiteness as a system of privilege. Hence, while Latinos claim that whites have “no culture,” they simultaneously engage in the production of a bounded “white culture,” which is strategically deployed to denounce instances of racial privilege in the particular geographical, cultural, and ideological locality that is “Puerto Rican Chicago.” Likewise, this denunciation of privilege, while initially associated with a generic “white culture,” becomes more nuanced as various cultural taxonomies are deployed to racialize particular social interactions with whites.

The “yuppies,” the “artists,” the “ethnic whites,” and the “*billie-billies*” are not simple bounded categories, but rather cultural taxonomies that straddle the slippery surfaces of class and racial identities, and condition everyday relationships between Latinos and whites. As Latinos in this Chicago neighborhood recognized the heterogeneity among individuals racialized as “white,” the more hegemonic perception of the United States as a “classless society” interrupts the process of class-based alliances between individuals who share the similar consequences of being poor. These poor white’s are not “real” whites because despite the nuances in everyday practices, whiteness and white culture are too conflated with notions of upward mobility, middle-classness, and ultimately, Americanness. Their authenticity is questioned based on their closeness or distance from dominant social decorum, as well as the nature of these whites’ relation to the cultural and geographical spaces marked as “Puerto Rican” or “Latino.”

Nevertheless, while “white culture” is constructed and brought out of its privileged invisibility, the system of privilege and whiteness is quickly elided and its own hegemony is reasserted. Fears of “losing the neighborhood” are more related to prejudice against African American *barrio* residents and struggles over U.S. citizenship among Latino groups of various nationalities than about a Latino recognition of systemic discrimination and white privilege. In this sense, racial formations among Latinos in Chicago’s North West Side result from shifts in economic structures and the historical and ideological movements of people through a constantly changing urban space. These fluid spaces provide the basis for refashioning political and residential orders and orchestrating the continuous production and reproduction of models of representation.

b

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I am in no way suggesting that prior to the 1990s Puerto Ricans in Chicago had no interaction with these other groups. There is some evidence that Puerto Ricans had frequent and meaningful social interactions with Mexicans (Padilla 1947) and, to a lesser extent, African Americans (Padilla 1987, 1992) from the very early stages of Puerto Rican migration to Chicago in the 1950s. As Elena Padilla has documented, the Puerto Rican elite that migrated to Chicago in the period between the World Wars tended to have frequent association with whites. Marriage between this elite and whites –and other Latin American migrants who shared their social class– was also a strategy to avoid an association with the migration of the Puerto Rican poor and localities marked as “Puerto Rican.” Nevertheless, even as recent as the early 1990s, Puerto Ricans’ segregation from Mexicans, though falling in the medium-to-high range (an index of .598), still reflected the highest level of Mexican-Puerto Rican segregation of all five cities with significant populations of each group (Massey and Denton 1989:75). A more exhaustive discussion of the production of space and Puerto Rican racialization of African Americans and Mexicans has been elaborated elsewhere (Ramos-Zayas 1997, forthcoming; De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 2000).

<sup>2</sup> I am deliberately using “Latino” here, as opposed to “Puerto Rican,” because I have included ethnographic data from people whom I interviewed either formally or informally, some of whom were Mexican, Mexican-Puerto Rican, and one person was Dominican. I recognize the potential problems of using pan-Latino rather than nationality-based labels (see Oboler 1995) and try to take these matters into account at critical junctures of my arguments. I will use the nationality-based designator in reference to specific interlocutors, but will continue to use “Latino” when I am outlining broad theoretical concerns.

<sup>3</sup> Virginia Domínguez’s essay (1994) eloquently defines racialization as the process by which “differences between human beings are simplified and transformed into Difference.... Racialization is produced and reproduced through ideological, institutional, interactive, and linguistic practices that support a particular construction of Difference” (p. 333). Hence, the term “racialized” describes an instance or situation in which the racial identity of an individual is sharply essentialized or objectified (cf. Hartigan 1999).

<sup>4</sup> People’s names in this paper have been changed to protect individual identities. The names of the neighborhoods are the real names. Names of people who may have appeared in newspapers or widely distributed publications have remained the same.

<sup>5</sup> This is based on a 17-month (March 1994–September 1995) ethnographic research project among grassroots activists, white-collar workers in the not-for-profit sector, barrio residents and youth in the Puerto Rican area of Chicago, and a smaller number of suburbanite Latinos. Since most of the Latinos who had contact with whites were the working- or middle-class for the most part, the voices presented in this paper may reflect this tendency. For a more detailed account of the methodological and theoretical propositions of this study, see Ramos-Zayas’ *Performing the nation: The politics of class, race, and space in Puerto Rican Chicago* (forthcoming; University of Chicago Press).

