1-1-2003

Seeing Gray: Whiteness and the Erasure of Difference

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He is a young man, highly regarded by all who know him, tall and slim, but of powerful build. His face would attract attention even in a thousand. Gray-blue eyes light up a face at once intelligent and handsome. A blond mustache ornaments his upper lip, while a mass of dark hair crowns a proudly poised head. He is a picture in repose and a tiger in action.[1]

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When I was invited to write an essay relating to the third section of this exhibition, I was a little nervous about trying to explain or interpret the concept of "The Graying of Whiteness" to others. But I was also fascinated by the interrelationship among the works chosen because many of them suggest an ambivalent or antagonistic relationship to whiteness, and the more I thought about the exhibition, the more I began to see a link between its exploration of whiteness and my own ongoing research into the lynch mob as a manifestation of whiteness. I found my thoughts repeatedly returning to the passage quoted above, which presents a canonical image of the American hero yet actually describes the leader of a lynch mob. The passage originates from an episode from the little-known history of lynching in California which illustrates precisely how racial erasure is systemic within the construction of whiteness. At its most basic level, my research project is an attempt to determine the actual number of Latinos lynched in California since statehood, but along the way it has also become a study in the erasure of difference.

Just as the works in the exhibition push and prod against one another, each of the case histories I've uncovered pushes at the boundaries of whiteness as a discourse. As a result, this essay, perhaps like the exhibition itself, may be less concerned with defending the parameters of whiteness than with dissolving them altogether. Certainly issues such as racial inequality, gender equity, and sexual orientation are familiar points of contact among the artworks in the exhibition, yet in the context of whiteness, new and unfamiliar elements also begin to emerge. In considering the thematic links among the works, we want to be careful not to "white out" their specific origins in any number of art movements, including but not limited to pop art, conceptual art, performance art, the women's art movement, and their many contemporary permutations. Throughout this section of the exhibition, questions of difference, visibility, and invisibility become sites for an expanded debate about those individuals and

1. *San Francisco Examiner*, 12 July 1887.

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Kim Dingle
Untitled (Wild Girls), 1993
Cat. no. 56

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Lezley Saar
Mulatto Nation Gift Shop, 2003 (detail)
Cat. no. 68

communities that have found themselves located at the edge of whiteness. With its self-conscious insistence on including works that, at least on some level, address or derive meaning from multiracial or transracial identities, the exhibition moves the debate away from a black/white dichotomy toward the understanding of whiteness not merely as a racial category, but as a social system. For many, black and white are the only racial histories evoked by the discourse of whiteness. But given the exhibition's origination in California, it seems imperative to expand this discussion of whiteness to include other communities of difference. After all, blacks were not, and are not, the only community to have been, and to be, exploited, indentured, underpaid, despised, persecuted, and even desired, for that matter.

A recurring problem in the discussion of whiteness is that it is often misperceived as the latest flavor of identity politics, but such a view overlooks the complex relationship between whiteness and economics, law, politics, art, science, and the media—or, to put it more simply, power. The concept of whiteness cannot be understood, and certainly cannot be dismantled, until one recognizes that our understanding of race has been continually reshaped, poked, and prodded by evolutionary theories, genetics, criminology, physiognomy, craniology, and other (occasionally short-lived) scientific and pseudo-scientific disciplines. Today race is widely accepted as having less to do with biology than with sociology, and in the wake of the Human Genome Project, many scientists have argued that the differences in physical appearance typically associated with race have little or no biological basis. As George Lipsitz writes in *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*: "This whiteness is, of course, a delusion, a scientific and cultural fiction that like all racial identities has no valid foundation in biology or anthropology. Whiteness is, however, a social fact, an identity created and continued with all-too-real consequences for the distribution of wealth, prestige, and opportunity."[2]

The Erasure of Hong Di

Reading the newspaper on July 12, 1877, many in the small town of Colusa, California, must have been surprised to see a familiar young man so gloriously described in a San Francisco daily. After all, this "picture in repose" was none other than Bud Welch, a local bartender by trade. Given the newspaper description's exaltation of Welch's physical beauty and prowess, the reader may be surprised to learn that the article detailed how this heroic figure had, just days before, led a mob of citizens in the lynching of a young Chinese boy known as Hong Di. The case was widely reported in newspapers from San Francisco to New York, yet its nearly complete erasure from the historical record highlights how whiteness can, and frequently does, reshape history itself.

