



CONTESTED WHITENESS: USEFUL HEURISTIC OR REINSCRIBING DOMINANCE?

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Contested Whiteness: Useful Heuristic or Reinscribing Dominance?

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This paper takes a relatively new concept in discussions of race and racial identity – that of *contested whiteness* – and expands upon it substantially. I first review literature on racial incongruence and mismatch and then provide a theoretical amplification of contested whiteness by situating it in theories of racial formation and whiteness as property. I identify a diverse subset of undergraduate and graduate students who can be described as *contested whites*. These are groups of postsecondary learners who grapple with racial contestation along the borders of whiteness on a daily basis, either from social forces, institutional logics, fellow students, or faculty and staff. In conceptualizing this population and the attendant dynamic of racial contestation, I elucidate the power formations of white supremacy and the policing of its borders as a potent, but covert dynamic that maintains contemporary U.S. race relations. I share stories of contested whiteness from data gathered using this heuristic and argue that it allows for a more complete revelation of the operations of white supremacy. Implications for higher education policy, practice, and research are considered.

Initial analyses of 2020 Census data have appeared in U.S. news media. For example, the *Washington Post* proclaimed that “the number of White¹ people in the U.S. fell for the first time since 1790” (Bahrapour & Mellnik, 2021, para. 32). Despite common usage of Census categories for race and ethnicity that presume neatly defined groups, there are many who fall outside of those categories (Brunsmas et al., 2013; Gaither, 2018; Johnston-Guerrero, 2021; Liebler et al., 2017). For example, would someone with three white grandparents and one Asian grandparent be included in the

¹Throughout this work, I capitalize the words *Black*, *Indigenous*, and other words meant to indicate racially minoritized populations in the U.S. context, but do not capitalize *white* or *whiteness* – following the standards of Pérez Huber (2010) – as a grammatical move to decenter white dominance, unless I am quoting directly from a source, as in this instance of a news article. I use the terms *multiracial* and *mixed* interchangeably to indicate mixed, multiracial, multiethnic, and transracial people. Also, I use the term *Latin** when referring to people of Latin American descent or origins. *Latin** considers the fluidity in gender identities of Latinx/o/a/e/i/u people (see Salinas, 2020; Salinas & Lozano, 2022).

falling number of whites or the growing number of non-whites in that headline? What do we call those who do not fit neatly into contemporary structures of racial difference? How are they accounted for in understandings and analyses of race?

These federally defined classifications of difference also shape postsecondary settings and processes (Ford et al., 2021; Harris, 2017; Johnston et al., 2014; Renn, 2004). In fact, postsecondary education is a time when individuals leave their highly segregated U.S. residential communities and move to environments wherein they interact with people of different racial, ethnic, cultural, and national backgrounds (Tatum, 2017). The years of early adulthood are also those in which individuals advance in racial and ethnic identity development (Patton et al, 2016). Yet for segments of postsecondary students, every time a form requires them to indicate their racial classification, they are confounded (Johnston et al., 2014). They do not fit neatly into the racial options available. Furthermore, in spaces on campus, including classrooms, student organizations, and social events, they are racially misread through U.S regimes of racial difference that are deeply shaped by the Black-white binary (Hickman, 1997; Khanna, 2010) and that overlook other forms of mixture and ancestry.

Contested white undergraduate and graduate students are individuals with varying mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds who are caught betwixt and between monoracial categorizations of racial difference (Vargas, 2014). They encompass a very diverse group of postsecondary learners who share the experience of being under constant pressure to explain and justify their racial location along the borders of whiteness (Mohajeri, 2021). Some contested white students have a multiracial background, including those who have partial white ancestry. Contested whites also

include others who claim 100% ancestry in one single racial/ethnic group, but who still actively experience racial contestation at the borders of whiteness, such as U.S. Americans with more recent immigration from Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA)² (e.g., Ajrouch & Jamal, 2007; Maghbouleh, 2017), Eastern Europe (Roediger, 2005; Sadowski-Smith, 2018), Latin America (López et al., 2017; Vargas, 2015), and other locales. Transracial adoptees who have been raised in white culture can also be considered as contested whites (Ashlee, 2020). All these individuals experience racial insecurity, ambiguity, and contestation along the borders of whiteness.

The purpose of this paper is to theoretically amplify the concept of contested whiteness and explore both its utility and limitations. The primary aim is not to report findings from an empirical study, although I do use a few narratives from a study I conducted in 2017-2018 to illustrate the utility of this conceptualization. Thus, I first summarize literature on racial incongruence and mismatch to sketch out a broader landscape of related scholarship. Next, I connect the concept of contested whiteness with theories of racial formation (Omi & Winant, 1994, 2015) and whiteness as property (Harris, 1993). I then share a few narratives of contested white students. Last, I raise and discuss uncertainties that attend this construct. The heuristic of contested whiteness reveals stories that speak to both the power of white supremacy (Doane, 1997) and simultaneously the emptiness of whiteness itself (Leonardo, 2009; Roediger, 1994). Contested whiteness names and delineates the operations of whiteness as a

² Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) is also referred to more commonly as the Middle East & North Africa (MENA). SWANA is preferred since MENA centers “the West” as the point of reference from which all Others are geographically located and named; SWANA centers Asia itself as the geographical center of the continent.

project of dominance, bringing attention to the policing of difference and belonging along the borders of whiteness.

Literature Review

Scholarship has identified and quantitatively described a phenomenon of racial incongruence and mismatch. However, it is important to go beyond description to question where power lies, and how and when it is deployed. Thus, after describing some complexities in attempts to classify race for mixed and multiracial/multiethnic people, I highlight several concepts that reveal power dynamics underlying racial incongruence, including monoracism, multiracial microaggressions, and racial contestation.

Mixedness and Racial Incongruence

The U.S. multiracial population has been growing over the last century, including those who have partial white ancestry. Changes to anti-miscegenation law (e.g., *Loving v. Virginia*, 1967) and increases in patterns of interracial/interethnic marriage (Parker et al., 2015) reflect this growth.³ Continued immigration also contributes to the growth of the multiracial population (Bakhtiari & Sohoni, 2020; Waring & Purkayastha, 2017). Intermittent alterations to Census questions concerning race and ethnicity signal state acknowledgement of such changes.

