The global configurations of Whiteness

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Title: The Global Configurations of Whiteness

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Abstract:

This introductory article on The Global Configurations of Whiteness situates the special issue and the articles in it within debates about how Whiteness is understood, appropriated and reconfigured globally. We highlight the importance of studying Whiteness and examine the contemporary trends. We make a particular case for the need to analyse the reproduction of Whiteness not just in the Global North but also in the Global South, as the normative nature of Whiteness is produced globally due to legacies of colonialism and empire, and connected histories and sociologies. Additionally, we articulate the need to do so from an intersectional approach and consider methodological and epistemological impediments to studying Whiteness. Contemporary developments show how Whiteness is transforming and emboldening its power and influence through mobilising in new and novel ways, through appeals to new geographies and peoples and by diversifying its constituents. Understanding the changing and newer configurations of global Whiteness are crucial as they also underpin and embolden the resistance Whiteness presents when its supremacy is questioned.

This journal, *Identities*, last produced a special issue on Whiteness in 2019. While the theme of that was *Whiteness and Nationalism*, and the theme of this one is the *Global Configurations of Whiteness*, there is a degree of overlap. Having two issues that seem to cover similar ground may make readers pause to ponder. It may also summon paradoxical and mixed feelings that it is both too soon as well as overdue to be analysing Whiteness in a special issue again. If so, we suspect that attitude is likely, in large measure, to be due to a combination of weariness and alarm at the multiple expressions of White power in the world today. In his introduction to the 2019 issue Nasar Meer surveyed the wreckage of White supremacy noting that, even then, it was a time in which 'fascists are renamed 'populists'', White 'racial self-interest' is not racism, and minorities pose a 'demographic challenge' (Meer 2019: 506). In the years since each of these elements has been multiplied, and abetted, as Meer also noted, by self-proclaimed intellectuals or 'ideological entrepreneurs' (Finlayson 2021, Mondon and Winter 2020) obsessed by the supposed take-over of universities by cultural Marxism. At the same time the rise of populism has fuelled a political class that makes it ever harder to distinguish progressives from reactionaries, in action if not always in rhetoric. The sense that there is more continuity between then and now could be encapsulated in one figure - Donald

Trump who was the President of the USA at the time of the 2019 special issue and returned to the post in 2024.

The rise of populist leaders and manifold nationalisms in many nations have gone hand-in-hand with anti-globalisation, which is not merely economic but also cultural. Populism thrives on fomenting divisions and creating enemies, heightening antagonism through culture wars and explicit hostility to racialised migrants, and even to long settled migrants who fail the test of Whiteness. The dangers of this are not confined to the hate speech of social media, especially Twitter/X, but have now branched out, even been magnified, on multiple similar platforms (Bar-On 2021, Saha, Sobande and Titley 2024). Whether populists are shaping or just reflecting public opinion is an open question, but either scenario creates concerns about the rise and fear of the demagogue. One step away is the spectre of dictatorship and fascism, with authoritarianism already well established in liberal democracies (Snyder 2017, Di Maggio 2021), including the UK (Featherstone 2024). Fascism, long considered a 20th century phenomenon and usually regarded as restricted to an extreme fringe of politics is now mainstream as the F-word has gone from a whisper to a tangible fear, not least due to Project 2025 and the Great Replacement Theory (Sedgwick 2024). While it is easy to see Trump as a dominant figure, this is a political phenomenon that pre-dated him, and occurs in many places: across Europe (including the UK, Austria, Germany, France, Italy, Hungary and the Netherlands), and South Asia, notably in India, and in South America, particularly Argentina and formerly Brazil. Hence, one important difference between the 2019 issue and the present one is geography, or geographies, as the former centred on the UK and USA, Denmark, France and South Africa. This is what the 'global configurations' in our title points towards.