<sup>6</sup> Two edited volumes that are emblematic of the critical white studies field are *Critical white studies: Looking beyond the mirror* (edited by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic; Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997) and *Displacing whiteness: Essays in social and cultural criticism* (edited by Ruth Frankenberg; Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997). While these edited works have been prominent in the articulation of the field of white critical studies, previous work by Black scholars have provided important foundation for whiteness studies. Two such works are bell hook’s (1992) “Representing whiteness in the black imagination” in *Black looks: Race and representation*, pp. 165–179, and Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the dark: Whiteness and the literary imagination* (1992).

<sup>7</sup> I am adopting Peggy McIntosh’s (1989) definition of white privilege as the ways in which

whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average. Whites also see their lives as “ideal,” so that even when they work to benefit others, they see this social work as a means of getting racial Others to be more “like whites.” The implicated “us/them” dichotomy further essentializes—and always pathologizes—the racialized Other’s “behavior” or “culture.”

<sup>8</sup> This paper is an exploratory incursion into the Latino constructions of whiteness and white culture. An equally important and related subject is how whiteness is deployed by Latinos to describe themselves or other Latinos (e.g. college graduates, professionals, suburbanites) that occupy ambiguous class and racial positions. The everyday invocations of such ambiguities are considered in a forthcoming work-in-progress, but have not been addressed in this essay. I am however aware of the limitedness of an analysis of whiteness which centers on Latino constructions of white racial privilege of white people, while altogether overlooking instances of “whiteness” among sectors of the Puerto Rican or Latino middle classes that experience the contours of racial and class privileges. Given the understanding of whiteness as a conflation of class and racial orders of power, privilege, and access to resources, it is possible to imagine instances in which some Latinos—especially the members of particular nationalities, racial and class elite—partake of the benefits of “whiteness.”

<sup>9</sup> The process of “becoming white” in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century U.S. society has been eloquently described by Noel Ignatiev’s historical analysis of the Irish immigrants’ incorporation into the U.S. racial structure, as well as in Karen Sacks’ study of Jewish financial mobility and racialization processes. These works recognize that “white” is a historically constituted identity that during the nation-building era in the U.S. excluded European Americans and non-Europeans who are today recognized by both Anglo-Americans and the U.S. government as unhyphenated whites.

<sup>10</sup> Gallagher argues that the identity politics of the 1990s has raised white consciousness. The generation of whites born around 1975 is the first to witness the full social, political, and cultural effect of identity politics. The political and cultural mobilization of racially defined minorities has forced many of Gallagher’s white respondents to think about who they are racially in relation to other racial groups. As Gallagher claims, “they grew up hearing that the U.S. was a color-blind nation, saw the rise of a black and Asian middle class, and were told stories about federal government that “blocks opportunities for white workers” (Gallagher 1997: 9). Likewise, Mahoney claims that “whiteness is visible to whites, however, when it appears to be the basis on which well-being is threatened.” Whites perceive racism against themselves when, through interventions in the norm of transparency, whites are forced to experience the consciousness of whiteness. In the logic of white privilege, making whites feel white equals racism” (Mahoney 1997: 331).

<sup>11</sup> Frankenberg divides whiteness into a set of “linked dimensions”: a location of structural advantage and race privilege; a “standpoint” from which white people look at themselves, at others, and at society; and a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed.

<sup>12</sup> While I follow Frankenberg’s understanding of whiteness as cultural practice in relation to racial formation and historical process rather than as isolable and static, it is important to examine the ways in which white culture is strategically essentialized among Latinos in Chicago and the purposes of such objectification processes. This is not to obviate how whiteness is complexly and differentially deployed in mediating social relations, but to see how the very essentializing of whiteness constitutes one such mediation.

<sup>13</sup> Yvette Glasgow (1997) uses this phrase to emphasize how much poor whites were willing to sacrifice to hold on to their property right in whiteness. Racism offers poor whites the illusion of superiority while maintaining the reality for rich whites. As a class stabilizer, racism maintains the status quo of economic exploitation of both black and white victims. Yet the white victims’ perverse clinging to racial exclusiveness only serves to divert attention away from economic reform, thereby preventing the potentially powerful coalition

they could form with blacks. The concept of a property right in whiteness thus highlights white racial solidarity over class-based interests. There are two sides to this property right in whiteness. For poor whites, it may mean forgoing economic improvement for white exclusivity; for minorities, on the other hand, it may mean gaining economic improvement at the expense of racial solidarity (108).

