Whiteness in a Black City: Who Gets to Fit In

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– Cynthia Dagnal-Myron, in response to the killing of Trayvon Martin.

Introduction

On February 26, 2012, at approximately 7:25 pm a seventeen-year-old African American boy was shot and killed in Sanford, Florida. The young man died unarmed with nothing more than a little cash, a bag of Skittles, and a can of iced tea. The teenager’s killer was an armed twenty-eight-year-old white Latino man. On March 14, the parents of the deceased boy created a petition on Change.org asking the Florida authorities “to investigate my son’s murder and prosecute George Zimmerman for the shooting and killing of Trayvon Martin.” Soon thereafter, their son, Trayvon Martin, as well as his killer, George Zimmerman, became household names across the nation. According to CNN, “within a week, it is the second most-popular petition in the website’s history, with 877,110 signatures.” Currently, the online petition has approximately 2.3 million signatures (as of November of 2013). Even President Obama has spoken publicly on the controversy, remarking, “if I had a son, he’d look like Trayvon” and that the nation is in need of some “soul-searching to figure out how does something like this happen.” Whether or not Zimmerman justly acted in self-defense or maliciously committed murder by following the demons of his own prejudice, the death of Trayvon Martin erupted into a national crisis that questioned the practice of racial profiling and the exclusivity of whiteness.

In light of the contemporary backlash and debate on the existence and practices of racial profiling, are hegemonic powers enforcing social understandings of what constitutes whiteness versus blackness? Does being black make one presumably dangerous? And being white make one presumably a more likely victim? What other characteristics are associated with
whiteness? In order to grapple with these questions, I will apply the Foucauldian concept of *discourse* to examine whiteness as a dominant ideology in US contemporary society.

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, French theorist Michel Foucault introduces his theory of “discourse,” referring to the way in which competing ideologies (or individualized group(s) of statements) are formed by people and then able to dominate amongst societies of people. *Discourses* produce knowledge in mediums that a society perceives as normative, taken for granted as understood; meanwhile, in doing so, *discourses* pervasively shape how the people in that society think, act and react. Foucault describes *discourses* as “pre-existing forms of continuity,” in which “all these syntheses… are accepted without question, [but] must remain in suspense.”

Foucault urges that “the tranquility with which [discourses] are accepted must be disturbed; we must show that they do not come about of themselves, but are always the result of a construction the rules of which must be known, and the justifications of which must be scrutinized.” Dominant in many societies historically and internationally, there exists a hegemonic *discourse* of whiteness that often pervades white and non-white perceptions and behaviors, and this paper strives to identify and scrutinize some of the rules and justifications that have constructed this *discourse*.

The *discourse* of whiteness has been made especially explicit in the news and reactions surrounding the recent death of Trayvon Martin, but its hegemonic breadth has spread far away from Sanford, FL, into Washington, DC, as well. Positioned within the majority black city of the District of Columbia, the *discourse* of whiteness takes on a unique form in people’s imagination of this particular urban criminal landscape. Through data collected from fieldwork during a police ride-along in the city as well as interviews with two DC residents, born and raised, I will illuminate upon how the Foucauldian concept of a *discourse* applies to how whiteness is discussed, viewed and treated by authority figures and residents of the capital city. I will first present data to support that a *discourse* of whiteness truly exists. Second, I will examine the rules for inclusion in and exclusion from whiteness in the District, and third I will analyze the consequences of this *discourse* of whiteness, and racial profiling specifically. This research is exploratory in nature, given that my fieldwork thus far is not extensive enough yet to make any definitive conclusions, and I hope this paper will invoke additional anthropologists to further examine *discourses* of race and ethnicity within and beyond the United States’ capital, and the implications at stake.

**Methodology**

Washington, DC, remains a highly segregated city, due to interconnected forces of race and social class. In order to collect data on the *discourse* of whiteness, I looked at how race is experienced by residents and law-enforcers throughout the city. Without the time and resources to conduct representative sampling in order to produce this student paper for an undergraduate course on “Methods in Sociocultural Anthropology,” I gathered a purposeful sample through fieldwork and two interviews with people from a variety of racial backgrounds. Please note that for sake of anonymity, all names of police officers and interviewees have been replaced with pseudonyms.

