Beyond Occasional Whiteness

All peoples can fall into Whiteness under the appropriate circumstances . . .

—Charles Mills (The Racial Contract, 128)

America at the end of the 20th century witnessed a new revelation of an old apparition that demands unremitting theoretical vigilance. Euphemistically, it could be called “white surprise”—the surprise that race remains a live issue in America and racial violence recurs. It is a surprise that comes to us in unwanted irony, harsh with epiphany. In 1995 alone, for instance, surprise that black people generally (though not, it must be noted and understood, “unanimously”) responded with joy to the O. J. Simpson acquittal, while white people generally (with a similar caveat) were depressed and angered. Surprise that Louis Farrakan could be a major player in the mobilization of a million black men of various religious persuasions to descend on Washington, DC in an auburn hour of activism one fall. Surprise that southern churches were burning again, leaving ash piles that were largely black. Surprise, really, because it was no surprise at all that a Ted Koppel late-spring interview with white people from Wisconsin (or was it Willamette, or Wilcox, or Walla Walla?) in a segment of Nightline entitled “America in Black and White” revealed a people decidedly “not preoccupied with race or the question of their own whiteness.” Race was something in the past, a problem still found here and there, in the outback of Idaho or in the imagination of the academy. Or in the ceaseless self-justifications of the ghetto. But not in real life. Not in that late hour of the third century of republican experiment. Not at the threshold of the millennium, on the brink of a future already overtaxed with other,
more immediate, concerns. But there it was (is). Surprise! White! An un-endangered species! Or could it be?

In one sense, “surprise” is the very opposite of my topic here. Whiteness in America is perhaps the least surprising thing around. Indeed, that is its very nature, its social character. It is taken for granted. Only other things—blackness, Asianness, salsa, dreadlocks, sushi, dreamcatchers—are “other” and thus capable of provoking surprise. Whiteness just is. Familiar. There. Home. American. “Us” (for those of us with the requisite pallor to escape remark). Not surprising at all. Not self-conscious at all. Until “we” are jolted into awareness by a jubilant brown face unable for a moment to contain its joy over an October announcement of acquittal.

In the recast words of Karl Marx, taken in a direction he might not have approved, white surprise could be said to be “full of metaphysical subtleties, theological niceties” (Marx, 1967, 71). Strange creature that it is, it births its head only after its body is in full view. A verdict is announced and before the mask can be found and placed, surprise finds and names its subject. A “we” is discovered in a sudden reflex of feeling, a pronoun after the fact. Whiteness is, indeed, at some level, a fact of feeling. But it is also so much more. And yet at the same time, nothing. Whiteness is everywhere in America and yet is nothing at all. Like its euphemism, the American Dream here at the end of “American” capitalism, it is oneiric in its fleetingness. Doomed to disappear. Immigration, contraception, and aging to the fore, postindustrial America is also on its way to becoming “post-white.” Or is it?

The Choice to Be White

In a recent popular rag in Chicago, the central political question got asked in all of its loaded simplicity, its seeming innocence. Why be white? As if it were a choice. Peter Leki opined that it was and that it amounted to simply, and only, a choice for privilege. Whiteness, in his mind, is a location on a scale of gradation, mapping pathways to power for those willing and able to pay the price. Its payoff can be actual, illusory, or merely only hoped for, like a promise on the horizon. But its place is an advantage one chooses to assume.

Like the author of How the Irish Became White, Leki argues that, historically, white identification represents the ascendant pole of a quintessential American hierarchy (Ignatiev, 1; Leki, 12–17). It first emerged as the homogeneous identity offered to newly arrived European immigrants in lieu of their own peculiar peculiarities. It functioned in