

# From the Borders Uncovering Implicit Definitions of Whiteness From the Perspective of the Questionably White

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Article abstract

Many scholars believe that locating Whiteness as a racialized ethnicity and examining how Whiteness constructs race and racism is crucial to the work of anti-racist feminism. Not often considered, but of equal significance, are folk taxonomies of Whiteness, implicit and unstated concepts and definitions employed every day in our society, and in scholarly anti-racist Works. As it is often from the borders that one can more clearly see and critique the centre, it is from an analysis of my own and other women's experiences of Questionable-Whiteness, the racially uncertain location between Whiteness and Otherness, that I examine the different modes of defining Whiteness and race, as well as their links with class, religion, and national identity.

## FROM THE BORDERS Uncovering Implicit Definitions of Whiteness From the Perspective of the Questionably White

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All my life, people have questioned the colour of my skin, my race, and my ethnicity. Strangers, acquaintances and friends, ask me “What are you?” “Where are you from?” and “Are you Aboriginal, Indian, Black, Italian?” among others. Nevertheless, until recently I had always thought of myself as white, although my father, who is Moroccan, might be considered a person of colour. I grew up with my mother who identifies herself as and whom I considered to be white, and with what I understand to be white culture and white privilege. By these I mean the sociocultural configuration which advantages white people over people of colour in terms of society’s benefits and statuses and which upholds whiteness as the invisible norm against which all others are measured. But, what exactly *is* whiteness? Is it only a skin colour? If so, where is the demarcation point? Can other considerations override it? If whiteness is an ethnic and cultural location, what about people like me who have been raised in white culture and with white privilege who do not have “white” skin? I call this racially uncertain location on the border between whiteness and otherness “questionable-whiteness.” Through my own experience of questionable-whiteness, I came to realize that in daily interactions, as well as in academic works concerned with deconstructing whiteness, people use implicit and generally unexamined definitions of whiteness. As Andrew Hacker suggests, perhaps “the question [should not be] ‘who *is* White?’ [but] ‘who *may* be considered White?’ [s]ince this suggests that something akin to permission is needed” (1992: 9). As I’ve learned, simply identifying oneself as white is not sufficient.

Many scholars believe that locating whiteness as a racialized ethnicity and examining how whiteness constructs race and racism is crucial to the work of anti-racist feminism. Not often considered, but of equal significance, are folk taxonomies of whiteness, those implicit and unstated concepts and definitions employed every day in our society as well as in scholarly anti-racist works. As these folk taxonomies are often used in a variety of locations to include or exclude people from the privileges of whiteness, an understanding of these definitions and how they are applied is integral to anti-racist work. It is often from the borders that one can clearly see and critique the centre. Therefore, starting from an analysis of my own and other women’s experiences of questionable-whiteness, I have examined the different modes of defining whiteness and race, as well as their links with class, ethnicity, and national identity.

I used two research methods. The first was a group interview involving four questionably-white women, including myself; women between the ages

of twenty-three and twenty-seven, with middle- to upper-class backgrounds, and with university educations. We explored our experiences of questionable-whiteness, from a variety of “racial” locations, and examined how those experiences have influenced our understandings of race and whiteness (Cohen 1997a). The second method, a questionnaire, asked anonymous women to study a display of ten photographs of women, ranging from questionably-white to more obviously white. Fourteen women filled out the questionnaire. Thirteen identified themselves, in some way, as “white,” and one as Filipina. They ranged in age from nineteen to fifty-one. As the questionnaire was located in the University of Winnipeg Women’s Centre, it is likely that all the respondents were university educated and had at least some feminist grounding. I asked the participants to determine the races of the women in the photographs, to examine and discuss their *process* of determination, to think about the contexts in which they might ask someone about their race, to suggest why they would want or need to do so, and to explore any feelings of discomfort that filling out the questionnaire might elicit (Cohen 1997b).

Sociologist Frederick Osborn’s assertion that “On the borders of every race there are individuals whose particular assignment is doubtful” (1971: 151) speaks to these interviewees’ identity struggles as questionably-white women:

Rachel: I’m one of those people that doesn’t fit into any category... I am a mix of a mix. My dad is from Trinidad, which means he considers himself Negro, which is the irony. His great-great-grandmother was Chinese, and everybody else was Black... but I also suspect that because Trinidad was colonized by French and Spanish... that there’s other stuff in there too. And then my mom is Canadian, and she’s white and, ah, I never know how to describe her (laughs) (Cohen 1997a: 1).

