

# Scholar@UPRM

## Locating whiteness: History, power, identity and the postcolonial framework

Item Type	Essay
Authors	Sen, Ruma
Publisher	Centro de Publicaciones Académicas, Facultad de Artes y Ciencias, Universidad de Puerto Rico en Mayagüez
Download date	2025-03-16 21:53:14
Link to Item	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11801/3278">https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11801/3278</a>

## LOCATING WHITENESS: HISTORY, POWER, IDENTITY AND THE POSTCOLONIAL FRAMEWORK<sup>1</sup>

*Ruma Sen*

What has become irreducibly curious is no longer the other but cultural description itself.

— James Clifford, 1988

### **A Prologue, 2003**

Whiteness matters. I realized this today more than ever before as I discussed bell hooks' video, "Cultural Criticism and Transformation" with students in my class on Communication and Persuasion. In her discussion of the politics of representation, hooks speaks of the institutionalized oppressiveness of what she calls "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy." In the discussion that followed, a student questioned hooks' use of the word "white" because, as she said, "supremacy could be of any color - white, black, pink, purple, it has nothing to do with white alone." Another student commented that while she understood that racism as a term continues to put white people at the center of the discussion, she cannot understand how the term "white" would add to the "supremacist capitalist patriarchy." A male student said that he was uncomfortable with the images of white males on the video and the references made by hooks because, "I am white but I do not see myself in those images." As I discussed the implications of using the term "white," I noticed that several students had already dismissed the term as irrelevant as they had disengaged themselves from the discussion. A discussion on the hierarchies of race and color had just fallen through the cracks of white apathy and denial. It is perhaps appropriate to mention here that this is a primarily

---

<sup>1</sup> A version of this essay was presented at the 98th Annual Convention of the Eastern Communication Association at Providence, Rhode Island. The paper was selected as a Top Paper in the Intercultural Communication Interest Group.

“white” classroom besides two Asian students. This is not my single encounter with whiteness, not even the most recent.

Although all people exist within what we might call the “strata” of subjectivity, they are also located at particular positions within the strata, each of which enables and constrains the possibilities of experience, but even more, of representing and legitimating those representations.

Lawrence Grossberg, “Cultural Studies and/in New Worlds” (13)

Cultural Studies is now known for its extensive writing on issues of race and identity (Allen 1993; Dyer 1997; Frankenberg 1993 and 1997; Hill 1996; Ignatiev 1996; Nakayama and Krizek 1995; Nakayama and Martin 1999; Sleeter 1994). The recent years have witnessed a conceptual shift in this discourse from race to whiteness, which has allowed us to “identify the ways that white privilege functions without having to name anyone a racist” (Wander, Martin, and Nakayama 23). This discourse has produced some of the more contradictory claims in the field as most of the writing has emerged from two seemingly opposing positions. The deconstructionist projects of the poststructuralists (like Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan) have treated identity as both always already there and constantly under erasure. The position of the race theorists has been somewhat essentialist in the assumption that whiteness is racially determined and experienced. The point of studying whiteness, as I view it and unlike the predominant perspectives on whiteness, is “to dislodge it from its centrality and authority, not to reinstate it” (Dyer 10).

In this essay I explore whiteness as a “location,” a “standpoint,” and a “set of practices” through the interlocking axes of power, history, and multiple subject positions. Drawing largely from recent writing in whiteness studies that have been premised on the Foucauldian principle of “exteriority,” I seek to explicate the rhetorical character of whiteness rather than the essentialist notion of what whiteness really means. This is why the study is grounded in postcolonial studies and hence looks for a (non)essentialist and a historically specific understanding of whiteness. The historicity implicit here is that of the postcolonial that speaks of the white as colonial, and hierarchy as always already there.

This essay thus adds to the discourse on whiteness by extending it to forms of expression in a non-white world, a world that is not simply non-white but which has the overtones of a past that is eminently experienced in the “colonial” privileging of white. The non-white world I refer to is postcolonial India, traces of which permeate/ filter into the space of Indian immigrants. I draw from critical theory’s use of “location” to speak of the context, I use notions of power and history

to understand that location and interrogate the influence of whiteness as a discursive formation in the postcolonial moment.

