

## REPLY TO KAUFMANN

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In 2000 I gave a keynote address at the Kyoto American Studies Seminar. What was particularly striking during the seminar, both in formal sessions and outside them, was the eagerness of Japanese and other Pacific Rim participants to move the discussion toward applying insights and methods from the critical study of whiteness in a comparative way and especially to Japan itself. The participants raised the questions of how Japanese imperialism intersected with, and sometimes posed itself against, white supremacy, issues subsequently and searchingly explored in Gerald Horne's *Race War!: White Supremacy and the Japanese Attack on the British Empire* and in Yuichiro Onishi's superb doctoral dissertation, "Giant Steps of the Black Freedom Struggle: Trans-Pacific Connections Between Black America and Japan in the Twentieth Century."<sup>1</sup> Younger Japanese scholars also consistently pressed me and themselves to consider how the castelike oppression of the Burakumin and discrimination against ethnic Koreans and Okinawans, for example, might have helped to give rise to a dominant racial (or ethnic) position in Japanese society. They posited that such an identity may have taken shape, as my *The Wages of Whiteness* argues that whiteness did in the United States, by focusing

on the alleged deficiencies of “others,” thereby letting the privileges of the dominant group seem natural and merited. I make no claims that the discussions went very far. In large part they were limited by my limitations in knowledge of Japanese history. Moreover, the differences the comparisons unearthed were at least as profound as the similarities. Indeed when Koji Takenaka convened a group of Japanese scholars of the United States after the conference to translate *The Wages of Whiteness*, the fourth word in the title immediately posed a problem: There was no ready Japanese-language equivalent.

I choose to begin on Japanese ground in order to highlight my general agreement with what I take to be the major contribution of Eric Kaufmann’s provocative, generous and wide-ranging contribution and to introduce some of my reservations regarding the article. The proposition to which I enthusiastically assent is that any reflexive attempt to apply the critical study of whiteness indiscriminately internationally is bound to run into insurmountable obstacles.<sup>2</sup> Kaufmann is in very good company when he warns against generalizing about race and ethnicity from a few examples, and particularly from a model based so overwhelmingly on the United States. Thus the social scientists Robert Miles and Malcolm Brown have recently argued that little good can come from “a concept of racism that is formulated by reference to a single historical experience (the United States) and then applied uncritically to another.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Kaufmann argues, the tendency towards loose definitions and assumptions that would tempt us towards such indiscriminate application of a mode of inquiry developed mainly in the United States to the world also vitiates some of the insights of the critical study of U.S. whiteness itself. In this matter his intervention is very like that of Steven J. Gold who recently held, “If there is a growing chorus against the viability of the black-white model of racism within the

U.S., a considerable body of literature suggests even greater problems with the model internationally.” Gold cites globalization and especially “the increase of international migration and of diasporic communities”<sup>4</sup> as pivotal factors in forcing the internationalization of studies of race and other forms of social inequality. He holds that internationalist campaigns against racism have strikingly raised the question of just what such a term encompasses. We might add that such campaigns also raise the question of whether racism is always and everywhere the most useful focus of coalition-building. Thus Kaufmann writes about a timely set of issues. His particular focus on U.S.-generated ideas about whiteness follows up nicely on Alastair Bonnett’s call for discussion of “white identities” to “be internationalized, to be refocused as a global debate and not simply an American one,” a project Bonnett has begun with, among much else, interesting analyses of race in Japan.<sup>5</sup>

However, Kaufmann’s certainty that once such a discussion is joined the utility of any systematic emphasis on whiteness will lose force seems to me to be set out in categorical terms more appropriate to the end of a debate than to its early stages. It is worth observing that the critique of what opponents insist on calling “whiteness studies,” but is better called the critical study of whiteness, has matured rather before the area of inquiry itself.<sup>6</sup> There is, for example, even in the U.S. not a single book series, journal, scholarly organization, advertised job or regular conference devoted to the study of whiteness—a tribute perhaps partially to the fact that such work is most organically situated within ethnic studies and not as a separate enterprise, but also an index of the brevity of its life inside universities. Scarcely fifteen years have passed since the seminal work of Alexander Saxton, Toni Morrison and Cheryl Harris made possible a deepened

academic critique of whiteness.<sup>7</sup> And yet the tone of some polemics against the critical study of whiteness would suggest that it looms fully developed at the very top of the academic food chain, begging to be brought down to size. Such a tone happily does not characterize Kaufmann's contribution. But a certain assumption that he is addressing a mature and static body of scholarship, rather than one engaged in such fierce auto-critique as to make the most interesting polemics regarding the critical study of whiteness occur precisely among its practitioners<sup>8</sup> does limit his article.