Concurrent to this demographic change has come increased scholarly attention, mostly focused on racial identity development through typologies and patterns (Renn, 2004; Rockquemore & Brunσμα, 2004). Important insights have emerged, including the assertion that multiple interrelated subvariables subsumed under “race” can be

³ For valuable counterarguments, see Gullickson and Morning (2011) and Spencer (2011).

identified and addressed separately (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2009; Wijeyesinghe, 2001). For example, *self-identification* is a subvariable that concerns how an individual identifies their own race(s), whereas *ascribed race* constitutes how an individual – the racial target – is appraised by others, that is which racial categories an individual may be assigned to in the estimation of an unknown observer, the racial perceiver (Khanna, 2004; López et al., 2017; Rockquemore et al., 2009). *State classification* comprises how the federal government organizes categories of racial difference as captured in tools like the Census (Rockquemore et al., 2009), and *ancestry* reflects “lineage or heritage inform[ing] racial grouping” (Johnston-Guerrero, 2021, p. 40) often as reported by commercial DNA test results. For some individuals, subvariables of race overlap and align with one another, but for others they diverge and differ, sometimes widely. For example, a person of SWANA descent might be classified as white by contemporary state classification, but might simultaneously be ascribed as Latin*, Indigenous, or Asian. Such mismatch or misalignment between subvariables point to those who experience racial incongruity.

Social scientists have measured such incongruity mostly through quantitative analyses of the Census or other national data sets (e.g., Burke & Kao, 2013; Campbell & Troyer, 2007; Saperstein & Penner, 2014; Vargas & Stainback, 2016; Liebler et al., 2017). This literature uses synonyms such as “mismatch” and “misclassification” to describe the phenomenon of subvariables of race not corresponding with one another. Before 2020, the population of U.S. Americans with incongruent racial identification was estimated to be up to 14%, including whites, Blacks, Latin*, Asians, and other adults,

but analyses of Census 2020 data are expected to reveal an even larger population (Vargas & Kingsbury, 2016; Vargas & Stainback, 2016).

On college campuses, incongruent racial classifications also play a role for postsecondary students, both the at the undergraduate and graduate levels (e.g., Johnston et al., 2014; Mohajeri, 2021). Many mixed young adults come to college with little to no racial literacy (Johnston-Guerrero & Pecero, 2016; Johnston-Guerrero & Tran, 2016), and thus the way they are racially classified and ascribed matters in terms of scaffolding understandings of their own racial identity as well as their emerging critical understanding of how race is created and used to achieve outcomes in larger society. More specifically, incongruent racial classifications impact students' sense of belonging on campus (Guillermo-Wann & Johnston, 2012; Hurtado et al., 2012; Wong & Buckner, 2008), access to scholarships and programs specifically aimed to support students of colors' scholarly development (Tehrani, 2009), retention and timely graduation (Hurtado et al., 2012), and identity development (Renn 2004).

Initial Explorations of Power

Racial incongruence is not simply a mechanical matter that can be addressed by creating better Census questions or by convincing postsecondary admissions and institutional research departments to revise their intake forms and surveys. Race is, among other things, a social good which confers advantages to some and disempowers and oppresses others (Omi & Winant, 1994). There are deeper "regimes of truth" (Foucault, 1991) at play behind the dynamics of racial incongruence and mismatch. Questions around agency, choice, normativity, and hegemony need to be explored.

Some concepts that offer insight along these lines include monoracism and multiracial microaggressions.

Monoracialism and Monoracism

Monoracism is a system of oppression based on monoracialism, that is the social force or paradigm that asserts that humanity consists of discrete, mutually exclusive categories of racial/ethnic difference (Johnston & Nadal, 2010; Johnston-Guerrero & Renn, 2016). Monoracism is reinforced by traditional racism and the vestiges of biological conceptions of race, and it targets multiracial, mixed, and transracial people. Johnston-Guerrero (2017) explained that “[w]hen racial groups are essentialized, they are viewed as having a uniting essence that is unchangeable, inborn, natural, discrete, and informative about the people within that group” (p. 7). Monoracialism and monoracism uphold concepts of racial authenticity, essentialism, and enoughness (Ashlee & Quaye, 2020), and play a role in the formation of subjectivity. Monoracialism ignores and invisibilizes those who do not fit clearly within its discrete groupings, thus not allowing for racial incongruence or liminality. The identification of monoracism as a system of racial oppression pinpoints a power dynamic, one that spuriously constructs racial difference. Awareness of monoracism brings critical insight to the study of mismatch and incongruence, and helps identify the powerful pseudo-biological conceptions of race that hold up categories of racial difference.

Multiracial Microaggressions

The concept of microaggressions, particularly multiracial microaggressions, also help expose power dynamics at play. Racial microaggressions consist of both intentional and unintentional daily slights, indignities, and aggressions targeting people

of color (Pierce, 1970; Sue, 2010a, 2010b). They occur from moment to moment, in day-to-day settings and interactions, and cause psycho-emotional pain, anxiety, depression, isolation, and can also impact physical well-being (Nadal et al., 2017; Sue, 2010a, 2010b). Racial microaggressions are leveled through a range of covert tactics, from colorblindness, assumption of criminal status, treating individuals as forever foreigners, etc. *Multiracial microaggressions* are daily slights and aggressions particularly aimed at mixed people. Johnston and Nadal (2010) connected multiracial microaggressions directly to monoracism as a system of oppression and published a taxonomy of five themes. The themes of *Denial of Multiracial Identity*, *Assumption of Monoracial Identity*, and *Exclusion/Isolation*, along with Harris' (2017) additional theme, *Not (Monoracial) Enough to 'Fit In,'* seem to align well with concepts of racial incongruence and mismatch.

It is important to note that microaggressions are both produced by systems of oppression and also uphold and reinforce these systems. That is, "covert forms of oppression both reflect larger society's norms and beliefs and simultaneously help to reinforce and propagate such faulty and spurious standards, beliefs, and actions" (Mohajeri, 2020, p. 1042). Thus, multiracial microaggressions point to power dynamics that shape experiences and structural realities faced by multiracial individuals in larger society and students in postsecondary settings in particular.