Generally, whiteness has been studied as a monolithic category within the scope of racial identity. I argue that for a radical constructionist ideology of whiteness to emerge, it needs to be studied at the intersection of both anti-essentialist notions of poststructuralism and the somewhat strategic use of essentialism within postcolonial theory. For instance, whiteness is witnessed in what it embodies (the face, the skin color, the more apparent nature of difference) as much as it is expressed through the hierarchy of knowledge that is produced by those who oftentimes negotiate and influence relations of power. Here I refer to assumed positions of power and ways in which hierarchies of power operate to attribute authority to some by virtue of occupying such positions. Further, postcolonial scholarship has so far theorized racial identities of people of color as an effect of power and knowledge, while social constructions of whiteness remain largely undertheorized (Supriya 109). This essay therefore examines whiteness as a trope for the social construction of hierarchies of power and the representations of both the white and the other.

White people just as much as people of color live “racially structured lives” (Frankenberg 1) that enforce and affirm their relationships with each other and the positions they occupy within the hierarchical social structure. Interestingly enough, while the politics of identity engages in exploring, mapping and examining the subject positions of people of color, white people’s identities have remained either largely disengaged from these conversations or have been treated as essentially (non)threatening to peoples of color and hence not contentious in the discourse of identity and whiteness.

Looking, and being looked upon, produces relations of power, the premise of the politics of identity. Implicit in such relations of power is the assumption that the “gaze” of observation and hence evaluation is partial, limited to those who can be subjected to the gaze as opposed to those who have the gaze. It is the gaze of the supposed surveyor in the watchtower of Bentham’s Panopticon, whose gaze is legitimate and who is never gazed upon. In the same way, those who are gazed upon have historically been observed and analyzed, and continue to be subjects of the gaze. Also, similar to the Panopticon, those on whom the gaze is focused then become “programmed” into gazing at themselves with the same lens as that which is used by the surveyor. Simultaneously, the surveyor remains neutral, ungazed and dominant yet unseen. This is the gaze that can be referred to as shifting between being invisible and yet made awkwardly visible by the attention that is cast more as aspersion—more negative than

affirming. As an Asian Indian graduate student at a large Midwestern university commented, “my dress, my color, and most of all my accent draws attention to me that makes me so uncomfortable that I do my best to blend in, change the way I dress, alter my accent, so that I am not so noticeable any longer” (Sen 1998).

As mentioned earlier, the discourse on whiteness has focused on the “white.” White is seen here not just as a color but that which signifies and significates power. “[White] wields power yet endures as a largely unarticulated position” (Nakayama and Krizek 88). White culture is also the “structural pre-condition for the existence of ethnic groups” (MacCannell 129). However, white is not an essence, even when premised on the strategic essentialist notions of the postcolonial context. In other words, whiteness is not and can not be studied as an absolute. Further, the ironic treatment of the construction of whiteness as marking only the space of otherness becomes untenable in the long run unless there is a simultaneous interrogation of the white as studied by the other (Supriya 128). This essay introduces a new kind of engagement with the rhetoric and power associated with being white. For the non-white other, it is the pursuit of whiteness and the process of “becoming white” (=having/owning power), an experience that is distinctly different from the lived reality of always owning privilege, of whiteness being always already there.

### **Can whiteness be made strange?**

White people have power and believe that they think, feel and act like and for all people; . . . whiteness needs to be made strange.

(Dyer 9-10)

Ruth Frankenberg defines whiteness as “a location of structural advantage” and as “a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed” (1). For instance, as Dean MacCannell writes, the consensus about this hierarchy is so structured that institutions such as tourism exemplify it with a lack of white cuisine where there is an abundance of ethnic cuisine (120). Similarly, the university/academe exemplifies it with a lack of white studies where there is an abundance of ethnic studies. As MacCannell reminds us, “(t)his structural imbalance is fundamental, operating on grammar and rhetoric as well as in social and economic relations” (122). Within a Foucauldian discussion of power, no one speaks of “white power” since power is white. The struggle here is to make that which is seen as the dominant, whiteness, into that which is also strange. It is perhaps in this interlocation—of being both essentialist as well as critical—that disparate grounds can be navigated simultaneously. This is

the challenge that my research aims to explore and address.