Simone: Yeah, same thing. I’m here because it’s a continual thing... always being asked where you fit in. And you start to realize... the importance that we place on knowing what everyone is. You can see the problem people have with gender-bending, cause it would be the same thing, it’s kind of like “ethnic-bending.” People are like, “No, what are you? I must know, I must know!” and then even sometimes when you tell them the truth, they’re like “Well, NO (slams hand on table) you don’t look like that, you look like this!” and I’m going “Well, I’M NOT!” (Cohen 1997a: 2).

I always thought... I was this very typical Canadian. I’m like pretty much every pioneer group there is that emerged in the 1800’s... I’m Scottish, probably Irish, probably a bit of Welsh, and German and Metis. So I thought “Oh that’s really Canadian.” But no, I’m Mediterranean, I’ve learned (Cohen 1997a: 3).

Michelle: My experience too. I’m constantly asked about what I am and the funny thing is... as far as my family goes back there’s no explanation why I have a dark complexion. Although my parents are darker themselves, too. My background’s Russian Mennonite. People never think so (Cohen 1997a: 2).

Nathalie: When I was taking Intro Women's Studies classes and race started coming up in the class... I just started questioning where I fit in... I mean, I guess I had always thought of myself as white, but obviously there was something in me that questioned that, because... as I started to do more reading, on particularly anti-racist work and on whiteness, I just couldn't figure out where I fit into that (Cohen 1997a: 2)

As these women suggest, the language of race is inadequate for describing the experiences as well as the appearances of questionably-white women. Many questionnaire respondents avoided such language (black, white, etc.), although it was used in the questionnaire, but instead referred to religion, ethnicity and/or nationality, such as "of Muslim country" and "Western European, perhaps Jewish" (Cohen 1997b: 2) when asked to ascribe racial identity. One woman responded to the question about whether national identity influenced her decision to ascribe racial identities by saying, "Isn't that what we're defining?" (Cohen 1997b: 4).

Not only is the language of race insufficient for understanding whiteness, but many women apparently felt discomfort with it. A few used the word Caucasian, but none used Negroid or Mongoloid; and while a few used "white," none used "black" or "asian." When referring to "non-white," respondents used religion, ethnicity, or more often nationality as descriptors as in "1/2 Japanese and 1/2 Caucasian" (Cohen 1997b: 2). Some respondents seemed concerned that ascribing the wrong race, especially one that often encounters racism, would offend the women in the photographs:

I think it's uncomfortable to identify the women who resemble races which had negative stereotypes placed upon them. e.g.: when I said that woman #2 looked Jewish, I thought about how Jewish people have been said to have big noses. I felt bad when that came to mind. (I don't think she has a big nose) (Cohen 1997b: 5).

This suggests that some racial categories are inherently offensive or, as my fellow student Kathleen Curtis suggested, that it is offensive not to be white (personal communication 1997). The questionably-white women in the interview also noted that, at times, people approached racial questions as if they might be offensive:

Rachel: Yeah, I find people in my peer group... they're very careful because... like I said the language around it is very hard. It's very hard to know what to ask or how to ask the question... I don't mind being asked... I know I look different and I don't mind people's curiosity about that, not really... because I believe that it's just a genuine interest and it's not because they think I'm bad. It's not valuated, so it's O.K. When it's friends, they're very worried about offending me when they ask (Cohen 1997a: 27).

Not only is race potentially offensive, but as a category it is seen as "non-white." For instance, when asked how the women's hair and skin influenced

her ascription of race, one woman said “the dark hair (and skin) were indicative of racial characteristics” (Cohen 1997: 3). This suggests that blond or brown hair and “white” skin are *not* indicative of racial characteristics. Another stated that “it was hard to decide on the women’s ‘racial’ identity because they were just pictures and not in person to inform me on their racial identity, *if any*” (emphasis mine; Cohen 1997: 2), suggesting that some people, probably white people, are not raced. A similar struggle with the language of race and with finding a language to describe their experiences in a positive way was evident in the group interview.