Racial Contestation and Race as a Site for Power Play

Vargas (2014) introduced the idea of contested race in his quantitative analysis of racial mismatch as found in national Portraits of American Life Study (PALS) data. He asserted that previously used terms for racial incongruence and misclassification were

insufficient, hinting that “emergent tensions” need to be further investigated (Vargas, 2014, p. 2296). Pushing this further, I argue that that there is a “*contest*” at work when it comes to race. There are multiple groups and players in a struggle, and there is a prize to be sought and secured. Race is a site of power play, and the prize entails dominance, normativity, privilege, and belonging. This racial contestation can take place along the borders of various racial groups. In this work, I look specifically at the borders of whiteness and the contestation that takes place there. Thus, contested whites particularly experience racial incongruence and mismatch along the borders of whiteness. For many contested whites, any two or more of the sub-variables of racial self-identification, ascription, state categorization, and ancestry do not overlap, and they experience relentless interrogation of their racial location and pressure to resolve their racial incongruence. While the literature on monoracism and multiracial microaggressions help elucidate power dynamics that bear on racial incongruence and contested whiteness, a critical perspective on whiteness is missing. In the next section, I amplify the concept of racial incongruence and contestation – particularly along the borders of whiteness – by situating it within theories from the critical study of whiteness.

Critical Perspectives on Whiteness

Scholars offer different ways to conceptualize whiteness, including as a racial identity (Helms, 1990, 1995), as ideology and dominance (Leonardo, 2009; Omi & Winant, 1994, 2015), and as discourse (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Frankenberg, 1993; Mohajeri, 2021; Yoon, 2012). These works build on one another in valuable ways, particularly those that pay explicit attention to the operations of power inherent to

whiteness. My theoretical amplification of contested whiteness focuses on two core theories: whiteness as a racial project and whiteness as property.

Whiteness as a Racial Project

Omi and Winant (1994, 2015) asserted that race must be understood as a site for political contest. They defined race as unstable, dynamic, and constantly transformed by political struggle, and named locations of racial construction as sites where power and relationships are negotiated and constructed (Omi & Winant, 1994, 2015). *Racial projects* are the willful exercise of power to represent and organize human bodies and social structures in ways that construct specific outcomes, that distribute goods and resources in particular ways. These projects are undertaken in a wide range of settings by a wide range of actors. Over time, some projects become “common sense” through the operation of consensual hegemony (Gramsci, 1948/1971).

Whiteness is one of these racial projects (Winant, 2004). Contemporary U.S. society’s classification of certain people as “white” is regarded as “common sense” (Castagno, 2014; Devos & Banaji, 2005). Categorizing people of Italian, German, Irish, English, Swedish and other Nordic descent as white has become “obvious” and “common sense.” Conversely, the classification of others, such as mixed Black-white individuals as Black, is also “common sense” (Spencer, 2011). Tracing the historical evolution of whiteness as a racial project reveals that commonsense understandings of whiteness change, and they have changed quite drastically over time to secure power for a portion of the population.

Whiteness was created some 400 years ago, and at key moments in U.S. history, recreated and rearticulated (Feagin, 2014; Omi & Winant, 1994; Winant, 2004).

These projects were used by white elites to disempower interracial economic alliances and were offered to lower status immigrant groups as a pacifier. Some groups who are now white were not always considered so (see Haney López, 1996). These groups occupied locations that were racially marked as not-white (Ignatiev, 1995; Roediger, 1991). Being common-sensically defined as “white” provides people who fall into that category with privileges and advantages, which people outside of that group are denied to varying degrees (Du Bois, 1935/2012). Thus, people who are common-sensically white enjoy certain intentional outcomes, a purposeful distribution of goods.

Whiteness as Property

Another conceptualization that bears relevance to a consideration of contested whiteness is that of whiteness as property. Harris (1993) explored whiteness as a form of property, protected by U.S. law, and sharing its characteristics. Harris claimed that the law grants “‘holders’ of whiteness the same privileges and benefits accorded holders of other types of property,” such as land or money (1993, p. 1731), and outlined four property functions of whiteness. First is the right to use and enjoyment. That is, someone who owns property has the right to use and enjoy it as they wish. Applied to whiteness, whenever a white person uses the advantages of whiteness, they are using and enjoying whiteness as property. Second is the function of reputation and status. There are strong associations of purity, morality, goodness, and intelligence associated with whiteness (Staiger, 2004). These qualities add to the status of the holders of whiteness. Third, property entails the rights of disposition. That is, property is typically alienable – able to be sold, marketed, and transferred from one owner to another. This does not apply to whiteness in a straightforward manner, since one cannot literally sell

or hand over whiteness to another.⁴ However, it is this selfsame *inability* to be transferred that makes whiteness scarce, and therefore more valuable.

Finally, property ownership includes the absolute right to exclude. Harris (1993) explained that whiteness “has been characterized, not by an inherent unifying characteristic, but by the exclusion of others deemed to be ‘not white’” (p. 1736). Harris (1993) elaborated:

whiteness became an exclusive club whose membership was closely and grudgingly guarded ... ‘White’ was defined and constructed in ways that increased its value by reinforcing its exclusivity ... whiteness as a theoretical construct evolved for the very purpose of racial exclusion. (pp. 1736-1737)

In other words, owners of whiteness have property rights to determine who else is an owner of whiteness and who can never be an owner. In this endeavor, it becomes critical to position whiteness as “unadulterated, exclusive, and rare” (Harris, 1993, p. 1737). Thus, policing the borders of whiteness and maintaining those borders become essential work in the preservation of white supremacy. This right to exclude is one of the most fundamental dynamics that needs to be examined in efforts to delineate how white supremacy functions and maintains itself in a position of ascendancy.

Contested Whiteness

The property right to exclude works in tandem with whiteness as a racial project to reveal the contested borderlands of whiteness. There is no inherent, stable characteristic of whiteness, since it is a historical and contemporary fabrication meant to elide power relations. Rather, whiteness is a purposefully constructed racial project for the differential distribution of power and goods. As such, the group of those deemed

⁴ Except in some instances through birthing a child, but only if the other birth parent is also perceived as phenotypically white. Patton et al. (2015) also add that whiteness can be transferred in a few other instances, such as inherited wealth and legacy admissions.