Two examples of how the capacity of the critical study of whiteness to change in ways that speak to some of Kaufmann's concerns and objections will have to suffice. The first involves my own work, and that of others, on the whiteness of immigrants from Ireland, and from eastern and southern Europe. Fifteen years ago, such work organized itself overwhelmingly around the simple narrative of such immigrants "becoming white" in the U.S.<sup>9</sup> However, the newer generation of scholarship—leading writers include Sal Salerno, Jennifer Guglielmo, Catherine Eagan, Thomas Guglielmo and Matthew Frye Jacobson--on these subjects has traded some of the earlier narrative of a pat devolution into whiteness for a much more nuanced story necessarily acknowledging that Europeans brought to the U.S. complex mixtures of thinking regarding both race and nationality and that they applied such views very unevenly to the local realities that they encountered. Such recent writing joins Kaufmann in calling for far greater attention to "ethnic" divisions among whites, and particularly calls attention to the domination of Anglo-Saxons (or "Nordics") at key junctures.<sup>10</sup> Indeed such divisions are precisely the topic of my self-critical new study *Working Toward Whiteness*. The second example lies in the emergence of fine recent studies of Hawaii by Taro Iwato, Moon-Kie Jung and Evelyn

Nakano Glenn. These studies, both influenced by and constitutive of the recent development of scholarship critically studying whiteness, demonstrate that ideas about race travel in significant measure because migrants travel with them. Thus the experiences of Japanese, Chinese, Puerto Rican and Portuguese agricultural workers with white supremacy in Hawaii offer the opportunity to think about how whiteness did and did not matter on multiple continents.<sup>11</sup>

We might strive for a tone that allows us to study whiteness internationally without either aggrandizing it or pushing it to the margins—to seek a discussion that emphasizes the non-importance of whiteness in Japan but does not lose track of the critical role whiteness played in framing how that nation’s imperial projects were viewed internationally and that leaves room for the sort of intellectual curiosity that asks how Japanese structures of inequality might be illuminated by comparisons to the workings of whiteness in other contexts.

Indeed the need for such care appears to be the lesson to be drawn from the swirling debate most directly taking on the question of how to avoid U.S.-centric models while studying race internationally. That debate centers on perhaps the most fiercely stated critique of reading race outwards from the United States to the world, the article “On the Cunning of Imperialist Reason,” published by the University of California sociologist Loïc Wacquant and late social theorist and activist Pierre Bourdieu in 1999. Bourdieu and Wacquant reproduce with surprising stridency Marx’s argument that the ruling ideas of an age are produced by those who dominate. They identify the “cultural imperialism” of United States scholars as the source of attempts to flatten varied regimes of inequality, a flattening they see as producing a misreading both of history and of

current political possibilities. Focusing on the case of Brazil, Bourdieu and Wacquant contend that U.S.-inspired, U.S.-funded and U.S.-produced research works to impose a “rigid black/white social division” and constitutes an “insidious” export. Such imperialism succeeds, Bourdieu and Wacquant hold, even though its arguments are “contrary to the image Brazilians have of their own nation.” It does so by trading on a perverse and unspecified combination of anti-racist rhetoric and neoliberal financing for scholarship. As polemic, “On the Cunning of Imperialist Reason” offers great passion and force, identifying the real threat of the “McDonaldization of thought” in a world with but one superpower. At times, the article’s criticisms score heavily in excoriating the ways in which the least fruitful concepts in U.S. sociology are precisely the ones packaged for export.<sup>12</sup>