Raka Shome argues that whiteness remains an empty term unless examined from the perspective of location (110). For instance, India's history with British colonialism implies a relationship with imperial whiteness that is very distinct from the relationship of the African American with whiteness in the United States. Understanding the reasons behind an existing Anglocentrism in various sectors of the Indian culture, for instance Indian cinema, requires an examination of India's own relations with the colonial past as well as its negotiations with the current surge of white American cultural norms and practices, as they influence and inform the cultural psyche of the nation in this postcolonial moment. The postcolonial context in India is complicated by the exposure to and ready acceptance of white American cultural cues by increasing numbers of the population who form the emerging middle class with an exponentially growing purchasing power.

As a product of enterprise and imperialism, whiteness is "always already predicated on racial difference, interaction and domination" (Dyer 13). As a power-laden discursive formation that privileges, secures and normalizes the cultural space of the white, Western subject, and sustained by forces of imperialism and capitalism, whiteness has "traveled" to "other" worlds and influenced "other" identities and cultural spaces. It is in/ through these travels that the postcolonial subject has come to be located within the locus of whiteness at once influencing and being influenced by it. Most evident of these interlocutions have been the discursive practices of the white and the postcolonial subject. Shome contends, "Whiteness is not just about bodies and skin color, but rather more about the discursive practices that, because of colonialism and neocolonialism, privilege and sustain the global dominance of white imperial subjects and Eurocentric worldviews" (108). It is a system through which certain individuals are granted greater degrees of social acceptance than others.

Studied within the postcolonial framework, whiteness can be perceived as that which represents superiority. At the same time, the postcolonial subject's long engagement with the superiority of the white, Western, colonial entity can offer ways for dismembering the power source, i.e., the white. This capitulation can be viewed as an outcome of the years of struggle that results ultimately in shifts within the structures of power. Framed thus, whiteness can be conceived as a discursive formation that is being constantly constructed and which takes its shape depending on the "location" within which it is studied.

## Framing the location of whiteness

Drawing on Foucault's writing I suggest here that power is experienced through relations among subjects and influenced by a multiplicity of factors such as the subjects within that relationship, the history of the relationship, the discourse within which that power relationship is produced and maintained. We need to re-contextualize power as relational struggles of power rather than suppose that power might exist on one side, and that on the other side lies that upon which power would exert itself. Also, we cannot assume that the struggle develops between power and "non-power." Thus, Foucault argues, power is simultaneously the institutionalization, the definition of tactics, and the statement of arms and implements, which are useful in all these clashes. It is that which can be considered in a given moment as a certain power relationship, a certain exercising of power. As Foucault writes, power is conceived out of a plurality of relationships that emerge from interactions among entities and permits the development of something besides that from which it emerges (Foucault 70).

A discursive formation, in the Foucauldian sense, is that which is taken for granted within an enunciative field, which leads to what Foucault calls a regime of truth, i.e., an episteme. An analysis of the dispersion of statements in the enunciative field leads to a regime of truth. Foucault's project is the negotiation of the enunciative field as engaged through the discursive act. Power exists through language in the construction of discursive formations and it shifts constantly depending on the enunciative field. Thus, when whiteness is examined within this framework, it is claimed that power is not invested in the white, rather in the negotiation of the enunciative field of identity as expressed through the discursive act within which both the white and the other are engaged.

Foucault (*Power/Knowledge*) writes that power "doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse," and at the same time needs to be considered as "a productive network which runs through the whole social body" rather than as a "negative instance whose function is repression" (119). If this were true, how then would such an understanding of power illuminate the discussion of whiteness as a discourse of power that marks both white people and the people of color? I believe that the shift in the gaze, or perhaps the "reversal" in the gaze in the study of racial identity today to include the gaze of the so-called periphery or the other towards the so-far "invisible" center is in itself an expression/ symptom of the scope/ nature of power as shifting, never fully determined. In making

the center visible, power is being continually established within the framework of the relationship between the white and the other. This situation thus affirms that power is not “had” or possessed by any one individual, group or collectivity, it exists in the relations between individuals, communities and nations.

If truth is to be understood as a regulatory system of ordered procedures, it is possible to claim that whiteness is a representation of the system of power which is produced and sustained by the social order and which exists because of its circular relations with other systems of power. These systems of order establish and maintain the hierarchies within which subjects are interpellated. In the Foucauldian sense, whiteness is thus a regime of truth that establishes hierarchies of knowledge, which in turn operate and influence relations of power. The subject is interpellated both by and within these relations of power.