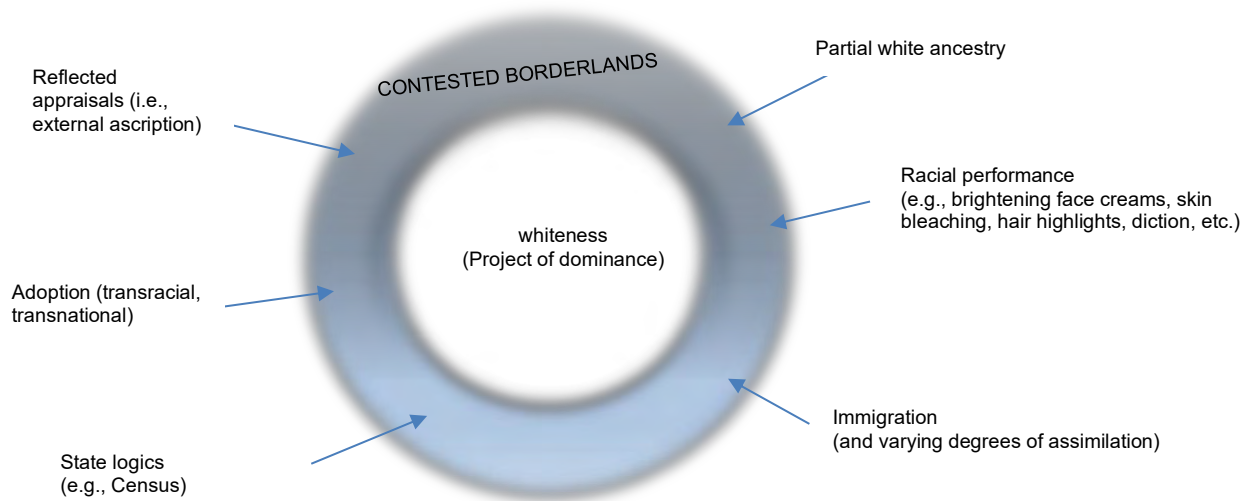
white – that is those who receive benefits – must be clear and maintained. There cannot be too much diffusion at the borders of whiteness. There cannot be too much ambiguity about who is white and who is not. The policing and maintenance of the borders of whiteness become vital work (Mahtani, 2002). This labor is actively prompted when it comes to contested whites since they constitute a threat to the borders and exclusivity of whiteness.

Contested whites are a subset of U.S. inhabitants who are differentially located along the borders of whiteness, but who share common experiences of racial ambiguity, incongruence, and contestation. Contested whites are not easily classifiable or categorizable. They are ambiguously raced and not securely positioned. Their racial status is under question, either by others, institutions, or larger contexts (Johnston & Nadal, 2010; Kibria, 1996). Contested whites may sometimes be categorized as white and sometimes not (Ajrouch & Kusow, 2007; Mahtani, 2002; Vargas, 2015). Contested whiteness is not some new racial category for self-identification that should be added to intake forms and the Census. Rather, it is a critical site of racialization where larger dynamics of racial formation, whiteness as property, and racial contestation have real material effects.

Figure 1 sketches out some pathways to the contested borderlands of whiteness and illustrates various forms of contested whiteness. This figure is not comprehensive but represents the beginnings of a visualization of contested whiteness. Here, whiteness is not concealed as a racial identity, but is unmistakably labeled as a project of dominance. The borders of this project are fuzzy and diffuse, as indicated by the gradient ring. There are various forces, material realities, and dynamics that serve as

pathways to the contested borderlands of whiteness, such as transracial adoption, immigration and assimilation, racial performance, partial white ancestry, etc. For example, multiracial folks with partial white ancestry can find themselves in these borderlands. Transracial adoptees raised in whiteness, white-presenting Latin* folks, and a whole host of others can be located in the contested borderlands of whiteness. Furthermore, these pathways are not solitary and exclusive; sometimes they intertwine. Thus, an immigrant from the SWANA region can be identified by others as non-white, but must select white on the Census due to the pressure of state logics, and can also take up elements of racial performance (such as skin and hair bleaching), finding themselves in this liminal space.

Figure 1. Some pathways to the contested borderlands of whiteness. ©2022 Orkideh Mohajeri.



Clearly, there is a wide range of people who can find themselves in these contested borderlands. Stated differently, there is a significant range of diversity among contested whites, in terms of racial background, ethnicity, ancestry, and geographic origins. What unites them together is the shared experience of near-constant surveillance, policing, and contestation of their racial identities. This scrutiny and racial

contestation come from a variety of sources: friends, colleagues, family, institutions, forms, social norms, discourse, and more (Mohajeri, 2018). This intense questioning is a reflection of whiteness as property (Harris, 1993), particularly in its absolute right to exclude, that is, in its active labor of monitoring and safeguarding its borders. For whiteness to exist as a form of valuable property, its borders must be maintained with a degree of clarity. Contested whites disrupt these borders, sometimes by their phenotypical presentations, sometimes by their ancestry, sometimes by their familiarity and fluency in white culture, and sometimes by their narratives and positionalities. The overbearing power of white supremacy to maintain itself in an unnamed position of normative power is threatened at these borders by individuals who bring proof of the illogics of its rules and of the paucity of racial categories themselves. Thus, contested white individuals are scrutinized with a somewhat ferocious compunction to analyze, categorize, and cast them out of the ambiguous borderlands of whiteness. In the next several sections, I share narratives of contestation from contested white students at a predominantly white-serving institution of postsecondary education (PWI), but first I briefly describe the methods used to gather these accounts.

