THE EXPERIENCE OF WHITENESS AMONG STUDENTS AT A BC UNIVERSITY:

Invisibility, Guilt, and Indifference

JADE NORTON AND P.M. BAKER

FIRST PERSPECTIVES

BRITISH COLUMBIA IS HOME to a unique, colourful population, and many of us consider ourselves extremely fortunate to reside in such a comparatively peaceful part of the world. Nonetheless, the province is by no means impervious to the inevitable social conflicts that appear in any given society. Issues of social inequity arise on a daily basis and centre on societal configurations ranging broadly from sexuality and class to ability and race. With British Columbia's expanding poly-ethnic population, issues of race, racialization, and racism are among the categories of experience that have become more important over time. Although racial tension in the province may today appear more demure than it was even twenty or thirty years ago, and attitudes have *greatly* changed since colonial times, British Columbia continues to face new challenges and conflicts. In the public and legal spheres, events such as the recent restitution for the Chinese head tax and struggles over Aboriginal land rights remind us that being non-White has had significant effects on many generations in this province. Matters that involve deciding who is eligible for various benefits always raise the contentious issues of ethnic or racial claims.

The most recent (2001) Canadian Census reported British Columbia as being home to 836,440 people who self-classified as "visible minority,"[1] making up 22 percent of the overall provincial population. This is almost

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[1] The language surrounding ethnic categorization on censuses is also highly contested. Though not always related to ethnic categorization, comprehensive changes to census-taking are made from census to census in order to accommodate public concern without sacrificing the compatibility and integrity of data collected in past censuses. For a look at some changes made to the upcoming 2006 census, see the 2006 Census Consultation Report, Statistics Canada Catalogue #92-130-XIE.

twice as high as the national average (13 percent). There is, of course, considerable variability among the regions and cities in the province. For example, the two most populous districts differ significantly in certain demographic characteristics: the Capital Regional District (Victoria area) has a far lower percentage of its population that is comprised of visible minorities (9 percent) than does the Greater Vancouver area, where more than 37 percent of residents are identified as such. Visible minorities generally make up less than 5 percent of residents in other regions of the province (typically small, rural, northern towns), while the opposite is true for Aboriginal populations, which are more prevalent in many smaller, more northern communities. The population in British Columbia's Capital Region has a much smaller share of both visible minorities (9 percent) and Aboriginal populations (3 percent) than is reflected in the provincial averages (22 percent and 4 percent, respectively), making it a comparatively "Whiter" region than most others.

Race has always been a determinant of power, although Whites usually conceive of race as a quality of *other* groups.[2] Consequently, historically, whiteness has been defined by absence or negation (Herndon 2003, 225).[3]

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[2] For consistency, the categorical labels "Native," "Asian," "Black," and "White" are all capitalized, despite the widespread usage in academe and outside that does not capitalize "white."

[3] We need to provide some definitions of terminology surrounding the study of race, ethnicity, and culture. These standardized definitions, and the number of different variations for each term, illustrate the discrepancies within the area of racial discourse and are pertinent to the understanding of different perceptions of race and ethnicity. Such dictionary-style definitions also highlight, whether inherently or symbolically, much of the history that surrounds race and language. Defining the terms of racial discourse: excerpts from the *Random House Unabridged Dictionary* (1995 ed.):

"**white**" : adj.1. of the color of pure snow, of the margins of this page, etc.; reflecting nearly all the rays of sunlight or a similar light. 2. light or comparatively light in color. 3. (of human beings) marked by slight pigmentation of the skin, as of many Caucasoids. 4. for, limited to, or predominantly made up of persons whose racial heritage is Caucasian: a white club; a white neighborhood. 5. pallid or pale, as from fear or other strong emotion: white with rage. 6. silvery, gray, or hoary: white hair. 7. snowy: a white Christmas. 8. lacking color; transparent. 9. (politically) ultraconservative … 13. Slang. decent, honorable, or dependable: That's very white of you. 14. auspicious or fortunate. 15. morally pure; innocent. 16. without malice; harmless: white magic … n.20. a color without hue at one extreme end of the scale of grays, opposite to black. A white surface reflects light of all hues completely and diffusely. Most so-called whites are very light grays: fresh snow, for example, reflects about 80 percent of the incident light, but to be strictly white, snow would have to reflect 100 percent of the incident light. It is the ultimate limit of a series of shades of any color. 21. a hue completely desaturated by admixture with white, the highest value possible. 22. quality or state of being white. 23. lightness of skin pigment. 24. a person whose racial heritage is Caucasian.

"**Black**": adj.1. lacking hue and brightness; absorbing light without reflecting any of the rays composing it. 2. characterized by absence of light; enveloped in darkness: a black night. 3. (sometimes cap.) a. pertaining or belonging to any of the various populations characterized by dark skin pigmentation, specifically the dark-skinned peoples

Following Enlightenment philosophies of humanity, the prevailing notion of whiteness came to mean universality and normality, without acknowledging any racial character (Friedman 1995). By the twentieth century, Whiteness in British Columbia, as in all Western societies, was redefined and policed by court battles over segregation and immigration law.

Many racialized identities are based on this negative association with the dominant race, ethnicity, and culture in both predominantly White societies, like British Columbia's capital city, and in societies comprised largely of non-Whites. The acknowledgment that Whiteness plays such a crucial role not only in the formation of societies, including the hierarchical structures of power within these societies, but also in the formation of the individual has contributed to the development of a relatively new area of study, referred to as Whiteness studies (Dyer 1997; Roediger 1994; Omi and Winant 1994; Giroux 1997; Hartigan 1997).

Emerging partly as a response to the call from people of colour for White scholars to examine themselves rather than to scrutinize the "other," and partly as a result of White anti-racist scholars who want to understand their own role, the study of Whiteness is finding a place among many traditional disciplines such as English, psychology, anthropology, history, geography, women's studies, and sociology.

The experience of Whiteness is a matter of context. Whites in communities with significant percentages of visible minorities normally define themselves by contrasting their racial identity to that of the most significant visible minority. However, on an individual basis, the salience of Whiteness as part of one's identity normally depends on significant personal experiences. We give two examples.

The first author (Jade Norton) is White but, until recently, did not consider this to be a critical part of her identity. Here, she recalls a childhood experience from when she lived in a city in the BC Interior:

> I remember one of the first times I really thought about race. I wasn't really thinking about my own race, but I was thinking about race nonetheless. I guess I was about ten years old, and I was waiting at a bus stop to go meet some friends at the mall. I looked up from biting

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of Africa, Oceania, and Australia. b. African-American. 4. soiled or stained with dirt: That shirt was black within an hour. 5. glour; pessimistic; dismal: a black outlook. 6. deliberately; harmful; inexcusable: a black lie. 7. boding ill; sullen or hostile; threatening: black words; black looks. 8. (of coffee or tea) without milk or cream. 9. without any moral quality or goodness; evil; wicked: His black heart has concocted yet another black deed. 10. indicating censure, disgrace, or liability to punishment.

my fingernails and saw a man walking across the street. He was Black. I did a double-take, felt guilty for doing a double-take, looked away quickly, felt guilty for looking away too quickly, smiled, felt awkward for smiling. The man smiled and had soon passed me by. I then asked myself a string of questions: Had he seen me? Had I looked natural? Could this have been the first Black person I'd seen since we moved to Kamloops? Was he the only Black person in town? I remember thinking that seeing a Black person was such a rare occurrence. It was like seeing the Northern Lights: it only happened a few times a year. My awaited bus driven by a White man arrived and I quickly sat next to an elderly White woman and watched the White passengers get on and off at each stop. I was off to the mall, to see my White friends, to flirt with White boys.