Whiteness as a discursive practice systematically forms the objects for which it speaks, that is both the white and the non-white other. As Foucault notes, “discourses are (obviously) composed of signs, but what they do is more than use these signs to designate things. ... It is this more that we must reveal and describe” (Foucault 49). In the discursive formation of whiteness, both the white “center” and the non-white ‘non-center” are being constantly constituted through a continuous process of negotiation and re-inscription (Bhabha 31). This constitutive process is perhaps the key to a Foucauldian understanding of whiteness: that power relations evolve through negotiations between the discursive strategies employed by those who are situated within that discourse. While the positions of the center and non-center are central to an understanding of the discursivity of power, whiteness is constituted by the white and the non-white. The discursivity of whiteness shifts as the white is positioned and articulated just as the non-white has been historically. So white is made visible by the non-white through a production of the meaning of the white as an expression of power. It is an invisibility that operates intrusively just as power functions discursively.

### **Whiteness and/in the Postcolonial Moment**

Whites must be seen (*italics added*) to be white, yet whiteness as race resides in invisible properties and whiteness as power is maintained by being unseen. To be seen as white is to have one’s corporeality registered, yet true whiteness resides in the non-corporeal.

(Dyer 45)



The recent spate of writing on whiteness has articulated positions that place whiteness at the center of the discourse, under the analytic gaze. The meaning and apparent emptiness of “white” as a cultural identity, the persistence of a discourse that engages race relations with a gaze that is exclusively directed at the other, and the political contexts, strengths, and limitations of different ways of “thinking through race” all lend themselves to a postcolonial analysis that examines whiteness vis-à-vis power, space and identity. While the West and imperialism have been studied at length in postcolonial studies, the examination of whiteness from the postcolonial perspective has been a more recent scholarly engagement, the most prominent of such research being essays in the edited collection by Tom Nakayama and Judith Martin.

Here I argue that terms such as whiteness or white are significantly more political than the more readily available terms like the West or western, even American. White not only implicates a skin color but it pivots any engagement with identity within the postcolonial framework on the notion of power. White is thus that which embodies power and non-white is that which remains outside the domain of power. While working within what is apparently a binary, I claim that white(ness) allows us to examine power not only relationally, but also as a both/and, i.e., that which is negotiated, never completely possessed. However, there is value in some degree of essentialist assumption that those who perceive themselves as “having” power seldom, if ever, cease to “have” or relinquish power. For instance, I cannot assume that the white male professor who presumably does not need to exercise authority in a classroom since he “automatically” commands respect, is likely to willingly relinquish that authority. Even if/when he wishes to, it is obvious that the position is intrinsically associated with power. Consequently, even when as a student in his classroom I am able to question that professor’s authority/capability, I am perhaps shifting the balance of power, but in no way do I displace that hierarchy of power.

That subjectivity and subject position are inextricably woven together is a reflection of the condition that language speaks us. Since the Foucauldian analysis is based on institutional discourse (and I agree with Bhabha that one cannot ever escape the institution), the subject position that he refers to is embedded in the impersonality of the discursive formation. For a broader understanding of whiteness as a discursive practice, the study needs to include traces of one’s own experiences, both individual and collective, along with a reflection on the subjectivity associated with such experiences. Barthes’ description of the sign-as-symbol is conveniently analogous here to

the language we use to describe these experiences of identity. The symbolic consciousness of the sign is in turn useful in articulating the gestures of identity construction.

Identities evolve in negotiation, but are maintained by the locations within which the relations of power are enacted. Identity is thus studied in the context of both subjectivity and the subject position within the discursive formation, because it moves beyond the formation and location of subjects into thinking in terms of communal or collective and individual experiences/ expressions of identities (Gilroy 37).

The dominant ideology of whiteness, which as Stuart Hall writes of ideology, “unproblematically reproduces itself,” has marched onto multiple shores of “other” worlds particularly because of its fit with the notion of “false consciousness” (17). The implicit assumption that whiteness embodies knowledge that is the domain of thinking subjects belies the production of meaning as a result of discursive endeavors. The postcolonial subject’s reliance on a white, Western education, whether on her own grounds or having traveled to the Western world, also echoes of this assumption of knowledge as Western, and essentially white. At the same time, whiteness can also be viewed as a “system of representation” in the Althusserian sense, whereby whiteness is a discursive character that is also materialized in practice. Systems of representation are defined here as “the systems of meaning through which we represent the world to ourselves and one another” (Hall 23). However, as it can be argued that there are no social practices outside the domain of meaning, then all practices must always be discursive. Whiteness is thus discursively produced and maintained.

