1. WHITE NOISE

Writing in critical whiteness studies is a precarious activity, not only in terms of the ways in which white writers on whiteness attempt to destabilize and centre their own whiteness, but also as it does not have discrete disciplinary foundations. There are many works published on whiteness and there is exponential growth in terms of recent interrogations of whiteness. It is no longer enough to make whiteness strange, it has almost become normalized as the standard way of ‘doing’ race within a number of fields of endeavor including education. Even despite this sudden explosion in whiteness studies, it can not be considered to be a unitary discipline. It is a series of archipelagos around fields of cultural studies, post-colonial theories, sociology, political economy and literary theories. This means that writing on whiteness is inter-disciplinary and in this book I use a number of theoretical approaches, primarily from sociology and political economy, but also from cultural and media studies, law (primarily critical legal theory) as well as (obviously) from education studies. As a controversial endeavor, writing on whiteness often feels to be fueled on internal critique. Studies on whiteness reveal that it has burned itself out (‘this is the last book that should be published on whiteness’), that it is racist (re-centering discourses on whites) and that it appropriates the work of black scholars. As to the last point, whiteness studies can be seen to be the latest attempt by whites to forge an academic version of what Cashmore (1997) calls the ‘Black Culture
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Industry’. Just as Elvis ripped off black musical forms and practices, so too the ‘great whites’ of critical whiteness studies can be said to appropriate Du Bois or Fanon in order to sell black analysis in a palatable form to white readers. It is therefore a precarious activity writing in whiteness studies both in terms of shifting around disciplinary perspectives and in terms of the self examination and scrutiny that white writers are put under when they turn their attention to their ‘so-called’ white skin.

2. WHAT IS WHITENESS?

A number of terms are used within texts on whiteness. As a designation of ethnicity, white and White (The title of Dyer’s seminal 1997 book) are used but to show the social and political construction of whiteness, others refer to ‘so-called whites’ (Ignatiev and Garvey, 1996). The ambiguity of whiteness in certain contexts is demonstrated through terms such as ‘intermediate whiteness’, ‘situationally white’, ‘not quite white’, ‘semi-racialised’ and ‘conditionally white’ (Roediger, 2005). Whiteness is linked with class in that some individuals are pathologised as poor ‘white trash’ (Wray and Newitz, 1997) or even ‘rich white trash’. The ways in which whiteness works as a system of oppression are revealed in discussions of ‘white privilege’ (McIntosh, 1997) which depends upon the legal status of ‘whiteness as property’. These are reinforced by ‘white practices’ of white ethnic solidarity and racism and systemically by a system of ‘white supremacy’ (Allen, 2001, 2004; hooks, 1999; Mills, 2004). Some authors speak of whiteness whereas others contend that there are multiple forms of whiteness(es) (Bonnett, 2000). Even the name of the field of enquiry is disputed with some considering that ‘white studies’ is a collective name for those who work in the area whereas others consider that ‘critical white studies’ is a better term. More extremely, authors consider that the study of whiteness is a politically naïve project and it would be better to ‘abolish whiteness’ in a form of ‘neo-abolitionism’ (Ignatiev and Garvey, 1996).

As this lexicon of whiteness shows it is not fully accurate to describe whiteness as a contested term. Rather it is a combative term across which a number of disputes are gathered regarding the nature of race in general, as well as the specifics of the white race and whether or not such a thing meaningfully exists, in particular. One of the key themes in this book is the importance of distinguishing between the category white, whiteness, white practices, white privilege and white supremacy. Following Ignatiev and Garvey (1996) I consider the category white to represent a political category which is historically and socially reproduced. Moreover, the decision to occupy the category white is one which collectives and states make political