On that bus ride I remember thinking how "boring" my hometown was. "There are just us and the Natives," I thought to myself, "and we don't even get to see much of them. They mostly hang out on the other side of the red bridge. They probably don't even like me." As kids we called Kamloops the city of Cowboys n' Indians. Us White kids didn't really ever have to think about race, except for in school when we were taught what now seem like tidbits of information about the history of racial conflict in the United States and Canada. "Canada is multicultural," we were told. "Here, look at this picture of how happily the Indians traded with the European colonialists." I grew up exposed to the rampant anti-racism media campaigns of the 1980s. We were taught not to see things like skin colour. Diversity was probably a bad word, because it denoted difference. "We are all Canadians; therefore we are all the same." It's almost like we were supposed to ignore difference, which in turn taught us to ignore people. How were we supposed to ignore something so paramount? It was like pretending not to see the Northern Lights!

The second author (P.M. Baker) is also White, although he frequently self-identifies as "Welsh" and is in fact one-quarter Irish, Scottish, and English as well. Here is one of his experiences:

They say your attitudes about race often revolve around some youthful epiphany: mine came on a long bus ride out of New York City in 1967. I was raised in Vancouver, but a friend and I had hitch-hiked from Vancouver to New York. We had run out of money, and were trying to get out of town, cheap. At a peace rally in Washington Park, a Black guy told us to take a certain bus, which we did, not knowing that we were heading to a Black suburb. The ride was like a participant observation

study in majority-minority relations: we began inside a bus that was 95 percent White, and by the time we got to the end of the line, were the only Whites on the bus. On the street, we looked for a short-cut to the freeway on-ramp, where we hoped to hitch-hike. I remember four young guys surrounding us and wanting to know what the hell we were doing in their neighbourhood, and the crazy fact that our "Canadian accent" got us a ride out of there. Our Whiteness, something we had never really thought about, had become the most important thing about us … until our Canadian identity rescued us.

Although these personal experiences show some commonality (beyond the fact that they both involve bus rides), the authors' overall personal backgrounds and experiences differ greatly, most notably in age and gender. However, these differences pushed certain facets of the research to the surface – facets that would otherwise have gone unnoticed. Our differences allowed us to build perspectives from two very different platforms. We were able to share some of our own experiences as children, and as adults, growing up in British Columbia in two very different times.

Building on some of our own experiences while drawing upon the racial and cultural diversity that makes up the population of British Columbia and the unique demographic profile of Victoria, we examine issues surrounding race, ethnicity, and, most specifically, Whiteness. Beginning with a review of some relevant theoretical perspectives and previous research from the recent academic attention to Whiteness studies, we report the results of an empirical study that examines the actual experiences of sixteen White university students from the University of Victoria (Norton 2005).

 Despite a general indifference to this dimension of personal identity, these students expressed in their interviews a significant measure of invisibility and guilt. They also raised issues of privilege, power, and interactions with other groups on campus. To better locate and understand the nature of racial identity, we end with an extended interview with a non-White observer who offers perspective on the themes elicited by the White students in this study.[4]

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[4] The communication of the findings of this small, qualitatively based study is structured so as to alleviate the tendency to draw implications and/or judgment from the information so candidly provided by our interview participants. The literature discussed, though very important as a basis for interpretation, is meant only to provide some background and theoretical relevance. Likewise, the student experiences revealed in the interviews are meant neither to directly exemplify any of the theoretical positions of the specific literature reviewed nor to necessarily parallel the findings of other researchers. Our study is phenomenological in

SOME RESEARCH ON WHITENESS

Defining racial identity is highly contested,[5] and much of the literature on Whiteness reflects this complexity (Frankenberg 1993; Weis and Fine 1996). In addition, there is a significant lack of social-scientific literature on the topic of Whiteness: most studies explore identity formation and Whiteness while concentrating solely upon the philosophical issues surrounding the definition of problematic terms.

In one of the earliest studies on Whiteness, Wellman (1977) demonstrates an awareness of race prejudice among White research participants but a lack of any awareness about how Whiteness creates an advantage in their lives: "By removing themselves from the system of racial organization," they assumed a position of racial invisibility (212).

In an article about the dismantling of Whiteness, Herndon (2003) provides both a historical and a contemporary account of the emergence of Whiteness studies. She explains how African American writers have analyzed Whiteness for over a century, noting that such analysis has been necessary for social survival (202). Only within the past couple of decades have White scholars heeded the call to interrogate Whiteness and to identify with its accompanying benefits of power, privilege, and cultural dominance.

Dyson (1998 interview) suggests that, when we talk about Whiteness in the context of race and racialization, we are actually talking about "Whiteness as identity ... ideology, and ... institution" (quoted in Chennault 1998, 300). Some research has shown that White Americans, for example, do not experience their ethnicity as a definitive aspect of their social identity (Alba 1990; Waters 1990). Waters (1990, 21) found that Whiteness was perceived as "dim and irregular" and that White respondents found their own ethnicity to be "flexible, symbolic and

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nature and, as such, is meant only to relay the stories, perspectives, and experiences of the interview subjects. It is for this reason that the text is organized so as to separate the findings of this particular study from those found in the extant body of literature.

[5] It is important here to acknowledge that language is a highly contested terrain. On this note, we would like to emphasize the fact that labels such as "visible minority," "non-White," "White," "Aboriginal," "native," "indigenous," "culture," "race," and "ethnicity," along with many other terms, are problematic. However, given the lack of any viable alternatives, we use some of these terms interchangeably throughout our text. In our own writing we tend to use "race" rather than "ethnicity," depending on the context in which we are writing. Following James (2003, 27), we perceive "ethnicity" to refer to a "group of people who identify themselves, or are identified, as sharing a common historical and ancestral origin," and "race" to refer to "individuals who are identified by particular physical characteristics, for example, colour of skin, which come to represent socially constructed meanings and expectations that correspond to their ascribed status within the social hierarchy." We have not altered the choices of other authors cited in our text, nor of the students interviewed, with regard to their individual choices (including uppercase/lowercase, etc.).

voluntary." They also felt free to choose from among the varied strands of Whiteness, exercising an "ethnic option" that was not available to other groups.

In what is arguably one of the most influential early contributions to examinations of Whiteness, Ruth Frankenberg (1993) finds that ethnicity plays a strong role in the everyday lives of White people and that it is not merely a minor part of their identity. She also posits that the term "Whiteness" "signals the production and reproduction of dominance rather than subordination, normativity rather than marginality, and privilege rather than disadvantage" (237). In her extensive interviews with White women, Frankenberg finds that racially tolerant, well-meaning White women may come to perpetuate racism, racial inequality, and privilege by internalizing discourses of power and colour, consequently never really progressing to what she refers to as a "race cognizant perspective" (15).

More recently, Hughes and King (2003) examined Whiteness using a theoretical approach that conceives of racial identity as an awareness of having ideas, feelings, and interests similar to others in the same structurally defined racial status. Their research found that race is a far less significant component of personal identity among Whites than it is among Blacks and that the impact of racial identity on social and political attitudes is stronger for Blacks than it is for Whites. Jackson and Heckman (2002) explore similar concepts in their approach to understanding perceptions of White racial identity.

Of course, one's racial identity intersects with many other identity components, such as one's age, class, ability, or gender. In her work on White identities, Shirley (2003, 212) examines the gendering of Whiteness as it pertains to the "hierarchical boundary work Whites do to distinguish themselves from one another." In order to understand how gender interacts with race and class, she analyzes over forty interviews with rural, southern Whites in the United States. She explains how rural southerners have been described through "negative" labels such as "redneck" and "white trash." These labels are not only racialized and class-based but also gendered. The term "white trash" gets applied to both men and women but particularly to women and families as a whole, which connects to the finding that the cultural failings of "white trash" are linked to traditional expectations of femininity (e.g., personal appearance/cleanliness, taking care of children, domestic cleanliness, sexual morality). Understanding how people can hold both privileged and marginalized positions helps to uncover the complex ways that race, class, and gender operate in our society.