Methods

Since this paper does not primarily aim to report the findings of an empirical study, but rather constitutes a theoretical amplification of a relatively new concept, I will not detail the methodology at great length. Suffice it to note that in 2017-2018, I interviewed 20 contested white undergraduate and graduate students at a PWI in the Midwest (Mohajeri, 2018). Students from a wide range of racial and ethnic backgrounds identified with the term “contested white” and volunteered to participate. Data collection

included individual interviews that lasted from 1.5 to 2.5 hours in duration, three focus group conversations, and participant observation of a multiracial student group on campus.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of 2017-2018 participants

Name	Age	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Race⁵	Ascribed Race
Adela	22	Woman	Heterosexual	White	White, Ambiguous
Anki	21	Woman	Bisexual	Multiracial	Ambiguous
Bruno	27	Man	Heterosexual	Mixed Black-White	White
Cara	34	Woman	Bisexual	Native American + white	White
Elias	27	Man	Heterosexual	White	SWANA
Hermione	21	Woman	Pansexual	White	White
Jana	21	Woman	Heterosexual	Biracial	Part-Black; Ambiguous
Kiara	21	Woman	Heterosexual	Black	Part-Black
Lana	20	Woman	Heterosexual	Biracial	Ambiguous
Mara	30	Woman	Heterosexual	Asian/White	White
Nash	28	Man	Heterosexual	White	Latin* or SWANA
Neoma	18	Woman	Bisexual	Half Mexican, half white	Latin*
Nina	40	Woman	Heterosexual	White	White; Ambiguous
Parker	25	Man	Heterosexual	Colored	Ambiguous
Raven	21	Woman	Heterosexual	Latina	Ambiguous
Rona	21	Woman	Heterosexual	Mixed, Latina	White; Ambiguous
Ryan	20	Man	Heterosexual	Mixed, Asian-American	Ambiguous
Silas	35	Man	Heterosexual	Indian	South Indian
Taylor	20	Woman	Heterosexual	Mexican	Latin*
Zoey	20	Woman	Straight/Asexual	Latina/White, Mixed	Latin*

Table 1 lists some demographic characteristics of participants. The study included 14 cisgender women and 6 cisgender men, ranging in age from 18 to 40 years old. Nine were graduate students pursuing either their master’s or doctoral degrees, and eleven were undergraduate students. Most identified as Catholic or agnostic, and socioeconomic classifications skewed toward middle- and high-income backgrounds.

⁵ The data for Race reflects the words and phrases used by participants in the demographic form. While these are not an exact match to state classifications of race, they are certainly informed by state logics. The answers for Ascribed Race are based on the researcher’s judgement, based in part on substantial fluency with regional racial discourse.

When looking across the columns that indicate race, ethnicity, and ascribed race, great diversity is evident.

Analysis of the data was informed by poststructural approaches to narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993; Tamboukou, 2008). I first identified a set of racial discourses particularly active and widespread in contemporary U.S. society, and then I coded and analyzed the collected interview transcripts with an eye toward identifying where and how discourses were taken up and/or troubled by participants (see Mohajeri, 2021 for more detail on coding and analysis).

Stories of Surveillance and Contestation

I now share four narratives, each describing an incident of contestation along the borders of whiteness for postsecondary students. These stories are exemplars, and do not cover the whole range of pathways and dynamics of contested whiteness. Nevertheless, they do begin to illustrate the dynamics of surveillance and policing along the borders of whiteness.

The Three Parkers

Parker is a cis man and an Asian-white graduate student. He had a white father, an Asian mother, and a sibling who was lighter in complexion. Parker mentioned that others saw him as an “ambiguous man of color.” One incident he recounted occurred during his undergraduate years, when he was attending college. One evening, he went to a party. A new individual that he met for the first time asked him “What’s your name?” Upon hearing the response, the new person remarked, “Oh, that’s funny! We have three Parkers here – one Black one, and two white ones!” Immediately, a third, white individual standing nearby sidled up to Parker and held up his forearm right against

Parker to compare shades of skin. “Oh! Are we calling that ‘white’ now?!” asked the individual, incredulously. The implication was that Parker’s skin was not white enough. The allegation was that Parker cannot identify as white and must be recognized as Other and as an outsider. The exchanges took place in rapid succession, and Parker was taken off guard by this interaction, left in shock. This painful microaggression was a clear example of people policing the borders of whiteness in everyday, mundane interactions. However momentary this interaction was, it remained with Parker for years after.

Parker’s narrative illustrates that the borders of whiteness are policed actively by random strangers in everyday settings. Parker was at a party, in the evening on a weekend. He was trying to meet new people. But even in the dim light of the evening, in a room of intoxicated strangers, individuals were reading Parker’s skin tone and making decisions about inclusion, exclusion, belonging, and race. A stranger felt entitled to have his first words to a new acquaintance be enactments of whiteness’ property rights to exclusion. These moments of policing and contestation are everyday occurrences for contested whites that happen on a whim, when one might least expect it.

Should I Be Part of the Conversation?

Adela is a white-presenting cis woman, and a first-generation immigrant to the United States. She was born in Mexico and immigrated when just a toddler, with her parents and siblings. Adela was a graduate student with strong ambitions for her future. Adela identified as a person of color, as Mexican and Latina, and explained that “on a day-to-day basis ... I almost have to fight” for that social identity. “[B]ecause of the color

of my skin,” she explained, “I feel like all people just see me as white, and sometimes, even within my family, my sisters like to make fun of that because they’re darker.”

She explained that in various campus activities, she was always aware that others might assume that she was white. Adela described sitting in a group meeting for students of color who were doing an internship. When one group member said, “Oh, I didn’t think there were going to be white people in the program,” Adela immediately “thought that she was referring to me, and that made me feel just really sad.” Adela explained:

I think, even now, sometimes I still feel a little ashamed and embarrassed when speaking about race because I feel I've always been told that I'm white. It makes me feel that I don't really know what I'm talking about, or that I don't have a right to say what I feel, even though I see myself as a person of color ... I always think, if I talk to someone about race, I'm like, “Well, what are they thinking based off the color of my skin? Do they think that I shouldn't be part of the conversation?”

Adela used the words “ashamed” and “embarrassed” to describe her emotional state.

She identified other people’s reflected appraisals as a source of incongruence that fostered this shame. She considered herself to be a person of color, yet she was afraid of being read by others as white and therefore wondered if she would be seen as an illegitimate source of knowledge. Adela carried this internalized illegitimacy with her throughout the day, across various settings. It is important to note that the policing of the borders of whiteness is not just something that white people do to people of color; it is sometimes enacted by colleagues, family members, immigrants, other people of color, and the self. This incongruity and contestation can sink down to the level of self-regard.