However, a series of withering critiques, especially from the Brazilianists Michael Hanchard and John French and from the cultural theorists Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, have dismantled Bourdieu and Wacquant’s contention that race is also somehow a peculiarly U.S. concept that cannot be exported. The critical responses show that in neither the U.S. nor Brazil is race regularly deployed, as Bourdieu and Wacquant allege, for purposes of accusation rather than analysis, and that what they brand as “dehistoricization” is a charge that might be turned back on their own more reductive political arguments. Most importantly, the critics show that the scholars accused of spreading rigid “imperialist” caricatures of the Brazilian social system actually continue a long line of argument **within Brazil** that has consistently featured nuanced debates engaging both U.S. and Brazilian scholars who well realize that the historical context of

displacement of indigenous people, empires, slave-trading and slavery produced a very different but not incomparable racial system in Brazil than in the U.S.<sup>13</sup>

On an international scale the relative youth of any studies consciously organizing themselves around whiteness is still more striking than it is for the U.S. Melanie Bush's excellent 2004 bibliography of "international/comparative" studies of whiteness, for example, counts about 125 titles with about three quarters of them appearing in the last five years alone.<sup>14</sup> Instructively, most of these studies apply to colonial settler states born of British or Dutch imperialism. Bush includes five subheadings broken down by nation or region, after a general list of titles. The "Australia and New Zealand" section has fifty titles, including the important work of Ghassan Hase, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, and Gillian Cowlishaw. That on South Africa—an important case in which the "dominant ethnicity" model advocated by Kaufmann would obscure matters mightily unless joined with a serious accounting of whiteness and of racial capitalism--counts fifteen contributions, including Jeremy Krikler's brilliant work, with the section on Canada adding an additional five. The brief section on Asia meanwhile counts only four titles and that on Latin America just five. In the Latin American case, the large comparative literature on the history of Atlantic slavery could however be read as building towards a hemispheric history of whiteness, as masters created that category both to justify bondage and to ensure that poorer members of their own "race" would act to defend the slave system.<sup>15</sup>

For me, and here the brief balance of this response turns to substantive differences with Kaufmann's approach, any study of whiteness that helps to explain the patterns Bush identifies in where the concept of whiteness has gained scholarly traction must be

historical. Explaining the origins, social reproduction and vulnerabilities of whiteness has been the project of the best writing in this area. The claim to produce literature having “heuristic value for scholars attempting to explain majority responses to multicultural politics” may be of interest to Kaufmann but it has scarcely animated the writings he describes. Perhaps the single line most capturing the inspiration of such Marxist U.S. historians of whiteness as Saxton, Brodtkin, Noel Ignatiev, Theodore Allen and myself is W.E.B. Du Bois’s remark that the “discovery of personal whiteness among the world’s peoples is a very modern thing.” Writing early in the last century, Du Bois guessed such whiteness to be about 250 years old. Counting backwards and allowing for Du Bois’ focus mainly on British North America, such a view places what he called “personal whiteness”-- the idea that owning a white skin had tremendous value-- within a period in which the ownership of people with black skins and the appropriation by settler colonists of Indian lands brought color suddenly to the fore. In that sense, what Cheryl Harris powerfully calls “whiteness as property” matches Du Bois’s concept of “personal whiteness” perfectly. To the very uneven extent to which European use of unfree labor of people of color and the spread of settler colonialism and other forms of colonial rule covered the globe, whiteness will resonate, variously, over wide areas, though it of course neither supplanted nor preempted other forms of social division. To connect whiteness with such grand historical processes is, it seems to me, quite different from what Kaufmann calls the “deifying” of whites.<sup>16</sup> Du Bois’s point is instead that the history of whiteness is short, inglorious and hopefully finite.

Similarly, the Du Boisian view implies that whiteness is anything but a “free-floating text” or “colloquial terminology” applied by modern subjects to themselves.