I conducted four hours of fieldwork as a police ride-along on Saturday, February 25, 2012, during the 7:00 to 11:00 pm shift at District Six. The Metropolitan Police Department’s (MPD) Sixth District covers...
parts of the Northeast and Southeast quadrants of DC, east of the Anacostia River—a notorious border between affluence and poverty in the city. Officers working for the Sixth District patrol neighborhoods in Wards Seven and Eight, where the “black or African American” population composes 94.9 percent and 93.5 percent of the Ward’s total residents, respectively, according to the 2010 Census. Thus, District Six is home to a significant portion of low-income African Americans specifically, where many live in affordable or low-income housing projects such as Simple City.

To complement my fieldwork research, I conducted two interviews with local DC residents. Each interview was semi-structured and followed the same set of primarily open-ended questions regarding various DC neighborhoods, and their perceived racial/ethnic and socio-economic characteristics. Both interviewees, Maria and Fernanda, were born and raised in the District, and have resided, attended school and work, and visited friends in a wide variety of DC neighborhoods. At the time of the interview in 2012, Maria was seventeen years old and a Junior at Bell Multicultural High School, living in Columbia Heights and had an internship with DC government. Fernanda was twenty-two years old, living in Shepherd Park and working as an Administrative Specialist in a DC government agency, while attending classes at Montgomery Community College. At the time of fieldwork, I was also volunteering as an intern at the same DC government agency where both Maria and Fernanda were interning and working, respectively, and through this relationship I inquired if they would be willing to be interviewed for this research project. Maria and Fernanda both identify as Latina, however they each have unique racial identities within this pan-ethnic category. Maria self-identifies herself as a second-generation “black Hispanic,” with parents from the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua. In comparison, Fernanda is a very fair-skinned Salvadorian American, who is at times mistaken as Caucasian. Thus, together, this purposeful sample of interviewees spans a variety of racial identities and perceptions (i.e. from white to black to Latino), and encapsulates experiences from two individuals who are very familiar with the socio-cultural landscape of various neighborhoods in the District.

My own perspective and identity as the ethnographer added an additional contextual variable to the fieldwork conducted, important to keep in mind while reading through this preliminary ethnography. During the time of fieldwork, I was twenty-two years old and had lived in the District for almost four years, in the Foggy Bottom and Dupont neighborhoods. I self-identify as a middle-class female fair-skinned Caucasian, originally born and raised in Massachusetts. I am fluent in English and nearly fluent in Spanish as well. When explaining the purpose of my project and requesting their consent, I conveyed to all interviewees and police officers that I was an undergraduate student at the George Washington University. My position as “white,” female and part of the middle-class, amongst other characteristics, certainly influenced what was said or acted in my presence, and what was omitted—although evidence pinpointing specific incidences of these effects was difficult to locate. The police officers at times seemed to treat the ride-along as a spectacle—for example, driving slowly by housing projects with residents socializing out front, and stopping the car to escort me into abandoned buildings to show evidence of drug use and defecation inside. I perceived this as their attempt to entertain and/or shock someone who was clearly an outsider to the NE and SE neighborhoods they were patrolling, although I was not entirely certain of their motive. My interactions with interviewees Maria and Fernanda were a bit more relaxed, given that I...
had a pre-established relationship with each of them through my then-current internship.