Hong Di entered public consciousness on July 10, 1887, when a Colusa jury found the seventeen-year-old houseboy guilty of murder in the first degree.[3] Hong Di had shot and killed a young woman. One newspaper account reduced the murder to three possible motives: "lust," "love of murder," or the actions of "a frightened boy."[4] In a surprising turn of events, the jury recommended the imposition of a life sentence. At the reading of the verdict there was a riotous uproar, and the sheriff had to ask the governor to call out the Colusa guard. When local merchants refused to sell ammunition to the guardsmen, however, the sheriff was forced to disband the men.[5] Around midnight nearly 150 men overran the jail, and after a brief search, "the quaking Chinaman was discovered."[6] He was taken to the end of town and unceremoniously hanged near

2. George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), vii.

3. *Weekly Colusa Sun*, 16 July 1887; *Daily Record-Union*, 11 July 1887; "Lynchings in California, 1883–1935" (Tuskegee Institute Archives), 37. Hong Di is identified as "Hong, Du, Chinaman."

4. Editorial, *San Francisco Examiner*, 12 July 1887.

5. *Weekly Colusa Sun*, 16 July 1887; *Daily Record-Union*, 11 July 1887; *Yolo Weekly Mail*, July 1887; *San Francisco Examiner*, 11 July 1887; cited in Warren Franklin Webb, "A History of Lynching in California since 1875" (M.A. thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1935), 42.

6. Webb, "History of Lynching," 43.

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Clifford Lecuyer
Untitled #32, 1999
Cat. no. 20

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Millie Wilson
T & A, 1992
Cat. no. 76

the railroad turntable. An editorial published on July 16, 1887, claimed that the mob was two thousand strong and composed of the "best people" in the county.[7] Hong Di was portrayed as an ungrateful employee, and worse yet, in several articles he was presented as a sexual threat to the racial purity of this predominantly white community. In a rare acknowledgment of the bias against the Chinese, an editorial in a New York paper stated, "It is indeed remarkable that a California jury could be found to discriminate in favor of a Chinese criminal; it is even more remarkable, in fact, than the lynching."[8]

In his seminal text *Difference and Pathology*, Sander Gilman writes, "difference is that which threatens order and control," noting that "various signs of difference can be linked without any recognition of inappropriateness, contradictoriness, or even impossibility."[9] The mob, the spectators, the barkeep, the clerks who refused to sell ammunition to the Colusa guardsmen, the journalists who sexualized Hong Di's othernesss, the readers who bought the newspapers, the prosecutors who overlooked the illegality of the mob, and the employers who relied on the low wages of Chinese labor are all symptomatic of the fantastic degree of difference that was projected onto the young boy. This difference transformed him in the eyes of the mob into a spectacle—racially, sexually, and morally alien. His very existence was seen as an unacceptable threat to the safety of the community, so much so that his lynching scarcely registered as an illegal act in the local newspapers. A near-textbook example of Lipsitz's notion of the "possessive investment in whiteness," the case also highlights the overtly theatrical nature of many lynchings. In this context, the "spectacle" of difference was literally neutralized before a jeering crowd.

What is even more surprising is how such a well-known case was nearly completely erased from the historical record. Walter White (1893–1955), onetime leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, in his book *Rope and Faggot: A Biography of Judge Lynch*, listed all victims of lynchings in California as being either black or white, even though many Latinos (Mexicans and Mexican Americans), Native Americans, and Asians died at the hands of angry mobs.[10] That White's statistics on lynching record all nonblack victims as white is perhaps even more surprising given the fact that White was of mixed ancestry and could pass for white, although he self-identified as African American.[11] Even if White lacked the information, it is telling that white and not black became the default racial identity for lynching victims such as Gregorio Orosco (Native American), Jesus Fuen ("Mexican"), and Hong Di.[12] The fact that White was black only clarifies that whiteness can be a silent but powerful force in the construction of historical memory.