I argue that whiteness needs to be viewed from within the somewhat essentialist recognition that someone like the white male professor operating within the largely male environment of the American undergraduate classroom is quite unlikely to experience “being” the other. The Asian Indian (other), on the other hand, is hailed as a subject inferior relationally to the white and that subject position is maintained within these parameters. As the white is produced and maintained discursively, the relations of power negotiated between these subject positions produce the hierarchies of structure. I am encased as the non-white other just as a white American college student is framed as white. Our negotiations are influenced by the positions we believe we occupy. The relationality that emerges through our interaction composes how the whiteness/otherness is maintained and re-produced in future. Thus, while whiteness is discursively produced and maintained, the positions we occupy in the hierarchies of structure as white/non-white are always already there.

It is likely however that the discursive formation itself evolves to include possible shifts in these relations of power. My experiences as an international graduate student and teaching assistant/ instructor illuminate this condition. When I entered the academic world, my position was very clear: a female student from a Third World country “out there,” who was here in the United States in search of knowledge, wealth, freedom and other such “ideals.” Gradually, as I began to succeed as a student, I was soon viewed as a repository of some knowledge. After all, coming from the Third World in this postcolonial moment has its own share of the baggage of fame: I am that indigenous other who can speak knowledgeably about being the other and disclose hidden treasures of exotic lands. Operating within such assumptions, a student like me is viewed as valuable but only within the confines of the pre-determined position of the other. However, as these lines of demarcation become blurred, i.e., I take on the role of instructing young Americans, my body is more questioned than my credibility on the subject—public speaking, fundamentals of human communication, even higher level communication courses. Through such experiences I realize that as a non-white other I am being constantly re-read as a text in my own classrooms. More recent experiences of teaching material that requires critical thinking, for courses like ‘Introduction to Women’s Studies’ or ‘Cross-cultural Communication,’ further complicates the positions by requiring me to engage in discussions that critique the mainstream. Similar to Indira Karamcheti’s experiences, “my students study me for clues, decipher me for cultural understanding, and look at me for cultural references” (276).

As Richard Dyer observes, postmodern multiculturalism may have genuinely opened up spaces for the voices of the other, challenging the authority of the white, it may also simultaneously function as “a side-show for white people who look on with delight at all the differences that surround them” (3). Whiteness therefore needs to be visible *for* its power, and its power needs to be out in its place and its rule ended. This is why studying whiteness matters. Within the postcolonial frame, the complexity of whiteness as a discourse and a practice, and the complicity of the postcolonial subject in maintaining the hierarchies of power that act as manifestations of whiteness need to be further examined.

As a nation still embedded in its colonial legacy, India’s experience with whiteness is that of “always already there.” I write this because I believe the postcolonial nation is unique—both historically and geographically—and that the influence of whiteness in the Indian cultural context needs to be understood in terms of the presence of

white cultural traces and how that presence is articulated, or discursively formed. Forms of representation in the cultural capital of a nation, for instance in the film industry, contribute to the discursive formations occurring within that culture. Consequently, representations of whiteness and the subject position/ subjective experience of the Indian in relation to such representations of whiteness are likely to indicate the extent to which whiteness symbolizes power and the consequent implications for power relations in the postcolonial context.

The discursivity of whiteness extends the manifestation and expression of the white in far too many ways that have less to do with racial identity and are rather embedded in issues of power relations. Using whiteness as the central organizing principle, I intend to narrate some incidents that speak to and illuminate the discursive formations that maintain structures and relations of power.

### **Constructing Whiteness in the Indian Diaspora**

There is no better point of entry into a critique or a reflection than one's own experience. It is not the end point, but the beginning of an exploration of the relationship between the personal and the social and therefore, the political (Bannerji 7). It is an interesting point of argument that reflection into one's own lived experiences reveals not only the gamut of influences on our thought, but such reflection also provides the platform wherein research interests are formulated and paradigmatic positions take shape. Much of the readings that I have engaged with on the issues of identity and whiteness have to a large extent echoed the same sentiment—for instance Shome, Supriya, Mani, Nakayama and Krizek, and Steyn.