<sup>14</sup> Pérez's (2000) Mexican interviewee—"Señora González"—used the term "*bilbila*" not only as a translation into Spanish of "hillbillies," but as a *gendered* version of the term. In talking about how Mexican women were not "*rencorosas*," like Puerto Rican women were, Señora González narrated that she had forgiven her husband for having had an affair with a "*bilbila*." In fact, the Señora González had not only taken her husband back, but had even helped raised the child that had been born from the affair. As she emphasized, the child, now a young woman, called her her "Mexican mother."

<sup>15</sup> Hartigan (1999) demonstrates how anti-"hillbilly" sentiment was broadly expressed across the urban Midwest as white migration from the Appalachian region ebbed through the 1950s and 1960s. Chicago received the largest influx of these white migrants, and it was in Chicago that the racial threat posed by "hillbillies" was more explicitly conveyed. Hartigan analyzes a *Harper's* magazine article entitled "The hillbillies invade Chicago," published in 1958, to highlight that "The city's toughest integration problem has nothing to do with the Negroes.... It involves a small army of white, Protestant, Early American migrants from the South—who are usually proud, poor, primitive, and fast with a knife" (cited in Hartigan 1999:33). Not surprisingly, the image of the ill-bred and barbaric "hillbilly" constituted a "disgrace for the race." The mores and behavior of these hillbillies bore the characteristics of laziness, poverty, and prone to violence—characteristics that working-class and middle-class whites had until then reserved exclusively for blacks. As Hartigan argues, Southern whites were expected to "assimilate" to the dominant cultural decorum maintained by their Northern whites neighborhoods in midwestern urban centers.

## REFERENCES

- Barrett, James, and David Roediger. 1997. Inbetween peoples: Race, nationality and the 'New Immigrant' working class. In *Against exceptionalism*, eds. Rick Halpern and Jonathan Morris, 157–182. London: Macmillan.
- . 1997. How white people became white. In *Critical white studies: Looking behind the mirror*, eds. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, 402–406. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Bergmann, Emile, et al. 1990. *Women, culture, and politics in Latin America: Seminar on feminism and culture in Latin America*. Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Brookhiser, J. 1997. The ways of the WASPs. In *Critical white studies: Looking behind the mirror*, eds. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, 16–23. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Chabram-Dernersesian, Angie. 1997. On the social construction of whiteness within selected Chicana/o discourses. In *Displacing whiteness: Essays in social and cultural criticism*, ed. Ruth Frankenberg, 107–164. Durham: Duke University Press.
- De Genova, Nicholas, and Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas. 2000. Racialization and the politics of citizenship among Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago. Paper presented at the American Anthropological Association, November.
- Delgado, Richard, and Jean Stefancic, eds. 1997. *Critical white studies: Looking behind the mirror*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Domínguez, Virginia. 1994. A taste of 'the Other': Intellectual complicity in racialization practices. *Current Anthropology* 35(4): 333–348.
- Frankenberg, Ruth, ed. 1997. *Displacing whiteness: Essays in social and cultural criticism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Gallagher, Charles A. 1994. White reconstruction in the university. *Socialist Review* 24 (1–2): 165–187.
- Glaser, Nathan, and Patrick Moynihan, 1970. *Beyond the melting point: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City*. Rev. ed. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Glasgow, Ivette. 1997. Whites with nothing but whiteness. In *Critical white studies: Looking behind the mirror*, eds. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, 107–108. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Goldberg, David. 1993. *Racist culture: Philosophy and the politics of meaning*. Cambridge: Blackwell.
- Halle, David. 1984. *America's working man*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hartigan, John. 1997. Locating white Detroit. In *Displacing whiteness: Essays in social and cultural criticism*, ed. Ruth Frankenberg, 180–213. Durham: Duke University Press.
- . 1999. *Racial situations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Higgings, Tracy. 1997. Defining the property right in 'whiteness.' In *Critical white studies: Looking behind the mirror*, eds. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, 107. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- hooks, bell. 1989. *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking black*. Boston: South End Press.
- . 1992. Representing whiteness in the black imagination. In *Black looks: Race and representation*, 165–179. Boston: South End Press.