In order to review these various data collected, I extrapolated instances in which people explicitly or implicitly spoke of race and ethnicity, or had experiences shaped by racial/ethnic contexts. Next I coded this data in order to identify patterns within white and non-white perceptions and behaviors. I clustered together themes, such as socio-economic status, types of language, and criminal activity. Within each of these themes, I unpacked the relationship of how various characteristics correlate to whiteness and/or a lack of whiteness.\textsuperscript{xiv}

**Presentation of Data and Analysis**

A Foucauldian discourse is a collection of statements, ideologically competing with other discourses that embody other collections of statements. Thus the discourse of whiteness embodies a collection of statements that all contribute to an understanding of whiteness as a marker of superiority e.g. socio-economically, socially, culturally, politically, criminally. The Root recently reposted a blog entry by Michael Skolnik, a white man’s commentary on the allegedly racist killing of the young black Trayvon Martin by the white Latino George Zimmerman:

I will never look suspicious to you. Even if I have a black hoodie, a pair of jeans and white sneakers on ... in fact, that is what I wore yesterday ... I still will never look suspicious. No matter how much the hoodie covers my face or how baggie my jeans are, I will never look out of place to you. I will never watch a taxi cab pass me by to pick someone else up. I will never witness someone clutch their purse tightly against their body as they walk by me. I won’t have to worry about a police car following me for two miles, so they can ‘run my plates.’ I will never have to pay before I eat. And I certainly will never get ‘stopped and frisked.’ I will never look suspicious to you, because of one thing and one thing only. The color of my skin. I am white.\textsuperscript{ xv}

Skolnik’s blog post was published online through the African American newspaper The Root, in an article entitled “White People Will Never Look Suspicious Like Trayvon Martin.” This post was not unique, and the ideas discussed were not new or rare. The discourse of whiteness does exist, and it is powerful. Floating about other discourses pertaining to alternative understandings of race, ethnicity and identity, the discourse of whiteness often emerges dominantly above the rest. The tragic death of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin on February 26, 2012, erupted an out roar of grief, anger, and activism from the African American population of the US. In response, many blacks as well as some whites, such as this blogger, came forth with their own stories of experiencing racial profiling, for better or for worse.

Skolnik, as a white male, discusses the automatic benefits he is granted by simply being white. People are not afraid of him; people do not view him as a criminal or cheapskate. As he writes, “I will never look suspicious to you, because of one thing and one thing only. The color of my skin. I am white.”\textsuperscript{xvi} Whiteness implies higher socio-economic status, less likelihood of criminal activity, and less need for suspicion by individuals and authorities.
A Foucauldian *discourse* involves rules of inclusion and exclusion that are continuously established and re-established through peoples' social practices and perceptions. Within the *discourse* of whiteness, these rules dictate who is included within the realm of whiteness and who is excluded from the realm of whiteness. Higher socio-economic class, upward mobility and success in school, living in suburbia, and vulnerability to victimization by criminals (rather than being the culprits) all seem to be equated with whiteness. Conversely, lower socio-economic class, teenage pregnancy, poor performance in school, "ghetto" language, living in an urban setting, and criminal activity all appear to be equated with blackness and/or a lack of whiteness. Simultaneously, these rules of inclusion and exclusion for the *discourse* of whiteness are enacted and embodied by the actions, experiences and perspectives encountered in my ethnographic data. I will focus my analysis specifically on how whiteness corresponds to issues of social class, criminal activity, upward mobility and academic success, and teenage pregnancy.

The concept of gentrification, a popular topic in DC politics and community concerns, exhibits a direct correlation between whiteness and higher socio-economic class. Gentrification refers to a trend in which waves of middle and upper class people move into traditionally lower class neighborhoods of a city, often in areas where "revitalization" projects bring in construction of new shopping centers and more expensive housing. The process of gentrification is also intrinsically linked to race, particularly in such a racially segregated city as the District where, for example, Ward 3's population is 83.5 percent white, in comparison to Ward 7's 94.9 percent black population on the other side of the Anacostia River. Often the influx of people from higher social classes and increased housing costs causes a displacement of the working class people who once lived in the area—and often these wealthier people moving in are white, while those who become displaced and move out to less expensive neighborhoods are non-white (e.g. African American or Latino).