SOME CANADIAN LITERATURE[6]

There are several gaps in the Canadian and British Columbian literature on critical Whiteness studies. The vast majority of national and provincial discussion of whiteness has concentrated on historical constructions of White racial identity(ies), particularly within the context of White settler societies and colonialism. Although historical perspective is fundamental in establishing a basis with which to build an understanding of White racial identity in British Columbia,[7] few works have focused on the contemporary meaning and construction of Whiteness. Little has been done on a provincial, or even a national, level to explore how White racial identity is learned, propagated, and understood on an individual level and how it shapes social relations.

Despite the acknowledged gap in social research on Whiteness in Canada, many studies surrounding ethnic identities emerged between the late 1970s and early 1990s. Throughout those thirty years, researchers examined Canadian issues such as multicultural and ethnic attitudes (Kalin 1984; Kalin and Berry 1982; Lambert, Mermigis, and Taylor 1986) and second language use (Lambert and Holobow 1984; Lalonde and Gardner 1984; Gardner and Lysynchuk 1990; Young and Gardner 1990). Berry, who has probably been the greatest proponent of multicultural research in Canada, has continued to research acculturation (Berry 1987; Berry, Kim, Minde, and Mok 1987; Berry, Kim, Power, Young, and Bujaki 1989) and issues related to multicultural pluralism (Berry, Kalin, and Taylor 1977; Berry 1986). In addition, Aboud has examined ethnic self-constancy (Aboud 1983; Aboud and Skerry 1983) and ethnic identity development (Aboud 1987). Other than Morse's (1977) study on the national identity of university students, nothing has been written that specifically relates to Canadian identity in a higher learning environment.

In 1991, the Angus Reid Group conducted perhaps the most general of surveys of ethnic identity in Canada. Respondents were asked to select from a list of descriptors, including only "Canadian," "Hyphenated-

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[6] Given the time and space constraints of this project, more recent literature has not been included. Since the initial literature search was conducted (2004), numerous valuable studies have been produced. We have attempted to add some of these to our background work on the topic, though most were admittedly missed. The findings of these works will most definitely be included in future reworkings of this project, and their implications will be considered. It should also be noted that much of this study has been condensed from its original size and, consequently, has been either heavily edited or omitted.

[7] For a good in-depth discussion of the role of race in the formation of early British Columbia, see Perry's (2001) *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race, and the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1871*.

Canadian" (e.g., Greek-Canadian), and "Ethnic Origin" (e.g., Greek). In general, the Canadians who were surveyed identified more strongly with being Canadian than with their ethnic origins. However, no specific attention was paid to Whiteness.

With Canada's push to be hospitable to a multicultural environment, there has been a national attempt to encourage individuals to maintain ancestral ethnic and cultural ties while simultaneously feeling a part of Canada. Canada's history of tolerance and its official policies of multiculturalism have contributed to its reputation of being one of the most accepting and pluralistic countries in the world. However, the notion of multiculturalism as a policy that supports pluralism and diversity has recently been heavily challenged and scrutinized. In her ethnographic study of the construction of national identity in Canada, *The House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity in Canada*, Eva Mackey (2002) points to the contradictions and ambiguities in Canada's cultural identity politics both in a historical and postcolonial context. She argues that the concept of national identity and the official support of multiculturalism in fact serve to reinforce Anglo-Canadian identity rather than, as it purports to do, encourage plurality.

Similarly, Himani Bannerji's (2000) compilation of essays on multiculturalism, nationalism, and gender point to the experiences of non-White people living Canada. Through investigations of issues of difference that go beyond the current debates on multiculturalism, her exploration extends to the political economy, ideology, and state of Canada; other Western countries; and Third World countries. The texts emphasize how Canada has historically ignored the reality of First Nations peoples and the entrance of non-European immigrants in the "founding" of the nation. For Bannerji, multiculturalism is not a benevolent force but, rather, a tactic used by White Canadian institutions to control and divide immigrant groups, francophone-Canadians, and First Nations groups.

Razack (1998, 2002) focuses on space and the role of law in the mapping and shaping of hierarchies and oppressive categories and emphasizes how "place becomes race." She refers to a prime example of the racialization of landscape mapping: the development of Indian reserves. She also emphasizes the intersections of the concepts of class, colour, and disability and steers away from treating them as separate, independent concepts.

From a provincial perspective, in *Making Native Space* (2002), Cole Harris makes an important contribution to the understanding of the history of reserve mapping in British Columbia. While Harris's work illustrates the White topography and positions that dominated the

province from the 1850s to 1938, it also informs the current debate on Aboriginal land and treaty negotiations, bringing to light contemporary issues of race in British Columbia.

Another critical text in the Canadian literature on Whiteness comes from Cynthia Levine-Rasky (2002), who points to the binary constructions of ethnic and racial identity in Canada and in other countries. The international focus of this particular text is very important in demonstrating that Whiteness is a global issue that touches upon, inter alia, schooling, education, and administration.

SITUATING THE LITERATURE

In order to understand the work of previous researchers, we must understand how racial identities shape perceptions in everyday life. Every member of society is exposed to social constructs of race, and the pervasive nature of this ideology leads to its internalization through the socialization process experienced in institutions such as those found in educational systems (Omi and Winant 1994).

Richard Dyer (1997, 2) argues that making Whiteness visible works to "dislodge them/us from the position of power" without constructing ourselves (Whites) as victims. It appears that this assumption now governs much of the interrogation of Whiteness in academic discourse (Wiegman 1999, 117); however, the main criticism of Whiteness studies is that they have "sometimes failed to recognize … the lapse into essentialism" (Kincheloe and Steinberg 1999, 167). All racial classifications minimize the ambiguities of racial grouping by the attempt to "force heterogeneous racial configurations into a single category around similarities in skin tone, hair texture, and eye shape" (Kincheloe 1999, 169; Keating 1995). Many of the traditional sociological methodologies of inquiry into notions of identity seem antiquated when we consider that, in today's global society, individuals associate themselves with several identities as they move between different social and cultural locales (Fleras 2001, 120).

One way to look at such issues, as suggested by Renaud and Badets (1993), is to explore the self-perceived ethnic identity of Canadians. Ethnic identity refers, in this context, to identifying oneself as belonging to and feeling a part of a particular community of others.[8] This identification can occur on a symbolic or a behavioural level. Symbolic ethnic

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[8]   The term "ethnic identity" varies in its usage, and the question of whether it can be used only in reference to ethnic minorities or for all groups has not been resolved. In the present context, we use it to refer to any ethnic group in Canada.

identity involves feelings and emotions of being attached to one's ethnic group, whereas behavioural ethnic identity includes public expressions of this identity (Kalin and Berry 1994).

The existing literature on racialization, racism, and Whiteness highlights three significant gaps. First, few studies use qualitative data. Second, few of the existing studies deal with postsecondary education as a domain in which such identities are significantly constructed and challenged. Third, there is a lack of British Columbian and Canadian studies pertaining to Whiteness; though this is changing, much of the literature and research surrounding this topic remains exclusively American. One of the goals of our study is at least to begin to encourage further research in these specific areas.

As Kincheloe (1999, 174) suggests, a "pedagogy of Whiteness involves monitoring the White reaction to the identity crisis; and a central feature of that reaction involves the attempts of Whites over the last couple of decades to position themselves as victims." While we do not personally agree with any general use of the term "victim" when referring to a numerically and socially dominant group such as Whites in British Columbia, the idea of inquiring about the identities and experiences of White students seemed worth pursuing, for many reasons.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Our study's general theoretical perspective, "symbolic interactionism," which was developed by C.H. Cooley (1964), George Herbert Mead (1934), and Herbert George Blumer (1969), looks at the ways in which people make sense of their life-situations (Prus 1996, 10). Community life is also central to this position as individual actions and interactions cannot be fully understood apart from the community context. Symbols are developed, and they guide individual life: although some negotiation of meaning is always possible, society and language always precede individual actors. However, those actors can articulate their experiences within that cultural framework.