Rachel: So I’ll say, “Well, my dad’s from Trinidad... and my mom’s not” (laughs), cause I think that’s funny. Besides that, when I said Canadian, it didn’t mean anything to them... so I gave up saying Canadian... And, I used to say she’s white, and then that sounds bad because everything sounds like it’s, it’s so value-laden. “Well, my dad’s black and my mom’s white,” I don’t know, it just bugged me. I didn’t like it. So I find the language around this stuff really... awkward and really... limiting, and... offensive sometimes and it makes us all sound so ignorant to have to say “well, she’s white.” I mean, it’s not really accurate. It doesn’t mean anything, really (Cohen 1997a: 19).

In searching for a language that could include them, questionably-white women explored a number of possibilities.

Rachel: Do you think that the definition of women of colour applies to this group of women?... Because that was the only ambiguous one that I thought I could latch onto.

Nathalie: Right. And to me, I think I hold so much white privilege that it feels appropriative... or it feels like, do I, living in River Heights [an affluent area of Winnipeg], with a “white” mother, going to university, all the privileges I have, can I say that? Am I allowed?

Michelle: And for me, I couldn’t really. I wish I could say, “yes, I’m a woman of colour”, but I can’t, because I’m not.

Nathalie: And yet, what does it mean to be a woman of colour? I mean, is it the way you look? Because in many ways you have the experiences of a woman of colour.

Simone: I know, that’s where it all starts to break down. That’s when you realize how stupid it is that people base so much on looks, because you can’t really go any further (Cohen 1997a: 3).

Rachel: I call myself an invisible minority, cause I get all the privilege, so I don’t think I deserve to be able to check off a minority status, but I know, I still qualify technically (Cohen 1997a: 5).

Questions of the “Where are you from?” variety that are continually posed to people of colour and the questionably-white suggest that national identity

is linked to whiteness. If you are “coloured” you can’t be Canadian because Canadians are white. Himani Bannerji shows how the term “visible minority” connotes those it describes as “peculiar” and different from the norm, while at the same time connoting the “invisible majority” as normative and dominant. “They are the true Canadians, and others, no matter what citizenship they hold, are to be considered deviations from the way Canadians should look” (1993: 181-2), and, I would add, not really Canadian.

Simone: If [people] say, “What’s your nationality?” I say “Canadian, obviously.” And they go, “No, no, I mean... I mean... I mean... your background. Where are you from? Where are your parents from?” So they either assume I’m a recent immigrant, which I’m not. “You know, my family’s been here for a really long... like 400 years!” (1993 181: 16).

Simone asks, “Why don’t they break down white? What is white? It’s sooo weird, like “What are you? White? Like Scottish, Irish, Ukrainian, what!?” (1993 181: 6). This attempt to “break down white” is mirrored in the questionnaire responses. Both in identifying the women in the photographs and in defining their own racial identities, the women often resorted to using national groups to talk about their whiteness. For instance, one describes herself as “British, German, Norwegian, Scottish, French. ‘A European Mutt’” (Cohen 1997b: 7). What is problematic about using this strategy to break down the monolith of whiteness is that it continues to link national identity with race. Identifying your background as British so as to define yourself as white excludes British people who are not white.

As well as being constructed as essentially, fundamentally Canadian, whiteness is constructed as non-ethnic. One questionnaire respondent identified one woman’s races as “Jewish-Spanish/White” (Cohen 1997b: 2). Jewish and Spanish are added onto whiteness as ethnicities, and therefore whiteness, without another signifier, is constructed as non-ethnic. Another states that the jewelry of two pictured women “suggests different ethnicities” (Cohen 1997b: 3) and although she does not specify “different from what”, it implies that difference is equated with “non-whiteness” and with ethnicity.

Nathalie: I get asked a lot, “Are you Italian, are you Spanish, are you Greek?” and, I guess what I’m trying to figure out is, are those white categories?

Rachel: When people say “You have an ethnic look” that’s what... we’re talking about. That is what is not defined.