The widespread and visceral expressions of Whiteness carry a complex and even contradictory mixture of White fear, White power, White fragility, as well as White supremacy. These underline the ways in which Whiteness works as both an identity/subject position, as well as a structure. The expansive forms of Whiteness make it unstable and hard edged at the same time and this apparent contradiction exposes the power base of Whiteness, as something claimed and denied, as real and unreal, and as homogeneous and diverse at the same moment. It is presented as being under threat while its hegemonic status is beyond question. The multilayered resources and narratives that White domination draws on, with shifting scales and temporalities is in evidence in White victimhood, resistance to diversity (Ahmed 2020), anti-multiculturalism (Demir 2022), rising Islamophobia (Runnymede Trust 2024), and institutional denial (Murji 2017), with selective appropriation of groups and categories into and out of Whiteness, and the re-writing of histories of domination and colonialism. In this rapidly changing and developing context it is notable that Critical Whiteness Studies has been criticised for its parochialism and lack of engagement with global configurations (Hunter and Van der Westhuizen 2021).

While significant continuities between 2019 and now can be observed, it is worth stressing changes in the context and form of struggles around race in between these dates. Even as the era of COVID took hold from 2020 onwards, the death of George Floyd at the hands of a police officer in Minnesota sparked extensive Black Lives Matter protests. Significantly these were not just in the USA but occurred across the world. Equally significantly, those protests were not only about police violence but also foregrounded issues of White supremacy and settler colonialism. The geographic and thematic span of those protests underline the extent to which Whiteness is tied in with and connected to the precarity of life for African Americans in the USA, the institutional power of Whiteness, and its historical roots. The protests across the years 2020/21/22 brought to light the hollowness of so-called 'post-race' positions and arguments that emanated in the early and mid-2010s. We witnessed the time when it became routine for sports people, and even some politicians, to 'take the knee' to symbolise a commitment to racial solidarity. The extensive backlash to those protests has spiralled in ways that not many could have imagined even five years ago, such as the 'war on woke' and the backlash to Critical Race Theory (Goldberg 2023) that embodies the ways in which racism is being remade before our eyes through culture wars More than just debate or argument, this has been followed by a systematic dismantling of diversity and inclusion initiatives, let alone any steps to address racial inequalities. This is the raw power of Whiteness in action.

Our special issue seeks to examine its contemporary configurations globally, within but also beyond the Global North. As well as the changed social context signalled above there are two further important drivers behind this special issue and collection of articles. First, critical studies of Whiteness have typically concentrated on the Black/White nexus and the race/class nexus particularly in the US and UK, examining White subjectivity and its relationship to power, and the hierarchies it constructs. This is rooted in pioneering work by Du Bois (1998 [1935]) and Roediger (2007 [1991]) and others. More recently others, for example, Shilliam (2020), have also examined the 'wages of Whiteness' and 'methodological Whiteness' (Bhambra 2017). As was shown by Allen in *The Invention of the White Race* (2021 [1997]) the White race was borne out of and maintained through extending privileged status to Euro-American workers against the Afro-Americans in the colonies. Euro-American workers were poor but were allowed to take part in Whiteness, damaging if not halting solidarity between Afro-American and Euro-American labouring people. Accordingly, they received relevant social and economic benefits in the form of a 'public and psychological wage' as argued by Du Bois (1998 [1935]: 700–701):

> It must be remembered that the white group of labourers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent upon their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage law-

lessness. Their vote selected public officials, and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown them.

Such works thus investigated the privileges accorded to poor Whites enabling them to fight against what they saw as 'White decline of status and power in the face of rising equality, whether it be when slavery was abolished, or during the Civil Rights demands, or following anti-racism legislation.

Research on Whiteness also focused on an examination of ethno-racial boundaries, especially the dynamics of Irish, Jewish and East European migrants who were not accepted as White but over time gained financial and social benefits from racial solidarity with majority White populations in the US. For example, Jacobson (1998) revealed how in the late 19th century USA, groups such as Jews, Slavs, Italians and others who were not initially seen as White got consolidated into Whiteness. The Irish were at first not considered as White but were able to align with Whiteness over time and distinguished themselves from other colonised and enslaved groups and gained associated benefits accorded to Whites in the US (Ignatiev 2009, Roediger 2007 [1991]). Yet, as newer waves of ~~'second wave'~~ Whiteness studies has moved beyond the USA as a focal point, as well as beyond Europe (Andreassen et al. 2023, Twine and Gallagher 2008). Looking to the Global South among other places, scholars reveal how the dynamics of Whiteness do not necessarily follow a Euro-American analysis (Casey 2021, Jupp and Badenhorst, 2021). There is therefore a need to study contemporary forms of Whiteness but also to do so through an examination of the alignment of newer groups in or from other geographies as White, as various studies have started to document (Baker et al 2024, Ceron-Anaya et al 2023, Narkowicz 2023).