In order to accomplish an empirical investigation informed by symbolic interaction, we aimed to understand and describe the experiences of the research participants in a manner that was as free "as possible from theoretical or social constructs" (Rudestam and Newton 2001, 39). By taking such a stance, we created a collaborative narrative with the subjects through analyzing their experiences of university life. Such a research paradigm allows for presenting the descriptive

and interpretive nature of knowledge within a generally less structured format than do other, more positivist paradigms. We looked for patterns in the experiences communicated in the interviews, but we tried not to approach them with preconceived ideas about what we might find. This study, involving a small number of students, serves as a lens through which to see how a select number of members of a majority group perceive their position in the university and the wider community.

SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

To identify willing, self-identified White students at the university, we used "criterion sampling" (Rudestam and Newton 2001, 92). Through the use of mediators in the departments of anthropology, biology, chemistry, computing science, economics, engineering, English, psychology, and sociology, we contacted potential participants. They were given our contact information, and sixteen students chose to respond.[9]

Since the purpose of this study is to investigate interpretations of Whiteness among White university students, all participants needed to be self-identified White students. A balance of students from various disciplines was also important since we assumed that the perceptions and experiences of people in diverse fields would prove more representative of, although not strictly generalizable to, the student body as a whole.

There are, of course, many potential biases in using a non-random sampling technique. These include the fact that the resulting data are not statistically representative of the stakeholder group. If the population is "self-identified White university students," then these few volunteers only provide examples of the experiences of the "average White student." This is a very small sample, and this study could, therefore, be considered as simply a series of case studies. Of course, a major bias with volunteers in this study is that they are likely to be more concerned with, or at least open to, the social and personal issues of Whiteness than would a "typical" student.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The semi-structured, open-ended interviews allowed the participants to introduce relevant information that we may not have considered during the selection of questions. In order to account for fidelity in such a loosely

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[9] Of the original seventeen students who responded, only one (who would prefer not to be identified by department) chose not to participate after having read the consent form.

structured research format, we taped the interviews and then transcribed them so that we could return to them as needed. We subjected them to a phenomenological analysis by eliciting key themes in the dialogue. These were combined with other data collection methods, such as the use of a personal research journal, which allowed us to note emergent themes discovered during the interviewing process itself.

We used a semi-structured interview guide for the data collection. Interview questions were framed to encourage elaboration and expansion of participant response. The general areas of inquiry included: (1) interpretations of and experiences of race and ethnic studies in a university setting; and (2) perceptions of how Whiteness affects certain aspects of the university experience of participants. Students were asked questions about how they perceive race, ethnicity, other racial groups, and Whiteness. They were also asked questions pertaining to how frequently, as university students, they thought about their race, about how their Whiteness affected their classroom and/or social life, and about whether they felt they had been aware of competing self-concepts at university, had felt pride or shame in their Whiteness, or had ever been misclassified as a member of another race. The students were also asked questions about their experiences in courses that dealt either directly or indirectly with issues of race and ethnicity. In this section, they were also asked to share their thoughts on the prospect of Whiteness studies.

The interviews were audiotaped and then transcribed thematically rather than in their entirety. We also kept an interview journal with notes regarding things such as body language, tone, and the environment within which each interview was conducted in order to provide additional context and depth to the analytical process. In this journal we also included supplementary notes on our own interpretations throughout the interview as well as our reflections post-interview. This encompassed the positionality and reflexivity characteristic of qualitative research methodologies, which emphasize that the processes of data collection, interpretation, analysis, and writing up of results are not to be separated from each other (Cresswell 1994; Rudestam and Newton 2001). The interviews were conducted at the University of Victoria during the months of December, January, and February of the 2003-04 academic year.

WHAT WE FOUND

Since there is no in-depth research dealing specifically with Whiteness as it pertains to the university experience as a whole or to that of BC students in particular, this study is exploratory in nature. The data analysis, then, did not involve predetermined themes or patterns. It was also limited by the small number of cases (sixteen) and the lack of a random sample. Although the themes elicited are based on questions asked during the interviews, not all responses or questions are addressed. The reason for this is that some of the questions, as anticipated, elicited little response from students and were consequently skipped in the process of transcription and analysis.

The students tended to use the terms "race," "ethnicity," and "culture" synonymously, and since the goal here is to communicate the significant findings of the interviews, we also at times use these words interchangeably.

GENERAL REACTIONS TO RACE AND SELF-CONCEPT ON CAMPUS

The general reaction to Whiteness in our research in many ways paralleled that in Frankenberg's (1993) study. In our interviews, we found all of the participants to be racially tolerant, well-meaning White students. The interviewees expressed no direct racism in their rhetoric; rather, they tended to communicate an internalization of existing discourses of race, power, and privilege. The interview transcripts revealed a definite theme of recognition in that most of the White students admitted to some form of subconscious privilege that the university afforded White people.

Many students claimed that they responded to recruitment efforts because they were pleased to have a chance to discuss their race – an opportunity none of them had previously experienced. The general perspective was that White people are not given the chance to express themselves regarding their racial identity(ies), whereas people of colour are asked to share their thoughts with great frequency. Given that this is one of the points raised in the existing literature surrounding Whiteness and, consequently, one of the reasons we chose to explore this area of research, we found this majority response to be encouraging.

Interestingly, once the interviews had begun, most students were at a loss for words. What possible questions could we have for them about themselves? They were eager to discuss other groups but had apparently

never looked at themselves in this light. At the beginning of each interview, without exception, the participants appeared quite confused as to the merit of discussing *their* racial identity, and they expressed a preference for discussing their perspectives of *other* racial identities.

When asked whether they perceived race as having an influence on their academic and/or social experiences, many could not believe that such a question would be asked. It was quite apparent that none of the students interviewed had thought about how race could affect their lives on campus. Race was seen as something that concerned only other racial groups. However, their response was not negative, and many respondents appeared quite intrigued after they began to think about what their race might actually mean to them. Their response to questions pertaining to the academic effects versus the social effects of their Whiteness revealed some notable differences among respondents who study in the social sciences, business and sciences, and vocational trades.[10]

When asked to give their views on how race affects their academic lives, they responded in varied ways. One thirty-two-year-old English student, for example, reflected that her race affects her academic achievement because few non-Whites study English as a major; consequently, competition is "quite stiff." After further probing, it became apparent that, by this, she meant that if more students of ethnic minority majored in English – assuming that their first language is not English – she, and other White students (for whom English is their first language) would have a distinct advantage over the ethnic minorities. Here it became quite clear that race and language are often stereotypically linked. One sociology major and one anthropology graduate student replied that they had an academic advantage because of their race since, due to the language barrier, international students would have a harder time with certain complex course materials. Also, they thought that, because most of the teachers are White, it might be easier for them than for someone of ethnic minority status to relate to them.

From these particular responses, it can be tentatively concluded that, concerning the influence of race on academic achievement, being White could be either detrimental or beneficial. Some students tended to make more of an attempt than did others to appear "politically correct" in their responses by phrasing them so as to appear conscientious, non-racist,

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[10]   Since the number of students from each department was only one or two, this analysis deals exclusively with specific perspectives relayed to us. No direct comparison should be made between students from different disciplines until further research, with much larger response rates, can be conducted.

and educated. In fact, the term "politically correct" surfaced in many discussions. Some students, on the other hand, appeared to feel less of an obligation to say the "right" thing and were more eager to express their concerns regarding the competition between White people and people of other races for employment and educational opportunities. An interesting point here is that in each case the discussion turned to other groups, who were then used as a basis for comparison. Discussion did not focus on Whiteness on its own.

