Certainly, an invitation to write a piece for Manning Marable’s journal: Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture and Society was met with great enthusiasm. Joe was anxious to integrate his work on whiteness with his original work looking at the South and place. Placing his piece in this journal was a way to meet a new audience, outside of education. Anyone who has ever worked with or learned with Joe knows that positionality is an essential element in cognition and empowerment. Joe has often discussed his notion that ideology must always trump positionality…that what one knew and felt was more significant than how one appeared. Taking this idea to heart, every moment of Joe’s life was spent with recognition that he was privileged, that he was white, middle class, educated, and identified with the dominant culture. Taking note of Aaron Gresson’s theory of recovery, Joe blended his work on the Old South, the Modern South, and the contemporary South with the articulation of whiteness. This piece, in my opinion, is one of Joe’s finest articles. In a sort of second degree of separation motif, our son, Ian, was the managing editor of Souls at the time. To say Joe was incredibly proud of Ian would be, indeed, an understatement. SS

JOE L. KINCHELOE

14. THE SOUTHERN PLACE AND RACIAL POLITICS

Southernification, Romanticization, and the Recovery of White Supremacy

The political changes that have rocked the United States over the last few decades are profound. In other work I have argued that a central dimension of a right-wing movement in American political life has revolved around the perception among many white people that because of the Civil Rights Movement and social policies such as affirmative action, the real victims of racism in America in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are white people, white men in particular. In this essay I would like to employ what my colleague, Aaron Gresson first labeled as the recovery-of-white-supremacy thesis (subsequently referenced as the recovery movement) in relation to some important issues in African American studies as they relate to views of the South—especially the romanticization of the region—and the larger process of the Southernification of the United States. Using a critical theoretical/pedagogical base, such analysis opens new perspectives on Black politics in the last half of the first decade of the twenty-first century.1

THE SOUTH, RACIAL POLITICS, AND THE WHITE RECOVERY MOVEMENT

In the tradition of Black Studies’ radical eye, my work as a white Southerner engages a critical interracialism that avoids essentialism as it works for racial, class, and
gender justice. In this context I’ve used the conceptual lenses of a critical multiculturalism to explore the evolving nature of racism and racial identity in the contemporary era. In my work in whiteness studies I have operated on the assumption that whiteness studies conducted by white people must always be undertaken as an interracial act. A study of whiteness suffers when it is not directly connected to African American studies, Latino/Chicano studies, indigenous studies, ethnic studies, and postcolonialism and the way white power and the historical white construction of “reason” have attempted to position non-white peoples. Obviously, the histories of the world’s various peoples in general as well as non-European peoples in Western societies in particular have often been told from a white historiographical perspective. Such accounts have erased the values, epistemologies, ontologies, and belief systems that grounded the cultural practices of these diverse peoples. In this essay these concerns and modes of analysis will be brought to bear on the South, the growing Southernification of the United States, and the racial politics surrounding this larger manifestation of whiteness.

A critical understanding of whiteness/white power and its effect on racial politics is possible only if we understand in great specificity the multiple meanings of whiteness and their effects on the way white consciousness is historically structured and socially inscribed. Without such appreciations and the meta-consciousness they ground, an awareness of the privilege and dominance of white Northern European vantage points is buried in the cemetery of power evasion. The mutations in white consciousness over the last few decades join other occluded insights into whiteness in this conceptual graveyard. Students of African American studies need to exhume such concepts in the pursuit of a contemporary understanding of Black life in the twenty-first century.

One way to mitigate the repressive effects of this hegemonic white power is bring the multilogicality of postcolonialism to the conceptual mix. Central to the critical study of whiteness and its effects on people of color is an appreciation of the historical origins of the twentieth century anti-colonial rebellion movements that emerged in Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia. All of these movements, including indigenous peoples’ movements around the world, can be connected to a more inclusive anti/postcolonialism whose origins can be traced to these movements. Familiarity with the multiple perspectives emerging from such an anti/postcolonialism moves disciplines of knowledge to new conceptual domains. In the ruins of traditional disciplinarity the multilogicality of these new perspectives and their relationships to other ways of seeing are invaluable to critical scholars.

Inject the South and Southern studies into this critical theoretical mix. Many white Southerners in the contemporary socio-cultural landscape prefer to focus on the wounds inflicted on them rather than on the injustices they have imposed on others. Here rests a central force driving contemporary American socio-political life. As working class and numerous middle level jobs have been outsourced to parts unknown, many white males have been introduced to a situation African Americans and other people of color have suffered with for a long time—a declining domain for individual development and progression. In this new context fewer white men are going to college. In this twenty-first century context some of these southern