Experiences of whiteness such as the incident narrated at the beginning of this essay abound and have largely influenced my thinking about whiteness. Every time I enter a classroom I am faced with expressions of students that frame me as the non-white other, an experience recognized by other scholars, such as Bannerji, Mani, and Karamcheti. Here I present "being the other" as almost necessarily a "baggage" that one must carry, a baggage that simultaneously binds and confines to positions that are rarely contested. Such experiences are typically narrated as comments that appear on student evaluations or even in casual conversations: "s/he cannot teach," "we don't understand what s/he says," from a typical white under/graduate student.

On the non-white other's part (teacher or student), the experience

typically generates either a desire to “fit in” as expressed in: “no matter how hard I try I cannot overcome the barrier of my face,” or a feeling of discomfort or inadequacy brought about a “special scrutiny” or “look over” that as the non-white other I receive from colleagues and acquaintances (Sen 21). This gaze is both a look and a judgment. This gaze, Himani Bannerji notes, “is also the look of the mentally blind which does not see that is actually in front of it, but only sees inward into a mental image of those terrible stereotypes which are pasted onto us with invisible glue every time someone looks at us” (149). Such politics of the gaze enforces “others” like me to experience and occupy the unique position of being visible as an object, invisible as a subject. This in turn creates in “others” like me the need to conform, a feature most certainly symptomatic of the “otherized” mind. As Bannerji has observed, “We forget that those who make the rules can change them and that while we can make small gestures of self-mutilation we can not really flay ourselves of our skins and features” (150).

In the process, as Homi Bhabha notes, the “other” is framed, encased, and “loses its power to signify, to negate, to initiate its historic desire, to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse” (31). The other is expected to represent the “docile body of difference” and exist to (re)affirm the dominant. As Jean-Paul Sartre points out, the dominant always seeks to understand himself within the context of the “other.” Inversely, the “other” seeks to fulfill the demands of the category to which s/he has been relegated and attempts to perform the role to which s/he has been ascribed. The implication here, for both the dominant and the other, is that how one experiences one’s own body/text influences ways in which people relate to each other.

The “visibility” and the construction of one’s self as a “minority,” who is somehow lacking and needs to learn, is seen by Bannerji as ways of rendering people powerless and vulnerable. They work as operative categories not because they possess any truth, but because they enforce the racist and imperialist relations that are already in place. I realize that these are harsh words but so long as the desire continues to be that of a guilt-ridden self, wanting to “impersonate” the dominant other, the posturing of the superior vs. the inferior remains unresolved, even perpetuated. When a people can be commanded to be silent, *to become the images*, then it is not the image, but the relations of domination, that kills. The politics of images is the same as any other politics; it is about being the subjects, and not the objects of the world we live in.

Instances of subtle nativization places the other in a separate

frame of analysis, who is then, to use Appadurai's phrase, "spatially incarcerated" in that "other place" that is proper to an "other culture" (Gupta and Ferguson 11). I argue here that such encasing is not an active product of choice but an expression of the discursive formation of whiteness within which such relations come to exist.

In his book, *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha provides a useful location to speak of negotiations of identity in what he calls the "cultural space" which is both physical and discursive, constructed by those occupying the cultural "borderlands." These cultural spaces form contingently, disjunctively in the inscription of signs of cultural memory and eventually emerge as sites of political agency. If cultural difference is considered to be produced and maintained in a field of power relations in a world that is always spatially interconnected, then the treatment of the other becomes visible as one of the main means through which the disempowered are kept that way. The enforced difference becomes part and parcel of a global system of domination. Thus, we continue to be determined and defined by the center, as the periphery exists because and out of a center that creates that space. Our concerns are viewed as a direct outcome of occupying these interstitial spaces, and in the articulation of these concerns by the "cultural dominant" these concerns are foregrounded.

The dominant center, at the same time, continues to remain invisible. Simply expressed, my white colleagues expect an understanding of essentially white cultural cues like dating as the established norm, that which is assumed as "commonplace." Such opinions are articulated in conversations that even pre-empt any explanation that the practice of dating is Western and cannot be assumed to take place in India. Both verbal and non-verbal responses are that of extreme surprise and wonder, "How can you not have ever dated?" By the time I am able to respond and explain, the stereotypical associations regarding patriarchy and/in the Third World are readily aired, "You mean you are not allowed to date?" Thus the white, Western practice of dating in its invisibility as white, becomes articulated as the commonplace. In its very commonplace nature whiteness, in this case dating, becomes a representation and enactment of the culturally dominant. And the postcolonial other, in this instance I, become the forever "colonial"—the one in need of a "re-awakening" to the natural—a condition already (always) the given experience of the white.