In contrast to the two differing kinds of responses from students concerning the influence of Whiteness on academic life, when asked about how and whether being White affected their social life on campus, the responses were quite similar. Showing no relation to the students' individual areas of study at university, the responses instead related to their social circles. The general consensus was that race does in fact play a rather important role in the social lives of these students. This set of questions was not accompanied by as much confusion and deep thought as were other sets, and, in fact, most students seemed quite enthusiastic about it.

Two main themes emerged in this discussion: (1) feelings of belong-ingness with regard to other White people and (2) a perceived lack of students of other races with whom to socialize. First, most students stated that they feel most comfortable socializing with other White students because they have more in common with them. Many of the students we spoke with are from predominantly White towns, attended predominantly White schools, and hence grew up with predominantly White friends and family. It is not as though they initially sought out these particular social ties, only that they have become used to them. Such familiarity has shaped their identity to the extent that they feel awkward, or "funny," approaching students of colour. Generally, the respondents also expressed the view that that they see groups of other races "stickin' together," so it seems "pretty normal for White people to stick with each other too." Some students were quick to defend their positions, as though they suspected that there might be something wrong with the opinions they had just voiced. They were thus prompt to point out that they would never exclude someone of another colour from their social clique, just that this seems to be "the way things work." One student commented that she is friends with an Indigenous student but that this student is

> totally White. You know what I mean? Like, she doesn't act Native
> at all. She even talks the same. She was raised by White parents, so.

She'd rather hang out with us 'cause I have more in common. I don't even consider her Native and sometimes forget.

Sleeter (1994, 36) argues that "people need affective bonds with each other, and given the segregation of society, the strongest bonds are usually with members of our own race." Perhaps this can account for some of the approaches of the students with regard to their own race and their choices with respect to social ties at university.

The interviewees first claimed to socialize mostly with other White students because of a feeling of commonality, but then they maintained that they would socialize with students of colour if there were more of a "selection":

> I guess because of the generation that I grew up in … diversity was looked upon as such a positive thing, that umm … it doesn't matter if you're Greek, or Spanish, or Mexican or Asian, or you know what I mean? You're gonna find your group of friends regardless of what race you are.

When asked what race most of this particular respondent's friends happened to be, she reluctantly acknowledged that they were, in fact, all White; this, however, is because there really "aren't any African Americans in our program." In almost every discussion surrounding social life at university, students communicated their observation that there seemed to be very few people of colour on campus. It is apparent that many of the respondents felt that the reason they had more White friends, and, in some cases, had *only* White friends, was that most of the other students on campus were also White. A nineteen-year-old computing science major commented:

> I mean, statistically speaking there's no real chance to make friends with other people. I mean, there's none to choose from.

Also of interest is the apparent perception of certain races as being more or less "coloured" than others. For example, the perceived lack of racial diversity on campus is commented upon and is based solely on the smaller presence of Black students. There is a significant minority of Asian students; however, while discussing the number of international students on campus, one student stated:

> Asian people don't count, they're kinda just like their own category. Ya know? I mean that there's just no Black people and stuff on campus, that's what I mean by colour.

One area of questioning that we had initially thought would lead to numerous interesting discussions was that relating to conflicting, or competing, self-concepts at university. Interestingly enough, nearly all of the students responded negatively when asked whether they had ever experienced conflicting self-concepts. Regardless of ethnic history or background, the respondents seemed to agree that they had never felt anything other than White.

Surprisingly, only two exceptions to this trend surfaced. These two students both identified as Greek-Canadians. One student responded quite eagerly to this question and shared his experiences as a Greek-Canadian at university. He indicated that he quite frequently felt that his being White and his being Greek never really co-exist: he feels *either* Greek *or* White depending on the circumstances. Many of his friends on campus are Greek, he said, and many of them refer to White people as "whiteys," excluding themselves from this group. In other words, many of his Greek friends do not consider themselves to be White:

> It's just that it's kinda fun, I think, to see people's reactions when they see us deny that we are White. Plus, I think it makes me feel like I have more, like, culture or something when I get the chance to say that I'm Greek. Nobody asks us what we are because we look normal, and this gives us a chance to let them know. We're proud to be Greek.

Interestingly, the second respondent to discuss this idea of competing self-concepts, also a Greek-Canadian, felt very White but rarely felt Greek:

> If somebody asked me, "What are you?" I say, "Greek." If they ask, "What race are you?" I'd say, "White." But nobody says, "What are you?" That'd be rude. The only time I feel Greek is off campus when me and our family go to a Greek function or something.

This perspective is linked to the social aspect of university life; with regard to the classroom setting, it appears that, for these particular individuals, such competing self-concepts played no role in their academic experience.

NATIONALITY

Interestingly and significantly, not one respondent brought up nationality and its role with regard to self-concept until we introduced the topic. Many of the participants spoke of how, in their classes, it is nice to have the professor include some Canadian material and that, when

this happens, they feel proud to be Canadian; however, when they read something by a White person, it does not necessarily make them feel proud to be White. As one engineering student explained:

> It's just fun when some big accomplishment is done by a Canadian and I get to read about it, or our instructor tells us about it. It's like it gives you something to look up at. As if it makes any difference when the person is White or not, just Canadian.

Another interesting thing about this perspective is the assumption of Whiteness in academic authorship. Often, one does not know the race of any given theorist or author, even if a photograph is available. On the other hand, a quick glance at the publishing information can tell us whether something was published in Canada. When reading material for a university course, White students often assume the author is White. Consequently, according to these students, they do not feel any increased degree of attachment to most material unless they know the author is Canadian. In this sense, the Canadian identity of the respondents seems to be more salient than does their Whiteness, at least within the university setting.

OTHER RACIALIZED GROUPS

The second section of the interview asked participants to voice their opinions, experiences, and perceptions regarding upon how they relate to other racial groups at university. Only two groups were brought up with any frequency, and we refer to them just as the respondents did: "Asian" and "Native Indian." We briefly examine the perceptions of each group within both an academic context and a social context by eliciting the themes most commonly found in the interviews.

Perhaps because of a large, visible Asian student presence on campus, thirteen of the sixteen respondents first brought up Asian groups when asked to discuss their own ethnic identity as White students. This was especially interesting, given that participants had talked about there being "no one to choose from" when it came to associating with non-White people. It was difficult not to take this as implying that perhaps the student participants did not consider their Asian counterparts to be as non-White as were students of other racial groups. Many of the White students expressed companion-like regard for their Asian classmates, and some even denoted endearment in rather interesting ways. A sociology student reflected:

They're just so cute! Especially the girls. They always sit together, and chat real quiet, and are always super nice. I've never met a mean one! I wish White people were so nice! [laughs].

Conversely, some students identified their frustrations with these particular groups, implying that certain habits, whether culturally significant or not, had the potential to be aggravating:

It's not that I have any problem with them; it's just that they all walk together in these huge groups on campus, like in the hallways and stuff and they never look where they're going, and stuff like that. Not to sound rude but their voices kind of bug me too when they're all talking at once, super fast.

They are definitely the most segregated group in our department. Not really on our behalf … this is going to sound really racist … they kinda keep to themselves. I mean I see them off campus and recognize some from our classes and they have no idea who I am … mostly because they're comfortable that way.

Another common theme in the discussions surrounding perceptions of Asian students is that of general competitiveness. Many students, especially males, shared their envy of the "fancy cars" Asian students may be seen driving. Consequently, male Asian students were labelled as "show-offs" and as "making up for what else they lack." On a more academic level, Asian students are generally perceived by respondents to be very intelligent, especially in the sciences, computing sciences, and business. Some students also saw this as threatening.

The second group to be discussed by numerous students was the Indigenous student population. Most of the issues mentioned revolved around the perceived unequal distribution of resources. Many of the respondents remarked on how they thought it unjust that Native students had access to resources that White students, or other students in general, did not. For instance, over half the students interviewed raised issues such as tuition, scholarships, bursaries, building projects, and so on. This perception is exemplified by a psychology major:

[Native students] get way more than any of us and it's like they don't even know it because you hardly see any of them around the university. They get all the special stuff like what was that "friendship house" or something they just built … why can't I have something like that? Seems sorta lame if you ask me. I think they get free tuition too from the university.