Who's the Mutt – Me or My Dog?

Jana is a light-skinned, Black-white cis woman. She was an undergraduate student pursuing a major in the social sciences. Her white mother and Black father had three children, and moved to a rural, predominantly white town. Her parents later divorced, and Jana and her siblings continued to live in that town with their mom.

One day, as a young child, Jana and her older sister were out walking their dog around her neighborhood. An older white man started to cross paths with them, heading down the same sidewalk towards them. As he passed by, he made a comment under his breath, expressing disdain for “mutts.” Jana felt odd, uncertain why the man would make a disparaging comment about their dog. She returned home and sought solace from her mother, trying to make sense of the interaction and the random stranger’s hatred for their family pet. It was not until years later, in the middle of an activity on campus, that Jana realized that the comment was most likely racist in nature and the “mutts” in the story were her and her sister!

This story illustrates that Jana’s racial ambiguity was offensive to people in her small town. Her racial presentation was offensive to random strangers, to the point where they felt compelled and entitled to make negative comments about it, even to two, young, unprotected siblings. In other words, the policing of the borders of whiteness is taken up by complete strangers, who feel that it is their right to express disgust at the adulteration of whiteness, even towards minors in a random day-to-day setting. Contestation can take on an explicitly aggressive, hateful tone.

The Black Man Stealing from His Own Grandfather's Garage

Nash is a graduate student, and a cis man who grew up on the East coast in a primarily white neighborhood. Nash was of Italian-American descent and considered himself to be white. He was darker phenotypically than any other member of his family, including his parents, siblings, and extended family. Nash recounted odd incidents from his youth and childhood, instances of contested whiteness. For example, he noted that growing up, his grandfather's affectionate nickname for him was *mulignan*, meaning "eggplant" – dark on the outside, light on the inside – which Nash only recently realized was a clear reference to his phenotypic presentation. Although Nash knew it as his grandfather's term of endearment, it is actually a derogatory racial slur.

Nash described a rather harrowing incident when, as a middle-school aged youth, he was at his grandfather's house in the backyard helping with a project, in the very same small town that he grew up in. He explained, "I was at their house by myself doing something," The neighbors called the police to report that "there was a Black man stealing stuff out of their garage." In that moment, Nash's darker skin pigmentation was read as Black by his grandfather's neighbors. In this incident, a white, middle school-aged boy in a predominantly white town that he had lived in all his life was policed and identified by neighbors as a suspect Black body in the midst of committing crime. Nash explained that, once contacted, his grandfather "knew exactly that it was me" and, with a laugh, explained to the neighbors that his adolescent grandson was in the backyard. Incidents like this happened with some frequency throughout Nash's youth, and he was unable to make sense of them at the time, "but being more like, what's going on? Why is this continuing to happen?"

Nash's narrative illustrates that the policing of the borders of whiteness can come from the most trusted family members, neighbors, and long-time acquaintances. These relationships do not lessen the compunction to monitor the borders of whiteness. The wounds of contesting racial belonging can be both physical – as in this case Nash was actively being read as a criminal in the midst of carrying out an illegal action and could easily have been arrested or detained by police – and certainly the wounds are psycho-emotional.

Across these four vignettes, it is apparent that surveillance of the borders of whiteness is active in day-to-day settings and moments. Contested white students inhabit a position of racial incongruence where subvariables of race do not necessarily align. This mismatch often serves as a trigger for surveillance at the borders of whiteness, a panoptic labor often manifested as racial and multiracial microaggressions. The monitoring, questioning, and determination of who is white and who is not-white is a commonplace activity, taken up by a variety of actors in a variety of settings, regardless of mixture, age, gender, place, relationship, and – as Parker's vignette illustrated – even lighting!

When considered through the lens of psychosocial effects on the individual contested white student, it is clear that racial contestation has both psychosocial and material effects. When considered through the lens of racial projects and whiteness as property, it is evident that whiteness has no inherently stable characteristic, with muddy and porous borders. In fact, it is a fabrication necessitating regular re-creation and maintenance. One of its most important self-protective measures is surveillance and

contestation. In other words, the contestation of whiteness is about safeguarding and maintaining a particular distribution of power and dominance.

Discussion

Contested whiteness constitutes the dynamic of being actively hailed as incongruent and in need of identification and explanation at the borders of whiteness to secure the project of white dominance. Contested white students come from a very diverse set of backgrounds. They may have quite different racial and ethnic makeups, cultural backgrounds, phenotypic presentations, and even understandings of how race operates. However, they all have stories of racial surveillance and contestation at the borders of whiteness. They can easily recount moments where their being and sense of belonging were scrutinized in ways that were jarring, emotionally or physically violent, and that caused upheaval and pain. In fact, the narratives of this vastly diverse group of contested postsecondary students effectively point to how completely made-up, spurious, and false whiteness is, both as a racial identity and as a project of dominance.

Using contested whiteness as a heuristic is imperative to a more complete understanding of the operations of whiteness and white supremacy. It can help dislodge monolithic conceptualizations of race, and name and describe the liminal spaces between whiteness and non-whiteness, the borderlands where bodies are actively policed and dominance is enforced in everyday settings by individuals, institutions, and social forces.

In postsecondary settings, a critical examination of contested whiteness can be used to trouble and push back against monoracism, colorism, racial microaggressions, and other forms of oppression. It can bring nuanced and important insights to ongoing

efforts to build alliances for social justice. Using contested whiteness as an analytic tool can help identify undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, and staff who are invisibilized and invalidated (Mohajeri, 2021), and inform efforts to bolster sense of belonging, persistence, and learning and growth for various students and groups. And of course, there are practical applications where using the lens of racial incongruence and contested whiteness as a tool can help revise forms, surveys, and processes to more accurately capture diversity among students, faculty, and staff (Johnston-Guerrero & Renn, 2016).

