Chapter 5

TAKE THE SKINHEADS BOWLING?
What should educators do about white supremacists in the classroom?

1. EVERYDAY AND EXTREMIST WHITE SUPREMACY

In critical work on whiteness there has been a retreat from examining white supremacy as an individual, psychological or societal aberration and towards considering it to be a systemic socio-political system of oppression. This is not as much as the genesis of a theory of white supremacy as a re-discovery of the concept. Themes of white supremacy are implicit and explicit in the work of theorists such as Du Bois (1989, first published 1903) for example and hooks (1989) who states that rather than racism explaining the way in which whites exploited black people the ‘…most useful term was white supremacy’ (p. 112). Much of the current work in CRT and critical whiteness studies alludes to earlier theorists of white supremacy and stresses the continuing relevance of it to demystifying social and economic power relations. Within current understandings of what might broadly called white supremac(ies) there are different genealogies of this work. Mills (2001), for example, argues for a revival of white supremacy as a descriptive and analytical concept based in political economy. He argues that the term is valuable as it carries with it the ‘connotation of systematicity’ and shifts the focus of racism to the ‘…realm of structures and power, it helps highlight the most important thing from the perspective of justice, which is how the white population benefits illicitly from its social location’ (Mills, 2004, p. 31). Mills (2004) considers white supremacy to be distinct from Marxist...
exploitation in that it involves a generalised form of transaction where race ‘…determines or significantly modifies the nature of the transaction between them’ (Mills, 2004, p. 38, my italics). As in Marxian exploitation the ‘nature’ of transactions between whites and non-whites are seen as being a naturalised category. Explicitly, in a system of white supremacy, the status of individuals of different races (white and those racialised as occupying positions ‘othered’ from whiteness) has been structured and legitimated as unequal so that people of colour occupy a disadvantaged position in law as well as under other institutional and social arrangements. Mill’s consideration of the nature of transactions is broader than Marx’s emphasis on the economic and includes Du Bois’ emphasis on the psychological ‘wages of whiteness’ as well as the monetary. Ansley (1997) calls theories such as Mill’s of white supremacy ‘race models’ (in contrast to class models) that have political consequences and which are not necessarily (or even evidently) restricted to capitalist economies:-

‘White supremacy produces material and psychological benefits for whites, while extracting a heavy material and psychological price from blacks. It assures the former greater resources, a wider range of personal choice, more power, and more self-esteem than they would have if they were forced to share the above with people of color, and deprived of the subjective sensation of superiority they enjoy as a result of the subordination of non-whites. According to this “race model” this is the reason why whites resist an end to white supremacy: they have a stake in the system and they will fight to defend it…White supremacist regimes are, in fact, not confined to any particular political economy. They can be shown to exist in non-capitalist economies, including socialist ones’

(Ansley, 1997, p. 592 – my italics)

In other conceptions of white supremacy, Ansley’s conception of the heavy material and psychological price from blacks is of central importance in considering the operation of white supremacy as a contemporary and damaging form of practice rather than as a historically established system from which whites unconsciously benefit. Leonardo (2005) considers acknowledgement of the current and active participation of whites in this system to be an important theoretical and political movement away from discourses of white privilege to those of white supremacy. White privilege, such as the lists discussed by McIntosh in terms of her detailing of forty six benefits of white advantage (MacInstosh, 2001) rather than de-mystifying whiteness re-mystifies it as something that occurs unconsciously, even benignly in white lives:-