Some of the interviewees also touched upon pride and shame regarding their relations with Aboriginal students (see next section).

EMOTIONAL RESPONSES TO WHITENESS

Some of the most prevalent themes that emerged during the data collection process concerned feelings of pride and shame. Respondents were asked whether or not they had ever felt proud or ashamed to be White. Most of the responses were surprisingly negative: participants expressed little if any pride in their Whiteness. Given the responses to previous interview questions regarding, for instance, their perception of other racialized groups on campus, we expected that the discussion of pride and shame would reflect the same tone. It would seem appropriate for students to suggest feelings of pride, prestige, and perhaps even power when given the direct opportunity to describe these feelings. This, however, was far from the case.

Rather than presuming causal factors relating to the reactions of the students interviewed, we focused on the three dominant themes that emerged during the interviews: invisibility, guilt, and indifference. These themes exposed many issues of White identity, such as the perceived invisibility/absence of a clear and distinct White culture, a perceived disadvantage for Whites in the distribution of resources, and the problem of being perceived as "oppressors."

Invisibility

Throughout the interviews, a feeling of invisibility was among the most discussed themes. Of the sixteen students interviewed, eleven pointed out that, with regard to their race, they most often felt invisible on campus. While discussing issues of pride, one student mentioned that, in a contemporary university setting, where diversity is strongly promoted as something valuable, students aim to set themselves apart from others by any means possible:

> People don't want to be boring, you know. Look at how different people are on campus compared to off campus. You can't stand out too much but you need to at least be an individual, you know?

We had been under the impression that students would rather blend in than stand out in any given setting. This student's comments were, however, confirmed by most of the other participants. In particular, numerous students mentioned their attempts to be unique so as not to "blend in" too much with the masses of other White students on

campus. However, they were also quite clear that they did not wish to be *too* different, only to stand out as having something unique to offer. Specific talents, hobbies, musical tastes, and even clothing styles clearly took precedence over race with regard to the self-concepts of many of the respondents. A recent anthropology graduate explained his view:

> I try to not be too boring, you know? Like, I'm pretty boring to look at, being a White guy n' all. I like to think that our music sets me apart. I don't think our Whiteness makes any difference. I just blend in with all the other White faces here at the university. None of us really stand out, I don't think, unless it's in some other way, you know? People know me because of our band and not our race. How funny would it sound to be like: "Hey, I know him, he's that White guy!" Like anyone would know who the hell they were talking about!

In a university setting, especially one such as the University of Victoria, where the visible majority of students are White, racial consciousness is usually of some relevance. Students are exposed to ideas of equity and diversity on a fairly regular basis through campus magazines and newspapers, equity forums, and, ideally, in the classroom. Institutions such as the university make a concerted effort to be equitable in their operations, and students are consequently exposed to some sort of idealization of diversity.

As a result, according to those interviewed, White students feel as though their positions on racial issues are of little importance either inside or outside the classroom. Walking around, they feel racially invisible and, consequently, look elsewhere to distinguish themselves. Many students commented that people of colour look or seem "so much more interesting" and that they would "like to be interesting too."

Guilt

Many of the students expressed a sense of guilt over being White, and this was often tied to feelings of shame for the colonialist history of Canada and other Western countries:[11]

> It totally sucks to be White when you're studying Canada's history and other countries' too. It's kinda embarrassing 'cause we've done so much … shitty stuff [laughs] to everyone. I can see other [White] people,

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[11] Much of the discussion surrounding the theme of guilt ended up shifting to issues not pertinent to university life but, rather, to everyday life off-campus. These segments are not included here.

not just me, getting skirmish [*sic:* squirmy] in their seats when that stuff gets brought up. I hate classes like that!

The common view is that, whether justly or unjustly, White people are deemed responsible not only for much of the exploitation, violence, and discrimination that has occurred and continues to occur throughout global history but also on campus. A prevalent concern involved the impression that Indigenous students harbour a great deal of resentment towards White students. The students interviewed generally felt that, when they were among Indigenous students, the latter were looking at them with disdain and animosity. One student's reflection is indicative of the comments of many others:

> I can feel it, you know, when I, like, walk up, or toward a crowd of them and they all stare at me. I get sort of scared and just try to keep our <sic> head down and not make eye contact. I think it's mostly the girls that try to intimidate us and the older they get the nicer they seem for some reason. I feel super bad about what happened to their ancestors. But that's not us. That was then, this is now. I still feel guilty though because White people have done that same kind of thing to lots of people.

When asked whether they had ever spoken with a Native student about these concerns, it turned out that only one student had ever voiced concern to anyone other than other White students.

Several students also brought up a racially fueled streak of crime, mostly in the form of graffiti,[12] that occurred on campus. Apparently there was a certain amount of tension between White students and students of colour in the classroom in the few weeks following these incidents. The participants felt ashamed that their fellow (White) students could be capable of such actions and articulated feelings of guilt, which resulted from their fear of being clumped together with the perpetrators:

> I felt kind of stupid being White at that time because it's obvious that White people would be the only ones to do that kind of thing. But, it was like the non-White students in our classes were pissed off

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[12] Just prior to the interviews, incidents of racialized graffiti and vandalism occurred on the University of Victoria campus. Because of this, some of the welcoming festivities for incoming students had to be cancelled, and the university requested information from students about the crimes. These incidents proved problematic with regard to our ability to recruit participants for this project as it was difficult to determine how to go about requesting only White student participants.

at everyone [White], not just the people who did that stuff … I just
kinda kept quiet when it was brought up and stuff.

As Whites experience the racialization of their identity, some may
feel guilty about their association with a group complicit with racial
oppression. But many other reactions to this experience are possible.
Often some guilt-laden Whites develop a sense of self-denigration and
conceptualize non-White cultures as superior: this routinely includes
assumptions that other races are more "natural," "authentic," or "sacred"
(Kincheloe 1999, 168). Others react in an opposite manner, claiming that
non-White cultures have created a conspiracy against White culture.
They also see multiculturalists as calling for the repression of White
expression and identity. It was clear that many of the interviewees
harboured some of this feeling.

Indifference

Some students said they felt neither guilty nor invisible but, rather,
indifferent. Three students communicated feelings whose connotations
were neither negative nor positive. They appeared to consider their
Whiteness as something that "*just is,*" with no particular meaning or
importance:

> I've never felt proud to be White. But … I've never felt ashamed either.
> It's just how I am I guess … White. I've never really thought about it. I
> mean, what difference does it make really?
>
> Am I supposed to feel proud? Don't get me wrong, I don't feel guilty
> either. I just don't really care, that's all. There's way more important
> things at school to think about. I don't go around thinking about our
> skin colour. Wouldn't that take away from our work? [laughs]

Realizing that race is perhaps not something that White students
consider much, and given that one of the initial premises of this project
was that members of a majority or privileged group may not examine
certain aspects of their lives until challenged to do so, we pointed
out that, even if this is not something they think about often, they
should at least attempt to reflect on it for the interview. Many times
we heard responses such as "I've never really thought about that" or
"what difference does that make?" or "why should I care about that?"
These students were not meaning to be rude – in fact most times these
comments were followed by a "sorry" – they were just trying to be
honest. Even with a significant amount of probing, they were very keen
to leave this part of the interview behind. This convinced us that they

had nothing to say on the matter. And we found this "nothing" to be quite "something":

> No, seriously, I don't feel anything but just myself. I sure don't feel guilty. I don't think I ever have, really. Why should I?
>
> I've never done anything wrong to Black people or anything. Proud? No, not that either, 'cause I've never done anything special for White people. That's really all I have to say about that! [laughs]

Although only three students indicated this sort of indifference in this particular section of the interview, in almost every other section of the interview numerous students repeated these views. Suffice it to say, we considered indifference to be one of the major themes to emerge in the interview process as it illustrated how racial majority groups tend to perceive race as irrelevant. These expressions of indifference seemed to surface in regard to nearly every issue. Given that this sort of reaction is quite obviously one afforded to a privileged majority group, we were quite eager to hear the respondents' replies to questions concerning issues of privilege.