During the course of my two interviews, both long-term DC residents Maria and Fernanda directly referenced gentrification and how it has affected the socio-economic and racial landscape of Ward 1 and the Columbia Heights neighborhood specifically. When asked about how she would describe Ward 1, Maria immediately replied that it is "where the money's at, like, you know, it's more—people would come here and prefer to live here." I asked Maria to elaborate on what she meant by "where the money's at," and she began to describe recent changes specifically in the Columbia Heights neighborhood:

Oh because like um you know there's like a little mall thing here and um they have condos—... As soon as they started building the mall [DC-USA, where e.g. Target is]... Everything started like changing cuz it was really just like a Hispanic and black neighborhood but as soon as they started building condos more white people came in... And I guess like that's the whole gender-something.

I was surprised—already at seventeen years old Maria was familiar with the term gentrification, although she fumbled at remembering the exact name of it. I asked her, "gentrification?" and she shook her head in agreement, "Yeah." Furthermore, Maria specifically linked the construction of new (presumably more expensive) condos as a driving force that caused an influx of white people, when she said "as soon as they started building condos more white people came in."

When discussing her perception of Ward 1, Fernanda also immediately jumped to the issue of gentrification in Columbia Heights.
Fernanda described how “Columbia Heights... used to be kind of not as gentrified as it is today and we see that when condos are put in the area that because of all the businesses um that has gone up, you also have some change in the people who actually live in the area.” Similar to Maria, she went on to note the change in specifically the racial landscape from mostly African Americans and Latinos to an increase in whites:

Um, well, from what I remember, it used to be predominantly a Hispanic/Latino neighborhood with um I guess African Americans as well Um, but then because of all the—well I don’t know if it was because of, but definitely a lot of the property value has gone up and so has rent so it tends to have a lot more of um Caucasians moving in the area or I guess people who earn a higher income...

Fernanda understood white Caucasians as “people who earn a higher income” and directly attracted to the area once “the property value has gone up.” Together, Fernanda and Maria’s depictions of gentrification reveal how whiteness is often associated with people from a higher income bracket. Conversely, Maria and Fernanda also associate non-whiteness, embodied by the “Hispanic and black” population, with a lower income bracket who’s presence is decreasing as the neighborhood becomes a more expensive place to live.

Who is included in and excluded from the discourse of whiteness is also exhibited through practices of racial profiling. Racial profiling refers to a means of utilizing racial stereotypes and generalizations to judge a person based on preconceived notions pertinent to that person’s race. Within my fieldwork and interviews, I encountered two instances of reverse racial profiling in which police mistook a person as white in a presumably non-white neighborhood. Each of these instances of mistaken whiteness show how the discourse of whiteness generates particular perceptions and reactions to the encountering of a white body amongst a neighborhood largely composed of black bodies.

One instance occurred during my fieldwork as a police ride-along in the Sixth District. During the last hour of the ride-along from around 10:00 to 11:00 pm, I was in the car of Officers White and Gray. Driving the car was Officer White, who is questionably white (possibly Latino or another ethnicity/race), male, and approximately mid-thirties. Officer Gray, sitting shotgun, is African American, male, and a bit older—approximately mid-fifties or sixties in age. We were driving around the area when Officers White and Gray see another police car already pulled over with his overhead lights blinking. Officer White pulled our police car over behind the other car to check out what was going on. Rolling down the window, Officers White and Gray ask the officers outside what was happening. A white male officer leaned into the window and explained that they had pulled over a girl with a suspended license who was also drunk driving, and still sipping on an alcoholic drink.

Then Officer Gray asked the cop outside at the scene: “is that a white chick?” and the outside policeman responds: “No.” The conversation quickly ends and the officers exchange goodbyes and we drive away from the scene. A few minutes later as we are driving in the police car again, Officer Gray addresses Alyssa (a second student ride-along) and I: “you’re prolly asking yourselves why he [referencing himself] asked if that girl was white.” Alyssa and I looked up in silence. Officer Gray went on to explain how there are not a lot of white people in this area (MPD District Six). He explained, “white people stick out like a sore thumb, that’s why I asked.” Furthermore, Officer Gray described
how if the cops do come across a white person [presumably a white person outside of those on the police force itself], they can assume that “either they lost, buying some drugs or getting ready to make yourself a victim.”