While Patricia Williams writes of racism as both “condemnation” and “aspiration.”<sup>17</sup> Kaufmann constantly prefers to see only the latter moment of whiteness, casting it overwhelmingly as an identity, disembodied from social relations. At its worst such a line of argument leaves Kaufmann offering the putative presence of a hardwired human perceptual propensity to divide people by color as a material underpinning of whiteness hard by his own evidence of societies in which this supposed natural law somehow fails to operate. He sees whiteness as “secondary” because it has allegedly been unable to “stir the imagination as strongly as ethnicity.” He follows this remarkable generalization--one utterly at odds, for example, with the history of mob violence in the U.S.--by granting in something of an aside that whiteness “mattered greatly” in such presumably minor realms as “social interaction, citizenship and civil rights.” In those realms, whiteness was hardly just a “colloquialism” promiscuously tossed about as identities were constructed. It was the basis of a “political alliance,” to use Amoja Three Rivers’s apt term, that could defend slavery, of much of slave law, of naturalization law, of trade union exclusionary practices, of early immigration restriction, of Jim Crow education, of denial of voting rights, and of the state-subsidized growth of apartheid in housing. Only rarely, as in 1920s debates over immigration restriction, in some trade union constitutions, and in a small minority of restrictive housing covenants did the dominant Anglo-Saxon ethnicity speak its name or even the names of those European groups against whom the dominant also discriminated.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed Anglo-Saxon dominance was itself far less evenly shared by WASPs than Kaufmann’s article implies. Through the earlier 1960s, the term WASP referred to white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, to be sure, but not necessarily to any ethnic elite. Probably

originating not with intellectuals, but instead as an employment agency acronym, it marked the working class, often Southern, whites whom some employers preferred to, or preferred to pit against, “ethnic” new immigrant workers. As late as 1957, *Life* magazine wrote of the stereotypical cartoon hillbilly Lil’ Abner as personifying the WASP.<sup>19</sup> In that sense whiteness at times provided the ideological glue for the bridging of great social divisions even within the “dominant ethnicity.” Kaufmann begins his article by insisting, “Whiteness informs, but does not constitute, dominant ethnicity and we should not mistake the content of group boundary markers for the essentials.” If forced to make such a choice there can be little doubt in the U.S. case that we would be better off transposing the subject and the direct object of Kaufmann’s sentence. Happily we need not make such a stark choice. We can and should explore the dynamics of whiteness, in and beyond the U.S., in their sometimes strong and sometimes weak relationships to class, ethnic, regional, religious, and language divisions.

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald Horne, *Race War! White Supremacy and the Japanese Attack on the British Empire* ( New York, 2004); Yuichiro Onishi, “Giant Steps of the Black Freedom Struggle: Trans-Pacific Connections Between Black America and Japan in the Twentieth Century” (Unpublished PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> To appreciate the contrast between Kaufmann’s essay and the narrowness and rancor that has run through some critiques of “whiteness studies,” see Eric Arnesen, “Scholarly

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Controversy: Whiteness and the Historians' Imagination," *International Labor and Working Class History*, 60 (Fall, 2001), 3-32.

For a review of the literature, see David R. Roediger, "Critical Studies of Whiteness, USA: Origins and Arguments," *Theoria* (South Africa), 98 (December, 2001), 72-98.

For a gathering of my scattered recent essays cited in this article, see David R. Roediger, *History Against Misery*, forthcoming in 2005 from Chicago's Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company.

<sup>3</sup> Malcolm Brown and Robert Miles, *Racism* (London, 2003), 78.

<sup>4</sup> Steven J. Gold, "From Jim Crow to Racial Hegemony: Evolving Explanations of Racial Harmony," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 27 (November, 2004), 961 and 962.

<sup>5</sup> Alastair Bonnett, *White Identities: Historical and International Perspectives* (Harlow, GB, 2000), 43 and 67-75.

<sup>6</sup> David R. Roediger, "Defending Critical Studies of Whiteness But Not Whiteness Studies," *Souls*, 4 (Fall, 2002), 57-59; in the same issue, see also Noel Ignatiev, "The Politics of Studying Whiteness," 51-53.

<sup>7</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA, 1990); Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth Century America* (New York, 1990); Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review*, 106 (June, 1993), 1709-091.