However, it is important to bear in mind that contested whiteness is not some new trick to undoing racism, nor is it immune to critique. Like other conceptualizations, it can help garner some insights and should be used as a part of a multipronged approach to the dissolution of white supremacy and the creation of more humane futures. As I advocate for the broader use of contested whiteness in scholarship and higher education, I also raise some uncertainties and limitations that attend this concept. I present four sets of uncertainties below. Each one is introduced by a set of questions as a means to evoke a sense of inquiry and exploration. These questions and uncertainties are in no way settled; they continue to accompany the concept of contested whiteness and remain unresolved. I do share some initial reflections on the questions, and as I advocate for the heuristic of contested whiteness, I also invite ongoing exploration of these uncertainties.

Proximity to Whiteness

One uncertainty that attends the heuristic of contested whiteness concerns proximity to whiteness. In other words, does contested whiteness hint that mixed

people, transracial adoptees, and others should be classified as white? Does this concept of contested whiteness advocate approximation and eventual envelopment into whiteness?

This articulation and theoretical amplification of contested whiteness is not meant to serve the creation of some new racial identity category. Contested whiteness is not a new Census category, nor should it initiate a nationwide identity campaign that can be grown through social media. This is not advocacy for the creation of a new category at the muddy borderlands of whiteness. However, proximity to whiteness is a real dynamic that has been both consciously and unconsciously pursued by individuals and groups, historically and contemporarily (e.g., Doane & Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Spencer, 2011; Tehranian, 2009). Contested whiteness should not be misused to pursue and desire whiteness. Rather, contested whiteness should be used as a conceptual tool that helps focus attention on the covert operations of power in liminal spaces.

Centering Whiteness, Reinscribing Dominance

Another uncertainty concerns whether this concept centers whiteness, thus reinscribing dominance. Often, scholarly inquiry uses whiteness as a standard for comparison, a norm from which deviance is identified and measured. So, why discuss whiteness and its contours again? Why not explore a contested Blackness or contested brownness? Why not just center Blackness and write about that alone, without reference to whiteness?

Contested whiteness does in fact center whiteness, but does so to critique it, to understand its operations more clearly, and to bring under scrutiny the hidden dynamics of policing its borders and maintaining its hegemonic power. While most scholarship

falls into the white supremacist habit of invisibilizing the majoritized and powerful as a subject of inquiry (Doane, 1997), contested whiteness names a hidden dynamic in the operations of white supremacy and seeks to make it a subject of systematic inquiry. That is, contested whiteness centers *the fallacy of whiteness*. Contested whiteness names a dynamic that whiteness would rather keep silent – namely, that whiteness is unreal, that it does not hold up under scrutiny, that it is nothing but emptiness (Leonardo, 2009). Contested whiteness is useful to the extent to which it can help scholars delineate further the operations of white supremacy.

The Emerging Triracial System

Bonilla-Silva (2014) forecasted that the U.S. racial order will evolve into a triracial stratification system similar to that of many Latin American and Caribbean nations. Relatedly, is contested whiteness just honorary whiteness by another name? In Bonilla-Silva's triracial system, Euroamerican whites occupy the top of the hierarchy, along with "new whites" (e.g., Russians, Albanians, assimilated white Latin*, some multiracials, assimilated Native Americans, few Asian-origin people). The middle swatch – that is *honorary whites* – is populated by lighter-skinned Latin*, Japanese Americans, Korean Americans, South Asians, Chinese Americans, SWANA folks, and most other multiracial people. The bottom of the hierarchy – the collective Black – encompasses Filipino Americans, Vietnamese Americans, Hmong Americans, Laotian Americans, dark-skinned and poor Latin*, Blacks, New West Indian and African immigrants, and reservation-bound Indigenous people. In this hierarchy, honorary whites act as a buffer and each group is further stratified internally by skin color. Bonilla-Silva (2014) noted that this system already exists in various locales across the globe.

It may be that the U.S. system is currently evolving toward this arrangement. The conceptualization of contested whiteness is not a forecast or prediction. It may, in fact, be that contested whites become honorary whites or that there is eventual substantial overlap between the two, but this is not yet certain. One difference may be that honorary whites aspire to whiteness and dominance, and do not espouse a critical perspective on their proximity to dominance. Contested whites, on the contrary, do have the potential to maintain a critical perspective, and as mentioned, contested whiteness is not intended to serve as a new label for racial categorization. Nonetheless, keeping Bonilla-Silva's (2014) forecast in mind as research is taken up on contested whiteness is important.

Racial Fraud and Bad Actors

A final uncertainty concerns bad actors who commit racial fraud and claim that although they may be white by ancestry, they identify as non-white. Again, to encourage exploration of this uncertainty, I ask: Does contested whiteness condone or give legitimacy to such bad actors? Considering this paper, would individuals such as Rachel Dolezal and others be considered contested whites? Can people legitimate years of fraud and the use of Blackness for personal, monetary, and status gains under this conceptualization?

This is an area for further inquiry. In my data, there were in fact white people who were regularly read as not-white – such as Nash in the vignettes above. In these cases, there was an honest grappling with this contestation and interstitial space, not an attempt to pass as non-white. There is much to be learned from using the heuristic of

contested whiteness, although I do not believe it grants legitimacy to racial fraud and intentional deception by whites.

Implications and Recommendations

Monoracial conceptions of race – such as the widespread ethnoracial pentagon (Hollinger, 1995) – are widespread and powerful. They shape moment-to-moment understandings of race, difference, and belonging in everyday settings and encounters. They also uphold racism and monoracism effectively. In fact, they constitute a major support of ideas of racial purity and white supremacy because if humanity can be divided into discrete categories of difference, a hierarchy of such categories can be constructed, reinforced, and rendered normative. Furthermore, once established, the borders of such groupings can be policed and surveilled, and any threats to the clarity of these borders can be called out and negated.