In recording the name and description of the leader of the mob, the *San Francisco Examiner* gave a face to one of California's, and indeed America's, most anonymous and least documented manifestations of whiteness—the lynch mob. The writer's rhapsodic description of Welch becomes a powerful force in normalizing, embracing, and condoning an illegal act. At the risk of oversimplification, Welch's physiognomy was employed as a fundamental proof of his, and the entire mob's, innocence, just as Hong Di's racial identity, sexuality, and "heathen" religious practices, all widely noted in the press, pointed to his guilt, making him appear so repugnant that the outcome of the trial was rejected. As such, Welch's physical prowess and pleasing appearance provide a positivist justification for the mob's actions, imbuing them with a

7. Editorial, *Yolo Weekly Mail*, 16 July 1887.

8. Editorial from the *New York Tribune*, quoted in the *Colusa Sun*, 16 July 1887.

9. Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 21.

10. Walter White, *Rope and Faggot: A Biography of Judge Lynch* (New York: Knopf, 1929), 267. White gives 4,951 as the number of lynchings occurring between 1882 and 1927, with 1,438 of the victims recorded as white and 3,513 as black (237, table 3), he notes that 50 lynchings occurred in California, with 48 victims recorded as being white and 2 as "Negroes." My own research shows that White dramatically understated the number of cases in California. See also Ralph Ginzburg, *One Hundred Years of Lynchings* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1962), 253–70. Ginzburg estimates the number of blacks lynched between 1859 and 1961 to be nearly 5,000.

11. Paul Rueben, *Perspectives in American Literature: A Research and Reference Guide* (California State University, Stanislaus), 22 August 2002 <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/home.htm>.

12. Courtesy of the Tuskegee Institute Archives; *Los Angeles Star*, 15 August 1864; Fuen (also spelled Fulzen and Quien) was referred to as a "Mexican murderer" in the *San Fernando Daily Courier*, 7 April 1893. There is no evidence that he was a Mexican citizen, and thus "Mexican" was probably used as an ethnic identifier, pejorative for Mexican American.

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Kyungmi Shin
Blue Eyes, Peter, 2001
Cat. no. 72

moral righteousness harking back to the physiognomic systems developed in the late eighteenth century by the likes of Johann Caspar Lavater, who blankly asserted: "The morally best, the most beautiful. The morally worst, the most deformed."[13] Welch was even credited with saving the memory of "the chastity and unimpeachable good character" of a young woman—albeit not in time to save her life.[14] Unlike that of Welch, the young woman's moral worth was linked not to her actions, but to her passivity. In reading the newspaper accounts, it becomes clear that, in constructing a narrative of the case, there could be no tale of unbridled beauty (his), nor of pure and modest worth (hers), without a villain, and given the anti-Chinese sentiments of the day, Hong Di fit the bill.

Hong Di's lynching raises many issues that are essential to a consideration of whiteness: first, in presenting the mob as an extension of whiteness; second,

13. Johann Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy: Designed to Promote Knowledge and the Love of Mankind*, trans. Thomas Holcroft, 9th ed. (London: William Tegg, 1855), 10–11; cited in Robert Sobieszek, "Tolerances of the Human Face: The Affectless Surfaces of Andy Warhol," in *Ghost in the Shell: Photography and the Human Soul, 1850–2000* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 93.

14. *Daily-Record-Union*, 12 July 1887. The statement that was printed was drafted by the coroner's jury at the inquest into Hong Di's cause of death.

in noting the erasure of Hong Di's racial identity from even those historical accounts that include his case in their statistics; and third, in highlighting the necessity of maintaining race as a historical category.

The "Gray Experience"

This section of the exhibition raises questions of difference, visibility, and invisibility as sites for an expanded debate about just who, and what, lies at the edge of whiteness. Many of the works challenge the perception that whiteness is a neutral or transparent presence. For example, artist Kara Walker lays the groundwork for thinking about racial stereotypes with her mischievous paper cutouts, silhouettes depicting antebellum scenes (see figs. 46, 53). What is most fascinating about this work is how, by highlighting our ability to attribute a racial classification to something as simple as a paper silhouette, it reveals just how deeply imbedded racial stereotypes can be. In his analysis of the formation of stereotypes, Gilman writes: "It is evident that stereotypes are not random or personal.... Every social group has a set vocabulary of images for this externalized Other. These images are the product of history and of a culture that perpetuates them."[15]

15. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology*, 21.