Privilege

Many participants denied, justified, or defended their privilege. The role that race plays in the construction of privilege on campus was outweighed by two other factors – gender and class. This is best communicated through looking at excerpts of some of the most common responses:

> I don't think that, as a queer woman, that I experience the same kind of privilege that everyone assumes White people have. White men, I think, are the only ones who really experience and reap the benefits of their power.

> I sure don't get any privileges at the university because I'm White. I mean, I have huge student loan debts you know?! I don't get free or cheaper tuition like some people of other races. I'll be lucky to finish at this rate. I don't think that's privilege, you know?!

> There's no way I have privilege at school. Maybe outside of school, but not here. I have to give up stuff that I might be good at 'cause somebody else gets it 'cause they're minority or whatever. Someone said it's called equity something or other … policy maybe … but I think that sounds like … like … like privilege to me.

> I don't know. If I say I'm privileged, it seems like I don't deserve how well I do or something like that. Like, I just got a chance to go away and work overseas and I worked hard to get accepted and, like, if it's because of our privilege that I went there I'd feel cheated, and like I don't, like, deserve it. I still have to work so I don't think it's fair to say I get stuff because of our privilege.

Perhaps, as Delpit (1988, 282) argues, "individuals with power are frequently least aware of – or at least willing to acknowledge – its existence." Sleeter (1993) and Phoenix (1997) found that White people have difficulty constructing and talking about themselves in racial terms, while minority or racialized individuals do not. The reasons given for this vary from denial of power to the "lack of recognition of historical and political relations" (James 2003, 29).

There are, of course, exceptions to these perspectives. Although only two participants acknowledged their privilege, they must not go unmentioned:

> I cannot deny our privilege. All you have to do is look at the numbers. Like, how many White people go to this university? What kind of programs do they go into? How many of the teachers are White? Seriously, to say I have no privilege, on or off campus, would be super lame, not to mention ignorant.

> I guess you could say I'm privileged. I'm not sure why but I know I am. We're taught that.

As the latter comment shows, the university is a place where diversity is made apparent and where students are made aware of social issues. One may deduce that communities like universities should provide environments conducive to interactions with members of other groups.

Numerous students mentioned language when speaking of privilege. Interestingly enough, many deflected questions on race by responding as though the questions had actually been about language or "mother tongue." Privilege, according to many of these students, is only obvious in a classroom setting that features students whose primary language is not English. Some expressed a form of pity when commenting on the struggle that these students experienced when attempting to follow course materials. An economics student explained her perspective and exemplified that of many others:

> With Asian people I feel like I have the upper hand because they have such a hard time with explaining themselves, their asking questions

with profs, or being able to just write a test, like understanding the wording of a question.

PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE OF
RACE AS AN AREA OF STUDY

As James (2003) found, many students felt uncomfortable or defensive when using the term "race."[13] Consequently, when asked whether they perceive race and ethnic studies to be an important area of academic study, many again questioned the terminology. Several demonstrated their defensiveness by emphasizing that they did not, in fact, "see peoples' race," that they "look[ed] at the person first, not their skin colour." Also, and perhaps most pertinent to the discussion of race as an area of study, numerous students indicated that "race" is, in fact, a word that only surfaces in discussions about racism or prejudice:

> I think that I've been taught that race is a racist word and that I should be using "ethnicity" instead. Is it okay to use the word race, then? As a White person?

The notion of colour-blindness as an ideal is widespread, and sometimes a mere suggestion of race or racial consciousness is deemed racist. To speak of people as though they are raceless, however, could prove to be even more racist as once cannot deal with race without taking race into account.

When asked whether they had, in fact, enrolled in a course specifically geared to studying different races, ethnicities, or cultures, most students answered that their disciplines were not really conducive to that line of study. On the other hand, many courses had at least one section devoted to the study and understanding of other cultures. Most of these courses pertained to economic globalization in that they dealt mostly with "how not to offend people of a different culture" and with a "universal language of the globe." They were most often said to be required for the completion of certain components of a degree or program.

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[13] Since the student participants felt more comfortable using ethnicity as a term denoting race, so as not to imply meaning other than that intended by the participants, and since this research is not meant to dissect the contested terrain of language but only to understand the experience(s) of those interviewed through their own lenses, we adopt this use of terminology and will thus use the terms race and ethnicity interchangeably in this following discussion of race as an area of study in the university. It would be very interesting, in a future study, to explore White students' understanding of ethnicity and race as separate topics of discussion. However, for the sake of brevity and due to the time constraints involved in the research and writing, these issues will be left for a later date.

When asked to think of topics that they would deem most important to address in such courses, students most frequently brought up "language barriers" and "equal rights":

> Learning how to give most people the benefit of the doubt, or put yourself in their shoes. You don't see enough of that because it's not taught. The only way for it to be more of a worldwide thing is if it's taught, you know what I mean, like, to have open discussions in class and to be able to hear other people's opinions.

For the most part, very accepting attitudes emerged in the answers to this line of questioning. Virtually every student considers this to be an important area of study and said that they would be interested in taking (more) courses if they were offered:

> I think this is so important. To understand where people are coming from … knowing a bit about that person's history, or knowing how they might have been raised kinda helps you deal with people a bit better.

PERCEIVED PLACE OF WHITENESS STUDIES IN BC UNIVERSITIES

Student participants all seemed quite keen on the idea of incorporating Whiteness studies into general studies of race and ethnicity. Most liked the idea of having the opportunity to study Whiteness, and many expressed enthusiasm about learning more about their own racial history as well as the role it plays in the present. Three students even acknowledged the need for White people to study Whiteness, as opposed to the general assumption that whiteness studies would entail non-Whites studying Whites.

> I think a lot of people need to open their eyes and look at themselves before they go out there and look at others. I think I need to better understand ourselves. Actually, this interview has helped me to think about myself and my race a lot already! It's cool, though. Maybe I need more stuff, you know? It'd be cool to have a class full of whiteys studying whiteys!

However, most students assumed that Whiteness studies would be for people of colour, just as "ethnicity" studies are for White people:

I think it needs to be equal with every other ethnicity because if you are teaching a course in another part of the country, it totally needs to have totally equal rights. If I'm willing to be accepting and learn about other ethnicities, they should in turn be willing to learn about me.

Well yeah! I don't know why they don't have that yet. If they did then maybe people would understand that we're not all a bunch a racists!

Sure, they should study us. I might be kind of boring though! [laughs] I doubt it would be a very interesting class! Do you think they'd actually take it? I think they know us pretty well already.

What would it be about? There's so many different kinds of White people to learn about, you'd think they'd need quite a few classes to make it encompassing enough. Maybe it should be a new field instead.

These reactions are interesting in light of Omi's (2001, 253) comment that the racialization process for Whites is evident when "White students encounter a heightened awareness of race, which calls their own identity into question."

OUTSIDE THE IVORY TOWER: SID'S STORIES

Deciphering meanings from this research is difficult. After all, we talked to a small, self-selected group of White students. During the course of the study, however, the principal researcher began talking with her friend and co-worker, Sidig (Sid), about his perceptions on Whiteness. We believe his input has been crucial to the success of this project.

Sid is from Sudan and has been a Canadian citizen for five years now. He works at two jobs but also studies part-time at the University of Victoria. He is married to a White woman and they have an eight-year-old daughter. He works as a full-time dishwasher in two restaurants and sends money from his second job home to Sudan to support his immediate family, which has thirty-two members. Unlike many of the students interviewed, Sid has not come from a background of easily accessible education or high-status occupations, and, this being the case, in our discussions his reactions were not solely focused on race, but were often more centred on class. Sid was kind and surprisingly eager to offer his views on this study. We were keen to hear his perspectives as a part-time English-as-a-second-language (ESL) student who sees the classroom and social setting of the university through a non-White lens.