Second, both the formation and articulation of Whiteness have become more complex through the valorisation of Whiteness vis à vis class and the rising discourse of 'the left-behind'. In the UK, Bonnett (1998) highlighted the centrality of political economy and the race/class intersections. He argued that the conscious adoption of a White identity by the British working class occurred mainly after World War II, and not just through the arrival of Afro-Caribbeans and South Asians from the British colonies, but especially through the racialised appropriation of the welfare state by the working classes who were White in Britain, for example, couched as 'our NHS' and 'our welfare state'. Much of this strand of work in the UK and US has therefore considered Whiteness in relation to the 'labour' of the people of colour and the 'White working class', including the associated advantages those who appropriated White interests, values and identity gained, for example in terms of deserving special policy interventions, receiving priority in state provision and the labour unions. The racialisation of the working class has returned with a vengeance in the last decade, during debates about Trump and Brexit, yet again with a focus on the US and the UK. This has been critically discussed by, for example Bhambra (2017), Virdee and McGeever (2018), Mondon

and Winter (2019), Jardina (2019), Meer (2020) and Shilliam (2020). In considering the race/class nexus we need to be reminded that Whiteness is a not natural fact but a political choice: 'the white worker will not play an effective role in a class movement as someone who sees her interests as white, or as someone who allows leaders to cater to his concerns around whiteness rather than class' (Roediger 2017).

A related aspect to this is the way in which Whiteness also operates intersectionally (McDermott and Ferguson 2022), across identity categories as well as time and place. However, here intersectionality is employed in selective and exclusionary ways, for instance in the idea of a 'White working class' that has been abjected by multiculturalism. This deliberately takes little or no account of the existence of a Black working class, let alone the ways in which working class groups and communities have united across race lines to protest at the workplace and other forms of discrimination and exclusion. The attention to the White working class is often linked to the Brexit vote in the UK (through which it was certainly heavily mobilised), though it has a much longer history, in Britain and beyond (Pitcher 2009). Not only class but also gender is involved. A seemingly fragile White masculinity stretches across colonialism (McClintock 2013, Stoler 2010) through to the 'manosphere' of incels (Gheorghe 2024). The identity intersections combine with and operate across time and place, for instance, the construction of a White working class in 'left behind' locations (Dobbernack 2024), or the racialisation of time, and past and present (Kinouani 2023). Whiteness is also increasingly valorised through operationalising gender (femonationalism) and sexuality (homonationalism) as was articulated by Farris (2017) and Puar (2007). Exploring the resilience, continuities and legacies of Whiteness 'elsewhere' and its newer forms, operationalised through gender and sexuality, is thus much needed.

A third issue social scientists need to consider is how to study 'Whiteness' in contemporary times, given its implicit yet ubiquitous nature. What methods and approaches can social scientists deploy when seeking to investigate White power and resistance to it? One way is to deploy what social scientists have often done: to identify and reveal the multiple expressions of racialised understandings in amongst the discourses of the powerful and the elite, or to examine dominant trends in social media. Other important approaches and methods for investigating White power could include, for example: socio-legal approaches which can trace processes and expose the institutional and legal dismantling of anti-racist programmes in subtle but nonetheless audacious ways; ethnographic research which can examine both the far right and the resistance to the far right; critical discourse analysis revealing how racism is reproduced through denial, through claims that we are post-race, equality and discrimination; and how newer groups such as 'peripherally White' migrants or 'mixed race' people are recruited to, or resist, Whiteness. Social scientists also need to venture further and learn or use newer tools and techniques such as archival methods to trace continuities of White hegemony and comparative methods to show that the struggle against it is not new or specific to one place.