Not surprisingly, skin color remains a significant element in any discussion of whiteness, particularly when addressing mixed-race identities. Artist Adrian Piper addressed the question of "hybrid" racial identities in her *Political Self-Portrait, #2* (1978), a work that, although not included in the exhibition, may still be useful in our consideration of whiteness. This work highlights the difficulties posed by racial hybridity in the discussion of whiteness. As we shall see, it can be a phenomenon that leads to yet another form of erasure. At first glance, one is struck by the graphic splitting of Piper's self-portrait into two halves, one side rendered as black and the other as white. The word *paleface* is inscribed in large letters across the bottom, and the entire piece is overlaid with an expansive text recounting a series of poignant personal experiences that address the question of race and its shadow, racial invisibility. A closer look reveals that the black side is actually created though tonal reversal, graphically hinting at negation. Specifically addressing the question of her own racial self-identification, Piper's text reads: "I would never simply say Black because I felt silly and as though I was co-opting something, i.e. the Black Experience, which I haven't had. I have had the Gray Experience."[16] The passage highlights how cultural and economic factors affect multi/trans/cross-racial identifications in the play of difference. One might be surprised to realize that Piper was, nearly twenty-five years ago, already deeply engaged in the question of grayness posed by the current exhibition. She locates the "Gray Experience" precisely at the intersection between the myth of racial purity and the frequent and mistaken conflation of race with class. She avoids relativism by carefully inserting the term *gray* to expose the ambiguities inherent in the very notion of choice associated with mixed racial identity. To be clear, Piper rejects any relativistic interpretation of race by placing mixed-race identities outside existing racial models, in her case, an experience that she distinguishes from the "Black Experience." The text elaborates on the force of whiteness in the systematic fixing of racial identities:

16. Adrian Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, vol. 1 of *Selected Writings in Meta-Art, 1968–1992* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1996), 175.

> I would never deny that I am black... why I should have to feel dishonest regardless of whether I affirm or deny that I'm black; and

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Kara Walker
Master and Slave Together Building a Model for the Future, 1998
Paint on paper
65 x 95 inches
Collection of Robert Conn,
Del Mar, California;
courtesy of Brent Sikkema, New York

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Adrian Piper
What Will Become of Me, 1989
Cat. no. 60

> whether I, my family, and all such hybrids aren't being victimized by a white racist ideology that forces us to accept an essentially alien and alienating identity that arbitrarily groups us with the most oppressed and powerless segment of the society (black blacks) in order to avoid having that segment gradually infiltrate and take over the sources of political and economic power from whites through the de facto successful integration of which we hybrids are the products and the victims.[17]

17. Ibid.

As should be clear, race is not the only signifier in this chain of otherness, and the conflation or confusion of national identity with racial identity is nowhere more apparent than in the case of Hong Di's construction as Chinese, and not Asian. This can also be true in considering the nearly one hundred cases of Latinos lynched since California's statehood. In 1897 a Texas federal court noted that from an anthropological perspective Mexicans would be considered nonwhite but acknowledged that many former Mexican nationals living in the continental United States had been granted citizenship under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.[18] This de facto ruling reasoned that since citizenship could be granted only to whites (at the time), and since many (then former) Mexican nationals were already citizens, then all Mexicans must be "white." For the record, many Latinos do not self-identify as white, and indeed in many parts of the country are not seen as white, nor do they uniformly share the privileges of whiteness. Given the social and economic status of many Latinos and Hispanics, one can, at the very least, recognize the difference between "white" as a legal category and whiteness as a system affecting the distribution of "wealth, prestige, and opportunity." (And if constructing the "Latino experience" wasn't already complicated enough, consider the fact that a Spanish surname is no guarantee of racial, ethnic, or national identity.) But beyond whether Latinos are considered to be white, the question may be whether Latinos can really be "gray." The answer is that they can if, like whiteness, the term can resist racialization. This question of self-identification is essential to Piper's construction of the "Gray Experience." The choice of whether to disclose racial, sexual, economic, or other experiences is an essential element in the construction of grayness and as such extends beyond the question of race or even skin color to potentially include a whole range of communities of difference: Latinos, Asians, Native Americans, gays, lesbians, and persons with disabilities, to name just a few. The other element essential to the construction of the "Gray Experience" is the question of experience itself, which, I would argue, is inserted by Piper, less as a kind of essentialist proof of difference than as an ethical challenge acknowledging the contradictions inherent in socially constructed identities, as she does in her own text when she highlights how questions of class can, and do, complicate the construction of race.