In this work, I have taken Vargas' (2014, 2015) naming of racial contestation and contested whites and expanded upon it. I have amplified it both theoretically (by connecting it to theory of racial formation and whiteness-at-property), conceptually (by sharing the beginnings of a fuller articulation and visual of the multiple and sometimes intertwining pathways to the contested borderlands of whiteness), and empirically (by sharing a few initial vignettes from contested white undergraduate and graduate students). I do this to invite both scholars, practitioners, students, and others to use the heuristic of contested whiteness and racial incongruence to pull apart and question manmade categories of difference. Contested whiteness is a tool that can more readily demonstrate that our conceptualizations of difference are fanciful constructions that have been strategically used to divide and conquer, to create supremacy for some, and

suffering for others. Contested whiteness calls on us to pause, question, and trouble our assumptions about difference and belonging, normativity, hegemony, and power.

When it comes to scholarship, contested whiteness is a tool that can disrupt monoracial research questions and approaches. If scholars do not challenge monoracially-informed schema of difference, but continue to operationalize them uncritically, we are replicating not only biological conceptions of race, but also monoracism and white dominance. Substantial research can be conducted with this heuristic. First, the racialization and identity formation of any of the subgroups of contested whiteness could be examined, such as the experiences of subsets of transracial adoptees raised in whiteness, all with an eye towards the dynamics of racial contestation and policing. The impact of different regional contexts and different histories of immigration could be examined. Furthermore, how might contested whiteness show up across different ages and life stages? Exploration of concepts of performance, embodiment, play, and pushback can also be taken up. Specifically, it might also be productive to apply Johnson and Quaye's (2017) queered model of racial identity development to the experiences of contested whites. In particular, the variables of desire and performance are sure to yield illuminating insights.

Connections to any of the facets and tactics of whiteness as a project of dominance would be worth investigation, such as issues raised by the uncertainties articulated above, including colorism, proximity to whiteness, and the overall messiness of race and ethnicity (Johnston-Guerrero, 2016). Beyond this, inquiry surrounding connections to global white supremacy (Mills, 2008) and global anti-Blackness (Beaman, 2020; Bledsoe & Wright, 2018) are particularly important. Finally, exploration

of connections between this articulation and other theoretical articulations of whiteness, including considerations of the constructive power of discourse (Yoon, 2012), are important to pursue.

Contested whiteness can also be used as a lever for critical consciousness in the work of student affairs programming and university administration and leadership. It is clear that all campuses have an overall *culture of monoracialism* (Johnston-Guerrero & Renn, 2016), but there may be essential differences between institutional types, regions, and histories. Nonetheless, monoracialism informs many facets of organization, administration, and programming, from beginning to end. If we do not let racial incongruence and contested whiteness shake up and reform the ways we welcome students to campus, support them, program for them, advise them, and accompany them through their undergraduate or graduate journeys, our actions are replicating both biological conceptions of difference and monoracism. Thus, inquiry at varying levels of contextual analysis would also be useful. There are productive questions that can be asked by leadership, using the lens of racial contestation and contested whiteness, about processes and administrative subsystems, ranging from marketing to admissions, orientation, new student programming, and beyond. For example, how do the marketing materials, images, and wording either uphold or push back against monoracial constructions of difference? Do contested white students see acknowledgement and welcoming of their backgrounds and life experiences in the initial material that they read, or do college viewbooks, flyers, and websites constitute yet another set of visuals that render them invisible and anomalous? When contested white students come to campus and participate in New Student Week, are they assumed to belong to particular

monoracial groups, based on phenotype, forms, or other essentialist tools of racial classification?

When it comes to all the work that student services carry out to engender a sense of belonging on campus for students from diverse backgrounds, there is room for using contested whiteness as a tool for the illumination of necessary changes. For example, how much training is there for staff working in cultural centers to recognize and welcome racially incongruent or contested students and faculty to their activities and spaces? How can we invite and support students who are phenotypically marked as non-white (but categorized as “white” by enrollment surveys) to multicultural centers (Ozaki & Johnston, 2008; Johnston-Guerrero & Renn, 2016), to various student activities and programs, and to scholarship and academic support programs? How can the small mixed and multiracial student association that may exist on campus be strengthened through administration or student affairs support? And when contested white students turn to on-campus counselling and psychological services, are there trained counsellors who are well-versed in not just issues of racial diversity, but also mixedness, multiracial microaggressions, racial incongruence, and contested whiteness?

In the realm of faculty development and support, the heuristic of contested whiteness can help us see gaps and opportunities for supporting invisibilized faculty. For example, how do we support faculty of color who do not qualify for scholarships, positions, and training programs because they are caught between false state categorization of who counts as white and who does not (Tehrani, 2009)? How often do we overlook faculty who do not get invited to join multiracial faculty bodies?

Relatedly, how can the larger curriculum be reviewed and expanded to include critical consideration of not just racialization but also multiracialization (Osei-Kofi, 2012)? It is vital that push back against monoracism in the curriculum be systematically pursued.

Finally, there are many policy implications, much of which draw on institutional research, data collection, and reporting. These statistics are used by institutions when planning interventions around persistence, timely graduation, and even in attempts to reclassify institutions as minority-serving to secure federal funding. Johnston-Guerrero and Renn (2016) delineate much of this, explaining that the categories that institutions use to measure student diversity are deeply flawed. While postsecondary institutions of higher education do allow for student identification of more than one race (since the 2010-2011 academic year), this often reflects students' racial self-identification, and there is room for consideration of other subvariables of race, such as racial ascription. In other instances, institutional agents "distill" or reassign complex racial identity data for reporting purposes. What are the losses there? There is also significant room for consideration of multiethnicity and intersections with immigration and nationality. Much policy overlooks racial mixedness, and the heuristic of contested whiteness can be one apparatus for a more expansive and critical consideration of how an institution can best capture, describe, and create policy to support its students, staff, and faculty.

Conclusion

Contested whites are a very diverse set of U.S. inhabitants differentially located along the borders of whiteness, but who share common experiences of racial incongruence, surveillance, and contestation. Contested whiteness is a potent force of racialization that has real material effects. Studying contested whiteness helps reveal

how fuzzy and made-up the borderlands of whiteness are, more fully exposing both the emptiness of whiteness as a racial category and the operations of racial dominance. Employing contested whiteness as a heuristic will help dismantle whiteness as the false and empty phantasma that it is, and in postsecondary settings, will help higher education practitioners, administrators, faculty, and students shirk off the burden of monoracial conceptions of racial difference and identify areas for questioning, change, and transformation.

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