The main topic of interest to come up in our conversations with Sid concerned the question of why these White students attempted to deflect discussion of their Whiteness, to avoid discussing their racial selves as being part of their identities. We spoke of how, during our interviews, we frequently had to remind the participants that we were talking about them, their race and their identity, as they quite often tended to turn the discussion to other groups and seemed to feel uncomfortable talking about their own race. The theme of indifference is crucial to this under-standing: students purported to be indifferent to, and even unaware of, their race in many social and academic settings. This unquestionably ended up being the dominant theme of our project. Sid speculated about some of the possible reasons for this display of indifference:

> They say that because Whites *are* equal. It is equal for them so they think it is equal for everyone. Maybe they are trying to pretend not to think about this? Maybe they know what it means to know they are White, like you do know, but are scared to know? Maybe they have never had to think about this? Maybe they only think people like me have a race […] because I look like I have a race?

Sid brought up the link between university and the outside workforce. The interview participants frequently mentioned employment equity, and they often equated equal distribution of resources in educational institutions with equal distribution in the employment sphere. Sid shared his standpoint:

> Living in White society everything is there. Job application, eve-rything. When you have education you have job. I'm pushing our daughter to have education. When you have education you get chance. That's the only way for people to get ahead. Especially for people who not White, you know what I mean?
>
> I work hard in our life and never get more than minimum wage, nothing more than that because I have no education and, second, our colour. When people start to be, to be, exposed to more colour they get uncomfortable and jealous, or competition with us. That's where racism starts. They would have no reason to be racist if they didn't think they could win something for it.

Also discussed was the critical issue of language and race. Sid ex-plained that he faces assumptions about his (in)ability to speak English on an almost daily basis. He was also quick to emphasize that he does

not *"hold this against them"* because he feels that one has to look at how people have been socialized:

> "Why I talk you?" "Oh! You speak English" All shocked, you know, that I speak English. And I speak French too but nobody gets to know that about me because they would approach someone else first. Like for example, on campus I see people, you know, asking for time. I have a huge shiny watch that everyone can see but they walk past me and ask somebody else instead. Oh Well, I'm usually in a rush anyway! I don't have the time for you to ask me for the time! [laughs].

Some students remarked that the division of labour between White people and people of colour is the result of language barriers and the latter's occasional lack of ability with regard to English language skills. To this, Sid remarked that language is not the problem. He sees many White immigrants come from non-English-speaking backgrounds who have accents just as strong as his but who seem to get more opportunities on campus, both academically and socially:

> Somebody like me come from a different country and need a job but cannot have a job because of colour. It's not language because White man can come from Sweden and speak no English but still get a job much easier than me because he's White. He might even get more respect in the classroom. Most of our teachers are great about this but the students are not always good. They talking all the time to the Swedish guy, you know?

In our final area of discussion, Sid expressed his concerns about and his support for the study of Whiteness at the university:

> The more people have education the more things will change. I teach our daughter to be proud of back home, proud of her colour and strong. I think everyone should feel proud of their history, even if they are White. When they be confident they be not so racist. At school people be racist because they feel threatened and don't respect.

Sid feels that the study of White people should be taught by people of colour, despite his conviction that White people should *not* teach about other races. When asked why he holds this seemingly contradictory stance, he retorted that he thinks that people of colour, especially those who live in countries or communities comprised of a White majority, have a better understanding of Whiteness than do White people them-selves:

> That's wrong for White people to teach about other [colour] cultures, or countries. They don't know about the country. You know why? Even if they've been there, or even lived there, still different for Black people than for White people, you know what I'm saying? They haven't lived as a Black person so they can't teach about that. They only teach what they see. Not always real what they see. For example, in our country I have Big Fest, you know Big Fest? After Ramadan I party. Each family say "hi," you bring your food outside, everybody comes out to eat in the street, you can be poor too and bring no food but still eat. White people don't share like that. They'll give money at Christmas time but they would never share their fork with someone who was poorer than them.
>
> To teach about White people different because Black people, or coloured people, know you White people better than you do. We've all tried to fit in to your culture so I have to know the culture pretty well. You live in it every day and don't notice details like I do.

After listening to countless stories of (usually) subtle racism at university and much more blatant racism on the outside, the principal researcher commented that, if she were Black, she would be protesting any racist treatment that she experienced. She claimed that she would be irate and on the phone to newspapers complaining about shop owners and bank tellers. Sid, on the other hand, felt that, as a Black man, he could not afford to waste all of his energy protesting everything; otherwise he would have no time for his jobs or the important things, like school and family. The only way to make a difference, Sid said, is to just live and grapple with the everyday things and keep standing. Otherwise one could devote one's whole life to the cause, which is commendable but not an option for most. Sid's philosophy helps him to concentrate on the important things in his life:

> If you respect me I respect you, that's my way I do now. If not, Black or White, who gives a shit. Right? I don't live my life for the negative people any more.

TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF WHITENESS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Critical Whiteness studies owes a great debt to the work done by generations of non-White writers, by many ethno-racial groups, and by feminist theorists. The field attempts to trace the history behind the invention of Whiteness, to attack privileges afforded to Whites, and

to analyze the cultural practices that create and perpetuate notions of Whiteness. The purpose of Whiteness studies is to make visible the history and practices of White supremacy as found in social life, the law, literature, music, politics, and every other area of our civilization. Whiteness studies is no substitute for any other field of study; rather, it complements them (Fleras 2001, 106). There is always a danger that Whiteness studies might be seen as a gimmick, as a way to keep the focus on White people, as another attempt to put White people back in the position of privilege and/or to avoid the challenges presented by non-White perspectives. Unless we are both careful and reflexive, this line of study could end up privileging the White, middle-class individual's need for self-display (Jay 2005, 102). Furthermore, in criticizing past representations of race, Whiteness studies run the risk of merely recirculating the very ideas and images they hope to eradicate. It is to be hoped that Whiteness studies will avoid the pitfall of reproducing racism, though it will surely make mistakes. Newitz (1997, 149), for example, emphasizes the importance of questioning the "self-congratulatory mode that enables Whites to critique themselves before anyone else does." From her perspective, an effective counter-strategy would seek to disaffiliate White identity from the institutions of White supremacy.

Even though Whiteness can be linked to numerous oppressive social practices, it can also be negotiated on an individual level. In this sense, through Whiteness studies, differences within Whiteness may serve to deconstruct racial supremacy, helping to reproduce "indeterminate and anti-racist forms of White identity" (Wiegman 1999, 145). One of the most interesting features of the study of Whiteness is its focus on an object of study whose power and privilege it hopes to critically undo (134). As Apple (1998, x) points out, "what sets Whiteness studies apart is its placing of the spotlight of critical scrutiny, not on the 'racial Other,' but on the power of Whiteness and how it can be interrupted, interpreted, and transformed."

Here lies a difficult predicament: how can one go about studying and communicating ideas about Whiteness in British Columbia without essentializing all White British Columbians as privileged? Like the student participants from the University of Victoria, different White people inevitably negotiate their own relationship with Whiteness in different ways. Just as one cannot safely generalize about "all men," so one cannot safely generalize about "all Whites."

Clearly, Whiteness, like Blackness and other ethnic, racial, or cultural identifications, is heterogeneous. The brave students who were willing

to participate in this project have unique perspectives and, thus, none of them experienced privileges or disadvantages in the same way. Only through social research can we begin to get a picture of how different people are living with Whiteness and how Whiteness affects their everyday lives, and the lives of non-Whites, in British Columbia and across the country. As Sidig says, "the only way to know what someone thinks is to ask them."

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