18. George A. Martinez, "Mexican-Americans and Whiteness," in *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*, ed. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 211.

In common parlance, gray is synonymous with fading, aging, diluting, spoiling, the impure, and that which is not "black and white" and, as such, functions as a metaphoric contagion in the discussion of whiteness. In this context, as in color theory, gray never

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Myrella Moses
In the Mean Time, 1992
Cat. no. 57

becomes a color in its own right but remains peripheral to whiteness. For what is gray but concrete slabs, the look of death, miscegenation, and the fear of racial mixing? And vigilante justice must be the grayest form of justice. One wonders if gray can ever be sleek and shiny like a sports car, or as clean and fresh as linen blowing in a warm summer breeze. Recognizing the syntactic emphasis on whiteness inherent in the phase "the graying of whiteness," some may find pleasure in its positioning of that which is not white as potentially transgressive, but as Piper makes clear, "hybridity" is not an exacting measure of difference. Rather it is Piper's insistence upon "experience" and the failure of existing categories to encompass its full breadth that generates the conflict of self-identification within any single category or framework, a conflict that can be resolved only by choosing from an existing category, which, in essence, is at least a partial negation of some experiences. Once we are liberated to choose from any number of existing categories, the possibility of complete self-disclosure becomes in effect impossible. Likewise, our desire to belong, and the failure of individual categories to encompass the whole of human experience, is what produces anxiety in the first place. It is the weighting of those categories that becomes meaningful, and as such gray may be less a new category than a kind of temporary marker for the anxiety generated by the spaces between categories.

This idea of gray as a repository for many forms of difference shares aspects of Richard Rodriguez's notion of "brown," addressed in a recent book by that title. For Rodriguez, brown is more than just a means of expressing the Latino or Hispanic (his preference) experience and is intended to encompass many unrecorded, forgotten, and invisible histories throughout the Americas. For Rodriguez, "brown history" is "brown, not in the sense of pigment, necessarily, but brown because [it is] mixed, confused, lumped, impure, unpasteurized, as motives are mixed, and the fluids of generation are mixed and emotions are unclear, and the tally of human progress and failure in every generation is mixed, and unaccounted for, missing in plain sight."[19] Presented here as an independent but parallel response to whiteness, this conception of brown clearly shares a number of elements articulated so far in the discussion of gray. One need only think of how racial categories figure into to each of these "case studies" to recognize how each resists erasure.

19. Richard Rodriguez, *Brown: The Last Discovery of America* (New York: Viking, 2002), 197.

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Kammy Roulner
Colored People (Frank White), 2001
Cat. no. 66

Like a dense fog, this conceptualization of gray allows for some slippage, a freedom of movement in the discussion of whiteness, but after all, who really wants to be gray? "The graying of whiteness" could also be seen to suggest, or at least to imagine, the final dissolution of whiteness, but imagining an end to racial categories altogether is simply impossible as long as the hegemonic structures of whiteness remain intact, particularly given the awareness that many histories have gone "missing in plain sight," to use Rodriguez's phrase. In linking the erasure of Hong Di with Piper's notion of the "Gray Experience," it is hoped that we have been able to open a space within which race, class, and even gender can be seen not as immutable and set categories, but as historically permeable signifiers of difference—a difference that is recognizable only in its distance from whiteness.

I began this consideration of gray more out of necessity than choice, but in the end I have to acknowledge that the term may in fact provide a useful vantage point for looking at whiteness. After all, sometimes just changing the point of view can transform the landscape. In the cognitive sciences it is widely recognized that human spatial perception is guided by the edges of objects and not by their centers. So even

something as simple as looking toward the horizon at sunset reminds us that it is the visual illusion of a single, continuous horizontal line that allows us to imagine the point of confluence between the earth and sky, a point that, it turns out, is right under our feet. Whether guided by the horizon line, the lines of text in a newspaper, or even the less tangible lines of demarcation between racial categories, it may be the human desire for equilibrium and grounding, to know where one is and where one has been, that drives us. In this context gray may be less a new category than a strategy to help us visualize those spaces in between, on top of, and underneath existing categories as we consider the play of difference and erasure that surrounds us.