There is also a need to consider epistemological and institutional impediments. Some inhibitors to the study of Whiteness might come from university ethical approval processes which can be conservative. They can be couched as protecting the researchers and the participants, but at the same time inadvertently and unnecessarily encourage more cautious research questions, methods and epistemologies. Research ethics processes can be 'risk adverse' (Hardwick 2023) and thus impact on the study of race and racism, or produce research results which are obvious and insipid. Another issue to be vigilant about is research funding regimes or rather the 'defunding' of certain topics. In the US there have already been successful attempts to drive out the study of inequality, racism, gender and sexuality in federal funding of universities (Mallapaty 2025). The urge not to upset national and international (e.g. EU funding) bodies will be in the minds of many university researchers, not just university leaders across the globe. However, it is not just political constraint. In an increasingly depleted and competitive funding landscape, with higher education funding in crisis, it should come as no surprise if funding applications self-censor or steer away from race and power.

Additionally, revealing White normativity, especially where it is least expected, is going to need creative approaches and novel methodologies. A common and fashionable currency of research these days is 'collaboration', 'co-creation' and 'co-production', principally with non-academic partners such as charities, government organisations and businesses. Whilst such collaborative and co-produced research are not inherently opposed to studying difficult and risky topics, the urge to recruit, maintain and indulge, at least not to upset non-academic collaborators might drive research questions, findings and attention more towards harmony and congruence with partners, and away from a critical examination of dominant ideologies, including how partners, universities or the partnerships themselves might themselves be reproducing the racial order.

Our ambition in this issue is to build on the above themes and concerns but also to expand them, particularly to look beyond the usual sites and places where studies of Whiteness are usually found. In her book *Whiteness Just Isn't What It Used To Be,* Melissa Steyn examines the diminution of Whiteness, focused on South Africa but in relation to its echoes in other parts of the world. Writing in 2001, Steyn points out that sometime before the recent race/decolonial turn in academia post 2020, that Whiteness had become exposed at an academic and societal level. She argues: 'The historical construction of [W]hite privilege, the institutional, rhetorical, discursive, performative, and psychological strategies used to maintain its centred positionality, the economic policies used to enforce and secure advantage, the protection offered by legal systems – these issues are not established as part of academe's analytical repertoire' (2001: xxix). Yet by then, and since, such issues have been mainly exposed and covered predominantly vis à vis the figuration of Whiteness within the Global North, often based on examinations of the US, and the UK. Race and class have often

been at the forefront, as evident in the claims around identity politics and 'left identitarians' that saw movements such as BLM as diversions from class solidarity (Birch and Heideman 2016, Zoubir and Murji 2020). Thus, both the examination of Whiteness 'elsewhere' and the uses of the intersectional lens have remained diffuse and rather scant in the field.

The articles in this special issue expand existing research on Whiteness and explore the new configurations of Whiteness around the globe but also beyond the usual ways it has been examined in the Global North. First, as mentioned above, the articles in this special issue allow us to look at the configuration of Whiteness both within but also beyond the Global North. Whiteness as a political force has a large appeal globally, as the articles in the special issue show. The normative nature of Whiteness is not exclusively produced in the Global North, but also in the Global South, due to legacies of colonialism and empire, connected histories, sociologies and ideologies. It therefore also allows us to trace White power, supremacy, distinctions and privileges globally, exposing the colonial hangovers of Whiteness.

Second, as Whiteness began to be critically interrogated in the Global North, and the superiority of Whiteness came to be increasingly scrutinised amidst a backlash to this very challenge, the need for an examination of Whiteness in other domains, geographies and forms has become all the more urgent. The newer articulations of Whiteness elsewhere serve as a framework for distinction, power and domination between those who are considered of European stock and those who are not. New racial codes are created, older racial alliances are reinterpreted and mobilised, and new alignments with Whiteness are created – these are all processes which need much detailed examination from scholars of race, racism and racialisation.

Third, the articles in the special issue signal and unpack how the Global South is also characterised by complexity arising from problematic racial hierarchical legacies of colonialism. Whiteness is being discovered and rebirthed alongside a revival in the theories of White extinction and White genocide. When such a perceived challenge to Whiteness is on the rise politically in the Global North, Whiteness might seek or find other allies in amongst 'off-White' or 'peripherally White' people in the Global North, and amongst those who see themselves as bastions of Whiteness in the Global South. As Alcoff reminds us (2015: 21) Whiteness 'does not need to be a meaningful biological category for it to designate a meaningful social and historical category'.

