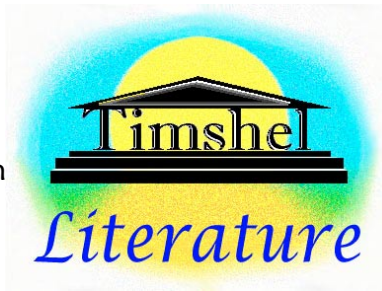


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Just Thinking, 07/14/03:

Stepping to My Whiteness

by Justin Katz

The American university seems to have fallen under closer scrutiny lately. One might be inclined to believe that it has just gone too far in teasing itself away from the reality in which most Americans live, which could reasonably be called “plain ol’ reality.” It might be more correct to suggest that the entire culture is in the process of beginning to pull back from having gone too far. To be sure, it didn’t help their cause that some vocal academics were slow to recognize the changed mood of the nation after September 11, 2001 – even if the new mood swelled and then receded some. Whatever the case, one radical ridge that has come to protrude into public awareness is “whiteness studies.”

Although it has been granted the imprimatur historically reserved for academic disciplines, studying whiteness is far from an objective inquiry. The core assumption on which the research has been built is that the white race has actually seen itself as without race and has imposed the idea of race onto “people of color.” On this basis, professors in the field set out to find evidence of their preexisting conclusion about whiteness: that its defining characteristic – even more definitive than the skin color from which it takes its name – is oppression of “darker” races.

Noel Ignatiev, a white professor at the Massachusetts College of Art with a Ph.D. from Harvard, is a coeditor of *Race Traitor*, a journal with the goal of “bashing the dead white males,

and the live ones, and the females too, until the social construct known as ‘the white race’ is destroyed — not ‘deconstructed’ but destroyed.” If that sounds racist, that’s because it is. However, there are reams of academic mumbo jumbo meant to make the theory too slippery to criticize. Essentially, taking the title of Ignatiev’s book, *How the Irish Became White*, as a clue, the strategy is to define the elite as white and the oppressed as black. So, raising the Irish as an example of an “oppressed” minority group that overcame the obstacles in Western society will yield the explanation that they *were* black, but *became* white.

This redefinition of class distinctions into racial terms is racist, superficial, and abysmally without benefit. Viewed in intellectual terms, it is so useless that every manifestation of the endeavor inherently reeks of the non-intellectual presumptions and bigotry over which the high-sounding verbiage of “critical theory” is draped. It is also perniciously deceptive, with practical conclusions that jettison lessons that class-based analysis ought to suggest; no “expert” in whiteness would recommend including oppressed Caucasians in affirmative action schemes. Appropriately, the most visible — also the most theatrical — exercise in whiteness studies, “the privilege walk,” illustrates this in striking relief.

To give students (or workshop attendees) perspective about the degree to which race separates those in different categories, they are asked to line up in the middle of a room. Based on questions read aloud, they either step forward or backward. Steps forward supposedly indicate “privilege”; steps backward are indicative of “oppression.” The extremely strong preference, in the context in which the game is played, is to take as many steps back as possible.

Nobody rational would claim that the exercise is in any way scientific, but the fact that the entire idea has not been summarily discarded indicates that few will admit how much it relies on preconceptions. Only the rare naif will fail to understand which answer to each question is preferable and which racial group is meant to take a step in a particular direction. In front of their

peers, participants must either move in accord with a stereotype or very visibly contradict others' expectations. The pressure is surely such that white students will move forward at least when their answer is in doubt. Steps back are undoubtedly even more compelling for minority students.

While participating in a privilege walk described by *the Washington Post*, Naomi Cairns, who is white, thought, "Oh my God, here we go again," before she stepped forward to the question of whether she was "certain [she] could get a bank loan whenever [she] wanted." Without taking guesses as to the financial viability of a 24-year-old college junior, one might reasonably wonder on what basis she decided to put her privilege on display. Many white students would be mistaken to do so for that particular manifestation of privilege, and many might be surprised by that discovery.

Other questions are even more closely tuned to preconceptions. In a column in which he racked up a score of 10 steps back, British-born, naturalized American John Derbyshire puts his finger on this aspect of the test in response to a question about whether he had ever seen members of his "race, ethnic group, gender, or sexual orientation portrayed on television in degrading roles." "I can't believe they are serious," he declares. "My 'gender' [by which I assume they mean my sex]? *Degrading?* Have these cretins *ever* watched *any* TV sitcom?" (emphasis and bracket in original).

Some of questions that Mr. Derbyshire answered had more to do with self-perception than social inequity; for example, a participant would be rewarded with a step back if he chose to classify himself within a subgroup of "American." Still others, such as those having to do with racial epithets and insecurity about appearance, would surely garner looks should the wrong person step in the right direction. Most extremely, some questions are intellectually incoherent. "If you ever inherited money or property, take one step forward." Beyond leaving room for various determinations about whether certain values or pieces of property require a step forward or allow a step back, among the young men and women who make up the majority of "privilege

walkers,” stepping forward would be an indication of prematurely deceased parents. How would that be a privilege? One wonders whether the authors of these exercises have *any* practical life experience at all.

As indicated by the manipulation of circumstances, the careful (if inane) phrasing, and the complete irrelevance of the findings, “whiteness studies” more closely resemble an ideological marketing campaign than an honest assessment of history and society. On that basis, they certainly demonstrate that higher education has drifted too far from its mission. They are perfectly emblematic of a vocational virus that has become so pervasive as to make inroads even into the sciences: the distortion and stroking of cultural trends in such a way as to justify a career.