### **Thoughts for now and the future**

White identity is thus founded on compelling paradoxes: a vivid corporeal cosmology that most of all values a "transcendence of the

body,” that hinges on the need to be both all and none, everything and nothing, being simultaneously present and absent. The “paradoxes and instabilities of whiteness also constitute its flexibility and productivity, in short, its representational power” (Dyer 40).

Whiteness is not easily de-constructed, nor could it possibly be completely de-constructed within the scope of any single project. Constructions of whiteness emerge in multiple domains. Even in the analysis of the discursivity of whiteness within the postcolonial framework, and beyond the issue of race relations, whiteness can be made problematic in multiple forms.

Within the framework of whiteness as a postcolonial experience, whiteness is figured and recuperated as: (a) the postcolonial subject’s negotiations with the white as culturally dominant, and (b) a construct that is articulated through the subject’s engagement with the “circuits” of power. Here power is viewed as that which allows anyone (irrespective of whether they have been historically located in the margin or the center) as potentially occupying positions that provide the scope for “being” white, in and through their “exercise” or experience of power.

The postcolonial subject’s negotiations with the white-as-culturally-dominant is well articulated in relations between individuals and among groups, and does not preclude the shifting nature of relationships. Whiteness is also negotiated in and through the relations that establish and/or maintain the subject as ignorant/inferior/subjugated, whether overtly in situations that question his/her competence as in teaching, or subversively in testing familiarity with cultural codes like dating, that are treated as essential, normal, established and thus somehow neutral. The postcolonial condition makes such essentializing relevant at the same time that the poststructural framework of the discursivity of whiteness makes all assumptions tentative and any attempts at “meaning” irrelevant.

How can one dismiss the oppressiveness of a system that expects one to regulate one’s behavior according to norms of dress, talk and behavior that are coded as general, obvious and hence implying change that is taken-for-granted? At the same time, one cannot also dismiss the idea that possibilities abound wherein someone who is “essentially” non-white (in race and/or skin color) can experience power in exercising control. As an instructor today, and possibly in future positions of increased “perceived power” I am likely to negotiate such conditions that are recognizable markers of power. When students in my classes overtly express their concern over their grade, which to them I “give,” or when at the end of the quarter, they echo

sentiments/statements that I made in class, my position acquires a power that is made apparent by the students' articulation of the position I occupy relationally to their positions. I would however be remiss if I did not mention here that it is this position, this hierarchy, that fosters some of the resentments that international teachers like me face from American undergraduate students.

Yet, as Chandra Mohanty and M. Jacquis Alexander have argued, it is also quite likely that it is my face which continues to mark me more than any position of power that I may occupy. It is a likelihood where the nature of the position the other occupies within any hierarchy accompanies power dynamics that dismantle the idea that only those who "look" white can have power. Power is established in exercising control or maintaining a hierarchy of power, relationally. Whiteness is then a trope for the negotiation of power within a relationship.

Whiteness is complicated particularly because it is not viewed as obvious, apparent or seen. The discourse of white is replete with denials of the power or signification associated with white (Dyer 29). Whiteness as a lived experience becomes significant primarily in its capacity to influence the non-white experience. The white experience is also notable in its inability to identify itself as "white." This is evident in the reluctance of my white friends and colleagues to understand the implicit and often potentially dangerous attempts at homogenizing, mainstreaming, or perhaps even worse, essentializing. As an other, I experience all or one of the above when broad claims about India/n are made on the basis of their rather limited experiences. The voice of authority, authenticity, and most of all the subtle indication of being politically correct and liberal, further legitimates their claims and even essentializes my Indian identity.

When an Indian's narrative on identity derives the response of "as a white I have the same experience," not only is the Indian's experience being slighted, once again the implicit nature of "white power" is emphasized. Whiteness is thus continually established as a sign that is articulated, enacted, and affirmed through gestures of identity and power. "White identity," "white space" and "white privilege" continue to be enigmatic terms. I am also reminded here of the curiosity or sometimes even discomfort that is generated by the idea that I, as an Other (and I use the upper case advisedly), should study whiteness. Interestingly, there is an implicit and sometimes voiced assumption: what is there to be studied in whiteness, isn't everything that we study generally all about whiteness? Agreed, but how about making whiteness strange?