<sup>8</sup> See Theodore Allen, "On Roediger's Wages of Whiteness," *Cultural Logic*, (April, 2002), 1-26; Robyn Wiegman, "Whiteness Studies and the Paradox of Peculiarity," in Wiegman and Donald Pease, eds. *The Futures of American Studies* (Durham, NC,

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20002), 282-96; Mike Hill, *After Whiteness: Unmaking an American Majority* (New York, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Roediger, “Whiteness and Ethnicity in the History of ‘White Ethnics’ in the United States,” in his *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History* (London and New York, 1994), 181-98 and Roediger with James Barrett, “Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality, and the ‘New Immigrant’ Working Class,” in Roediger, *Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past* (Berkeley, 2002), 138-68. See also Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York and London, 1995) and Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA, 1998); Thomas A. Guglielmo, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890-1945* (New York, 2003); Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno, eds. *Are Italians White? How Race Is Made in America* (New York, 2003); Catherine Mary Eagan, “‘I Did Imagine . . . We Had Ceased to Be Whitewashed Negroes’: The Racial Formation of Irish Identity in Nineteenth-Century Ireland and America” (Unpublished PhD diss., Boston College, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York, 2005); Taro Iwata, “Race and Citizenship as American Geopolitics: Japanese and Native Hawaiians in Hawaii, 1900-41” (Unpublished PhD diss., 2003); Moon-Kie Jung, “No Whites, No Asians: Race, Marxism, and Hawaii’s Preemergent Working Class,” *Social Science History*, 23 (1999), 357-93; Evelyn Nakano

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Glenn, *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor* (Cambridge, MA, 2002), 190-235.

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, “On the Cunning of Imperialist Reason,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, 16 (1999), 41, 42, 44, 46-50, 52 n.2, and passim.

<sup>13</sup> John D. French, “The Missteps of Anti-Imperialist Reason: Bourdieu, Wacquant and Hanchard’s Orpheus,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, 17 (2000), 108-26; Michael Hanchard, “Acts of Misrecognition: Transnational Black Politics, Anti-Imperialism and the Ethnocentrism of Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, 20 (2003), 5-29; Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, “French Intellectuals and the U.S. Culture War,” *Black Renaissance/Noire*, 3 (2001), 90-119; Bourdieu and Wacquant, “On the Cunning of Imperialist Reason,” 51.

<sup>14</sup> Melanie Bush’s contribution is in Tim Engles, ed. *Towards a Bibliography of Critical White Studies* (Urbana, IL, 2005), unpaginated.

<sup>15</sup> Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (New York, 1998); Gillian Cowlishaw, *Blackfellas, Whitefellas and the Hidden Injuries of Race* (Oxford, 2004); Aileen Moreton-Robinson, “Troubling Business: Difference and Whiteness within Feminism,” *Australian Feminist Studies*, 15 (2000), 343-52; Jeremy Krikler, “Lessons from America,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 20 (December, 1994), 663-69; see also Sarah Nuttall, “Subjectivities of Whiteness,” *African Studies Review*, 44 (2001), 115-40.

<sup>16</sup> Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, 2v. (New York, 1994 and ); Saxton, *Rise and Fall of the White Republic*; Brodwin, *How Jews Became White Folks*;

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Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*; David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York, 1991).

<sup>17</sup> Patricia Williams, “Metro Broadcasting, Inc. v. FCC,” *Harvard Law Review*, 104 (1990), 525.

<sup>18</sup> Amoja Three Rivers, *Cultural Etiquette: A Guide for the Well-Intentioned* (Indian Valley, VA, 1991), 8; Ian Haney-Lopez, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York, 1996); George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia, 1998); Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*, esp. 133-57 and 207-24; Ariela Gross, “Litigating Whiteness: Trials of Racial Determination in the Nineteenth Century South,” *Yale Law Journal*, 109 (1998), 109-80.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Howard G. Schneiderman, “The Protestant Establishment: Its History, Its Legacy, Its Future,” in Silvia Pedraza and Ruben Rumbaut, eds. *Origins and Destinies: Immigration, Race and Ethnicity in America* (Belmont, CA, 1996), 141-42 and “Notes on WASP,” Peter J. Tamony Papers, Western Historical Manuscripts Collection, Ellis Library, University of Missouri—Columbia which includes “Lil’ Abner—Broadway and Dogpatch,” *Life* (January 14, 1957), 74-83. The history development of the concept of ethnicity in the U.S., and the implications of projecting the category back in time, are critically important subjects too broad to be considered in this short response, but see Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*, 21-34 and Victoria Hattam, “Ethnicity: An American Genealogy,” in Nancy Foner and George Fredrickson, eds. *Not Just Black and White: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Immigration, Race, and Ethnicity* (New York, 2004), 42-61.

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