My interviewee Fernanda, a very fair-skinned Salvadorian American twenty-two-year-old who has lived in DC her entire life, provided the second example of mistaken whiteness as an anecdote of her own experiences. After our formal interview had ended and we broke into more casual conversation, Fernanda and I began to discuss the issue of racial profiling by the police. Fernanda gave an example of when she was younger [presumably in high school] and hanging out with friends in Ward 8 and she was stopped by a police officer and asked if she was okay because she was “light-skinned.” [From personal experience I know that people often think Fernanda is Caucasian and do not realize she is Latina.] Fernanda went on to say how this also would occur to her when she hung out with friends in Ward 4. Fernanda explained to me that the police treated her differently because she was “light-skinned.” Fernanda said, “police officers acted nicer to me… otherwise they might ask me, ‘well why are you here?’” given that the area was mostly composed of African American and Latino people. However, she then added that she got this nicer reception from police “unless they realized I was Spanish or something.” Note that Latinos are thus not included in Fernanda’s or the police’s (from what she’s encountered) definition of “white” people.

In both examples, whiteness is seen as out-of-place in locations notorious for high crime rates. In Fernanda’s example, her mistaken whiteness made her more visible and of concern to police—not because they saw her as a troublemaker but as someone not familiar with the area, and implicitly as someone they saw as a potential victim. Not only that, but she claimed police officers also “acted nicer” to her. In her anecdotes, Fernanda recalled these interactions with police occurring to her when she was hanging out with friends in Wards 8 and 4, presumably in the neighborhoods of these wards with more dangerous reputations. During my fieldwork with Officer Gray, he explained quite clearly that not only is there a lack of white people in that area of Ward 6, but that if a white person is encountered, “either they lost, buying some drugs or getting ready to make yourself a victim.” Also, this side of District Six (parts of Wards Seven and Eight), where the police were patrolling, is notoriously a dangerous area. Again, there is a concern that a white person is out-of-place or “lost” and about to be victimized. These two incidences exemplify how the discourse of whiteness includes victims to crime who are perceived as out-of-place in dangerous neighborhoods. In contrast, this discourse excludes suspected criminals and perpetrators of crime who are perceived as fitting in amongst rougher areas; who are associated instead with blackness or non-whiteness.

Preferential treatment and higher expectations for academic success and upward mobility amongst white youth are additional characteristics included within the discourse of whiteness. As I continued interviewing Fernanda, she began to speak of her own experiences in middle and high school that she interpreted as racially discriminative treatment due to her lack of whiteness. Fernanda spoke of her experience at Hardy Middle School, where a white teacher “would treat the Caucasian students better a lot than the African American blacks or Latinos.” Fernanda went on to describe how he had this kind of thing where it’s like anyone who was not white or Asian were dumb, and incapable of learning.” From her experiences in the DC public school system, Fernanda also discussed how whiteness was a marker of academic potential that
encouraged teachers to put in more time and effort into their education. In comparison, she felt that teachers often expected non-white black or Latino students to be more likely to drop out of high school and fail academically.

Fernanda also discussed her experiences of how some teachers at the public schools imposed expectations of teenage pregnancy onto particular kinds of people. According to Fernanda, teenage pregnancy, laden throughout US society with a lot of social stigma, was an expectation for young Latina girls. For example, she described her experience at Wilson High School:

Um, and then you also have [African American] teachers who were just ignorant. Like they would say things like—it was funny to me because one year actually there was more African American girls who were pregnant than Latina girls and all they would say is if you’re Latina the only thing you’re good for is having kids. You’re not going to finish school because you’re going to get pregnant.

Within her description, Fernanda distinguished that the expectation of teenage pregnancy, in her experiences, applied mostly to Latinas (not as much to African Americans). This expectation, placed upon her by some of her African American high school teachers, also embodied the tensions that existed between the African American teachers and students, and the Latino students at Wilson High School. Nonetheless, Fernanda explicitly excludes white students from her discussion of teenage pregnancy, indicating that the discourse of whiteness excludes an expectation of teenage pregnancy.