- Ignatiev, Noel. 1996. *How the Irish became white*. London: Routledge.
- Mahoney, Martha. 1997. The social construction of whiteness. In *Critical white studies: Looking behind the mirror*, eds. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, 330–333. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Massey, Douglas, and Nancy Denton. 1989. Residential segregation of Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and Cubans in selected U.S. Metropolitan Areas. *Sociology and Social Research* 73(2) (January):73–83.
- McIntosh, Peggy. 1997. White privilege and male privilege: A personal account of coming to see correspondences through work in women's studies. In *Critical white studies: Looking behind the mirror*, eds. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, 291–297. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Molotch, Harvey. 1972. *Managed integration: Dilemmas of doing good in the city*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Morrison, Toni. 1992. *Playing in the dark: Whiteness and the literary imagination*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Oboler, Suzanne. 1995 *Ethnic labels, Latino lives*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. 1986. *Racial formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*. New York: Routledge.
- Padilla, Elena. 1947. *Puerto Rican immigrants in New York and Chicago: A study in comparative assimilation*. Unpublished M.A. thesis, Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago.
- Padilla, Felix. 1987. *Puerto Rican Chicago*. Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.
- . 1992. The quest for community: Puerto Ricans in Chicago. In *In the barrios: Latinos and the underclass debate*, eds. Joan Moore and Raquel Pinderhughes, 129–148. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Pérez, Gina. 2000. Mejicanas sufridas y puertorriqueñas rencorosas. Paper presented at the American Anthropological Association, November.
- Perry, Pamela. 1999. White means never having to say you're ethnic: The construction of white identity as 'cultureless' in two high schools. Paper Presented at the American Studies Association Meetings.
- Ramos-Zayas, Ana Yolanda. 1997. 'La patria es valor y sacrificio': Nationalist ideologies, cultural authenticity, and community building among Puerto Ricans in Chicago. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University.
- . 1998. Nationalist ideologies, neighborhood-based activism, and educational spaces in Puerto Rican Chicago. *Harvard Education Review*, 68(2): 164–192.
- . Forthcoming. *Performing the nation: Class, race and space in Puerto Rican Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ramos-Zayas, Ana Yolanda, and Nicholas De Genova. 2000. Racialization and the politics of citizenship among Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago. Paper presented at the American Anthropological Association, November.
- . Forthcoming. *Latino optics: Racialization and the politics of citizenship among Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago*. New York: Routledge.
- Roediger, David. 1990. *The wages of whiteness*. New York: Verso.
- Rosaldo, Renato. 1988. *Culture and truth: The remaking of social analysis*. Boston: Beacon.

- Sacks, Karen Brodtkin. 1994. How did Jews become white folks? In *Race*, eds. Steven Gregory and Roger Sanjek, 78-102. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Waters, Mary. 1990. *Ethnic options: Choosing identities in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Wildman, Stephanie. 1996. *Privilege revealed: How invisible preference undermines America*. New York: New York University Press.
- . 1997. Reflections on whiteness: The Case of Latinos(as). In *Critical white studies: Looking behind the mirror*, eds. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, 323-26. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Winddance Twine, France. 1997. Brown-skinned white girls: Class, culture, and the construction of white identity in suburban communities. In *Displacing whiteness: Essays in social and cultural criticism*, ed. Ruth Frankenberg, 214-243. Durham: Duke University Press.



“Whiteness and white racialized identity refer to the way that white people, their customs, culture, and beliefs operate as the standard by which all other groups of are compared,” the website reads. “Whiteness is also at the core of understanding race in America. Whiteness and the normalization of white racial identity throughout America’s history have created a culture where nonwhite persons are seen as inferior or abnormal.” “Whiteness (and its accepted normality) also exist as everyday microaggressions toward people of color. Acts of microaggressions include verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs or insults toward nonwhites. Whether intentional or not, these attitudes communicate hostile, derogatory, or harmful messages,” the page adds. Hanson asks if whites in the United States will happily condone blatant discrimination where, as just two examples, “criminal suspects shall not be identified by race unless they are white,” while, at the same time, America’s most elite colleges can justify restricting “white admissions to around 30-40 percent of their incoming classes?” Hanson is of the opinion they will not, but offers no hint as to what that refusal may entail, aside from some self-inflicted damage. And here is where it may be forgotten that white liberals were themselves responsible for the woke movement in the first place. If “White culture” was imposed on people of color, we’re off the hook for all of that: the flip side of the denial of Black accomplishment inherent in the idea of “White culture” is a denial of Black responsibility. But ultimately this is almost as insulting and dehumanizing. Because there is no White culture -- only American culture -- people of color deserve their share of the blame as well as of the credit. We bear some of the responsibility for an ethic of “rugged individualism” that, at its worst, has fostered alienation and selfishness; if the veneration of the nuclear family has stigmatized other ways of caring and physical intimacy, we get some of the blame for that too. There’s a perception that whiteness is working for white people. It’s not. Whiteness is one of the biggest and most long-running scams ever perpetrated. The whites were told this was because God had made the blacks inferior to the whites, just as the whites were inferior to the superior classes that owned property. It broke all efforts of the majority of people, African or European, to fight for civil and political rights in America against a landed class that ruled everything. It reduced a portion of the people to the status of the negro slave, and gave the poor but now white people a precious and entitled inch to stand above the permanently enslaved on the social ladder.