Simone: But the funny thing is, the thing that’s not defined is “What is white?” Why isn’t white ethnic? Why isn’t English ethnic? I think English people are very ethnic. I mean I talk with an English person, I’m going, “Holy shit, are you ever ethnic, get back to England!” (Cohen 1997a: 9).

As well as demonstrating the struggles around the language of race and the questionably-white women's attempts to find a place in that language, these comments highlight the ways in which whiteness is linked to class. When Rachel and I talk about feeling that we can't call ourselves women of colour, it is strongly connected to our sense that our class privilege creates a barrier. To what extent, then, do people classify us as questionably-*white* on the basis of perceiving us to be middle-class as opposed to classifying us as, perhaps, questionably-*raced*? Or questionably of colour?

Simone: Usually if I'm dressed really swank, and I have my hair all tied back in a bun, all slicked up and everything, they think I'm Spanish, or Italian, or Portuguese, or Greek. And then if I'm looking all scuzzy one day, that's when they think I'm more Native (laughs) (Cohen 1997a: 8).

Nathalie: The assumption is that women of colour cannot or do not live in River Heights. And on the one hand it's a truism, because if you walk through River Heights you mostly see white faces. But on the other hand... I know when I started thinking about class and race, my own experience with it, I started thinking about my "list" of what it is people will call me. And until I was about nine or ten, everybody thought I was Native. And at that time I was living in the Corydon area [formerly working-class neighborhood]. My mother was a single mother/student. We had very little money, and I'm sure I looked like I had very little money. And when we moved to River Heights, and when my mother started working and we did have more money, I haven't been asked [if I'm Native] since. (Cohen 1997a: 8)

Upward mobility and class positioning can allow some groups to be regarded as white instead of as people of colour. Simone notes, though, that this upward mobility does not always create a safe place. There is always the possibility of backlash.

Simone: You might be thinking "Oh, I'm very comfortably in this white class" and suddenly somebody goes "You're not white, what are you? Get out of here!" (Cohen 1997a: 31).

I don't think Jewish people fit into either one [as white or as people of colour], because only fifty years ago they were being gassed in Europe, and fifty years ago people came here with nothing. Well, Jews worked their way to the top of the class, so in that way they're white. But then at the same time, only fifty years ago, they were killed and murdered for just nothing, for just no reason at all, besides being Jewish. So they're not in the safety of being white, really (Cohen 1997a: 8).

One of the strongest themes in the interview was how we, as questionably-white women, can construct identities for ourselves. During the interview, emphasis moved from feeling that questionable-whiteness entailed being *neither* white nor other to feeling that it *could* entail being *both*, and that the language, and society's perceptions, need to change in order to reflect this.

Rachel: I think it's a place that you don't arrive at easily, but I think you have to... assimilate everything that you are, and I think [there's a] danger of saying "I am not this," "and I am not that," it [should be] "I am all of this." Maybe *that's* the way.

Nathalie: "I am both."

Rachel: I've had to assimilate my dad's culture and my mom's culture and that affects who I am. I can't see myself as black or white. I don't like the way everything is diametrically opposed all the time. So I think... what I'm trying to do, and I think maybe the language has to start to reflect that is, "I am all of this, this is what I am all about"... It's a paradigm shift that's kind of hard to make (Cohen 1997a: 31-32).

Simone: There's a certain amount that people of colour can do, but essentially white people really have to change. They have to really look at themselves, or ourselves, or whatever I am — see I can't even say myself — and start to understand [themselves]... objectively (Cohen 1997a: 31).

Simone: I can swing in and out of this privileged class... but I want to be aware of it. I think that that essentially is what people need to know, that you are willing to see things from different angles.

Nathalie: I definitely have the privilege, and having that privilege I feel like... unless I work against it, unless I challenge in some way, then I'm inherently part of the system that dominates and oppresses. It's not enough to just say, "Well, I'm not a racist," you have to resist in some way (Cohen 1997a: 31).

The women felt strongly that taking an active role in anti-racist work was imperative, and that their position of *both* whiteness and otherness would be particularly useful as a place from which to create change. By resisting either/or definitions of themselves, by acknowledging and understanding both the privilege and the otherness accorded to them because of their questionable-whiteness, these women locate themselves in a strategic position from which to pursue anti-racist work and challenge existing definitions of race and whiteness.



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