The hegemonic discourse of whiteness evidently has real-life consequences in how police officers, teachers and other individuals perceive and react to whites and non-whites. The discourse of whiteness and racial profiling can result in behaviors of racial discrimination, as well as attitudes of lower expectations and biased assumptions about individuals based on the color of their skin. My data suggest that individual white people are associated with a number of positive qualities, such as higher socio-economic status and academic success, while non-whites are associated with more negative qualities. Although additional positive associations are associated with non-whiteness and negative associations with whiteness, those collections of statements are excluded from the dominant discourse of whiteness. Meanwhile, those associations that are within the discourse of whiteness often incite discriminatory practices and beliefs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my evidence suggests that DC is home to a dominant discourse of whiteness. Within which, notions of higher socio-economic status, victimization rather than perpetrators of crime, expectations for upward mobility and academic success are often associated with racial whiteness. In contrast, notions of poverty and lower income, criminality, teenage pregnancy, high school dropouts, academic failure are often associated with a lack of whiteness and/or racial blackness and/or Latino-ness. Note that this data does not suggest the existence of homogenous racial categories that indicate these social, cultural and economic issues. Race is a social construction, and there are certainly many degrees of contestation and ambiguity within and across racial categories. However, evidenced through this data on the discourse of whiteness, race nonetheless continues to affect how people are often perceived, profiled, and treated within social contexts.

The case of the young black Trayvon Martin
who was killed by a white Latino, George Zimmerman, and the out roar of media, political, and activist responses that erupted in response, embody the power of racial profiling and its potentially negative effects. As Cynthia Dagnal-Myron writes in her article, “For Trayvon and Emmitt: My ‘Walking While Black’ Stories”:

The first thing that happened was I was thinking about all the confusion that was going on about what had actually happened, and as a black woman, I was just thinking about my own life experiences and how none of this really surprised me, because of the things that had happened to me. So, as all this was swirling—and it’s beginning to get worse—I was just thinking about how most of us, most black women and men, have had experiences—we call it ‘walking while black.’ We’ve all had these experiences. So, for us, this was just another instance of someone being mistaken for a thug or something he was not. And it was just—I was angry. That’s all I can say. I was just angry.

Although, as Officer Gray discussed, racial profiling can be useful to identify persons likely to be lost or victimized, racial profiling and stereotypes often have a more negative effect particularly upon those non-white bodies excluded from the discourse of whiteness. The discourse of whiteness is a dominant discourse pervading the minds of a wide range of members in society from police officers to teachers to students to other residents. Although racial profiling to an extent may help people organize and understand chaos upon first meeting a stranger, racial profiling often results in negative stigma, assumptions, expectations and even lethal acts of discrimination against non-white bodies.

If I were to continue my research in the future, I would focus primarily on conducting additional fieldwork—to develop the ethnographic aspect of my research through on-site experience over long periods of time. I would participate in numerous rides-along with DC’s Metropolitan Police Department across all eight wards of the city, during various shift times and days of the week. I would interview additional people living, working and attending school in different neighborhoods of DC, who represent a more diverse range in age, race, ethnicity, and gender. Meanwhile, I would keep extensive field notes of all observations and ideas for analysis, and continue to record and transcribe all interviews. In addition, I encourage other anthropologists to build off this preliminary research to further bolster or conversely to challenge the claims I have made regarding the existence of a discourse of whiteness, the rules for its inclusion or exclusion and its consequences, in Washington, DC or other urban landscapes in the US or abroad.

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ix Ibid.


xix For a further discussion of gentrification and its racial and socio-economic implications in DC, please see: Gabriella Gahlia Modan, Turf Wars: Discourse, Diversity and the Politics of Place (Melbourne: Blackwell, 2007).

xx Fieldwork note: ironically, Officers “White” and “Gray” requested these particular pseudonyms to be included in my paper.