The extension of the borders of Whiteness to newer groups and new geographies who are willing to adopt White interests and values is thus not new (Allen 2021 [1997]). It has been part of history as part of European colonialism and settler society. What is worth exploring deeper in the contemporary global configuration of Whiteness, however, is that the formation and maintenance of Whiteness is historical and subject to change, exposed to challenges as well as renewal and thus amenable to be shaped and appropriated by newer

groups (e.g. women, sexual minorities, anti-trans activists, mixed-raced groups or the urban poor of Euro-Americans in South America). How it continues to move to or occupy a position of power and privilege by aligning with the needs and interests of those who promote Whiteness is thus central and our special issue sit at that very junction to interrogate them.

As such the articles of this special issue help begin to uncover and rethink such issues through examining Whiteness globally and sociologically, including rethinking Whiteness in its usual domains but also in new and novel ways, for example in relation to gender and racialisation of language. Morgan Olive-Carmellini's article 'Police and racial identity formation: thinking the Military police of São Paulo as a site of racial socialization to Whiteness' examines racial self-identification in the police force in Brazil, revealing how mixed-race police align with Whiteness, reproducing its ideological domination in Brazil. Macarena Bonhomme's contribution 'Whiteness, housing and the 'Migrant Issue': race and class in urban Chile' looks at the reconfiguration of the Chilean national identity as White through the othering of Latin American and Caribbean migrants in Chile, employing discourses of cleanliness and higher social norms. Aleksandra Lewicki and Maddy Clark in their 'Vigilant Whiteness: racism, transphobia and the mainstreaming of far-right politics in Britain' examine how difference is crafted within reactionary movements. They reveal how the mainstreaming of far-right extremism fosters a particular gendered notion of global Whiteness. Cathine Ann Martin's article entitled 'White with 'native' blood: the formative role of Anglo-Indians in the colonial construction of the White race' historically traces the Anglo-Indians' liminal racial positionality, focusing not just on their construction outside of Whiteness, but also how they were fundamental to the colonial construction of race within colonial India. In her 'Off-White: The Tensions of Whiteness in Quebec' Uzma Jamil examines the internal tensions of Whiteness between the Francophone minority/majority and White Anglophone Canada which she argues creates an off-White Quebec national identity, operated through the racialisation of French as a language. Two of the contributions also turn the attention to Eastern Europe and examine how Whiteness is reconfigured therein. In her 'Representations of Lithuanian migrants in the Lithuanian media: varying degrees of Othering and claims to hegemonic Whiteness', Irma Budginaitė-Mačkinė unpacks how Lithuanian media portray Lithuanian migrants living and working abroad. Her analysis reveals that whilst Lithuanian media challenge the negative tropes and portrayals of Lithuanian migrants, they reproduce Whiteness by positioning Lithuanian migrants over other migrants in their racial hierarchical ordering, reinforcing global hierarchies of difference and Whiteness. In their article entitled 'Eastern Europe's 'peripheral whiteness': class and gender racialization among Polish migrants and returnees' Dominika Blachnicka-Ciacek and Sylwia Urbańska also examine peripheral Whiteness, showing the intersections of gender, race and class in contemporary Poland.

We invite readers to engage with these wide range of arguments. A detailed examination of how Whiteness is understood, appropriated and reconfigured in this special issue is timely

and builds on the strengths of the field of Critical Whiteness Studies (Matias and Boucher 2023) provide a critical assessment of the field), yet with a different orientation and set of case studies. The articles have a global reach as they examine how those who are on the cusp of Whiteness not just in the Global North but also in the Global South situate themselves in relation to Whiteness. Individually and as a whole the articles critically analyse the reproduction and newer articulations of Whiteness, often using an intersectional approach. As such our special issue examines how Whiteness can transform and strengthen its power and influence through mobilising in new and novel ways, through appeals to new geographies and peoples and by diversifying its constituents. In so doing Whiteness also forms a potent resistance to its privilege and supremacy being challenged.

Acknowledgements:

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