As I reflect back on the prologue I am increasingly aware that



such instances continue to mark my teaching experiences, and are likely to frequent my future years in the academic world. There needs to be much more than the recent spate of whiteness studies to make whiteness truly strange. Perhaps whiteness needs to be sought in places and situations where whiteness is not expected, as in the expression of whiteness among the non-white. Such explorations offer ground for making whiteness problematic and extend/remove whiteness from the discourse of the dominant/center. As the white is located, negotiated and framed—made strange—the power that is inherent and assumed within whiteness can also be fully interrogated.

Ruma Sen

Ramapo College of New Jersey  
United States of America

### Works Cited

- Allen, Theodor. *The Invention of the White Race: Racial oppression and Social Control*. New York: Verso, 1993
- Babb, Valerie. *Whiteness Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness*. New York: New York University Press, 1998.
- Bannerji, Himani. *Returning the Gaze: Essays on Racism, Reminism and Politics*. Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1993.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Clifford, James. *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-century Ethnography, Literature and Art*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988.
- Dyer, Richard. *White*. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Archeology of Knowledge*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1972.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Discipline and Punish*. New York: Vintage Books, 1977.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings; 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1977.
- Frankenberg, Ruth (Ed.) *Displacing whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997.
- Frankenberg, Ruth. *White Women, Race Matters*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1993.

- Gilroy, Paul. "British cultural studies and the pitfalls of identity." In James Curran, David Morley, and Valerie Walkerdine (Eds.) *Cultural studies and communications*. London: Arnold, 1996. 35-49.
- Grossberg, Lawrence. "Cultural Studies and/in New Worlds." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 10.1 (1993): 1-22.
- Gupta Akhil and James Ferguson. "Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference." *Cultural Anthropology* 7.1 (1992): 6-21.
- Hall, Stuart. "Signification, representation, ideology: Althusser and the post-structuralist debates." in J. Curran, D. Morley, and V. Walkerdine (Eds.) *Cultural studies and communications*. London: Arnold, 1996. 11-34.
- hooks, bell. *Cultural criticism and transformation* [video]. Northampton: Media Education Foundation, 1997.
- Ignatiev, Noel. *How the Irish became White*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Karamcheti, Indira. "The Graves of Academe." *Women of the South Asian Diaspora* (Ed.) *Our Feet Walk the Sky*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1993.
- MacCannell, Dean. *Empty meeting grounds: The tourist papers*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Mani, Lata. Gender, class and cultural conflict: Indu Krishnan's "Knowing her place." In *Women of the South Asian Diaspora* (Ed.) *Our Feet Walk the Sky*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1993.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade and M. Jacqui Alexander. (Eds.) *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Nakayama, Thomas K. & Krizek, Robert L. "Whiteness as a strategic rhetoric. In T. K. Nakayama and J. N. Martin (Eds.), *Whiteness: The communication of social identity*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1990. 87-106.
- Ram, Anjali. "Framing the feminine: *Diasporic readings of gender in popular Indian cinema*." *Women's Studies in Communication*, 25 (2001): 25-33.
- Roediger, David R. *Towards the abolition of whiteness*. New York: Verso, 1994.
- Sen, Ruma. "'But you're not really Indian!': Negotiating space and identity as an international student in the United States." Paper presented at the annual convention of the National Communication Association, New York, 1998.
- Sherzer, Dina (Eds.) *Cinema, Colonialism, Postcolonialism*. Austin:

University of Texas Press, 1996.

- Shome, Raka. Whiteness and the politics of location: Postcolonial reflections. In T. K. Nakayama and J. N. Martin (Eds.), *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity*, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1999. 107-128.
- Steyn, Melissa. "White identity in context: A personal narrative." In T.K. Nakayama and J. N. Martin (Eds.), *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1999. 264-278.
- Supriya, K.E. White differences: Cultural constructions of white identity. In Thomas K. Nakayama and Judith N. Martin (Eds.), *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1999. 129-148.
- Wander, Philip C., Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama. "Whiteness and beyond: Sociohistorical foundations of whiteness and contemporary challenges." Ed. Thomas . K. Nakayama and Judith. N. Martin. *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1999. 27-50.