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Reitman, Meredith

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# Uncovering the white place: whitewashing at work

Meredith Reitman

Department of Geography, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, PO Box 413, Milwaukee, WI 53201, USA, mreitman@uwm.edu

*Recent work exploring the racialization of place tends to focus on the racialization of marginalized group space. This paper shifts attention toward the racialization of dominant group space, namely, the creation and maintenance of white places. Using the case study of the software workplace, I argue that white places are formed through a process of whitewashing, which simultaneously denies race and superimposes white culture. Whitewashing wields language and invisibility to deny race and promote a particular kind of multiculturalism, while cloaking the workplace in a culture of informality and business politics. The whitewashed workplace, like a whitewashed wall, is seen as colorless rather than white as white culture becomes universalized as high-tech culture. I draw my findings from in-depth interviews on workplace satisfaction, relationships, culture and diversity with black, Asian and white employees in Seattle-area software firms.*

**Key words:** race, whiteness, workplace, high-tech.

## Introduction

Recent contributions to the critical study of race reveal a thriving interest in the way places at various scales take on racial meaning and significance (Anderson 1991; Ford 1992; Gilbert 1998; Gilmore 2002; Housel 2002). With some important exceptions (Delaney 2002; Dwyer and Jones 2000; Hoelscher 2003; Kobayashi and Peake 2000), this work primarily investigates experiences of oppressed groups within marginalized space, such as essentialized Chinatowns and segregated black neighborhoods. A focus on oppressed places gives needed voice to those facing daily

material and psychological hardship, though it also turns attention away from the detailed agency of privileged groups in creating and reproducing dominant places. Since groups maintain privilege precisely through the characterization of their actions as ‘normal’ and therefore unbefitting critical analysis, uncovering their role in actively racializing space could upset embedded systems of dominance and oppression. For this reason, I focus on the opposite side of the power dichotomy (privilege versus oppression, dominance versus marginalization) and seek to ‘identify and interrogate spaces of silence’ (Kobayashi and Peake 2000: 400).

I investigate privileged space by examining white places and how they become white. The ability to create and maintain public and private white space has been one of the most powerful expressions of white privilege over the past century in the United States (see, for examples, Delaney 2002; Lapansky 1991; Pulido 2000; White 1996; Williams 1991).<sup>1</sup> Despite this significant role, white space remains understudied. In this paper, I choose to interrogate the workplace as a site rich with meaningful relationships and power politics that directly affects the material experiences of its participants through hiring, firing and promotion (Wilson 1996). I specifically explore the software industry, often referred to by the more general term ‘high-tech’, because despite its overrepresentation of whites across all occupations, it has avoided significant racialized critique, even at times adopting a mask of moral superiority over other industries (EEOC 2001; Jacoby 1999). As one journalist notes, ‘It’s been said so much that it’s practically a cliché: unlike other businesses, the forward-thinking high-tech industry is built on a colorblind meritocracy’ (Yamamoto 2001: 1). In addition, the discourse of the ‘high-tech’ workplace as a more progressive alternative to the traditional corporate model often acts as a siren call in uncertain economic times (Darrah 2000). The software workplace is silent terrain; it is best to know where we step before boldly venturing forward.

I argue the process of creating and maintaining a white place is one of ‘whitewashing’. I use this metaphor very explicitly to describe the *purpose, method and result* of racializing the workplace as white. Just as the *purpose* of whitewashing a wall is to ‘wash away’ undesired markings, the purpose of whitewashing the workplace is to ‘wash away’ undesired racial politics. The *method* chosen

to ‘wash’ a wall is to cover the markings with white paint; the method chosen to ‘wash’ the workplace is to deny that racial politics exist and to cover them with white culture. As an end *result*, just as the whitewashed wall is seen as clean even though it is covered in white paint, the whitewashed workplace is seen as colorless even though it is fully immersed in white culture. In fact, no true washing occurs at all, only pervasive camouflage that serves to naturalize racial dynamics in the workplace.

The structure of the paper follows the structure of the whitewashing metaphor. My review of literature on whiteness studies and antiracist and feminist geography characterizes whiteness as purposefully structuring space by ‘washing away’ racial politics. I follow this review by discussing the methods by which this ‘washing away’ occurs in the software workplace. First, whitewashing denies racial politics through choices about racialized language and invisibility and the promotion of a repressive type of multiculturalism. Second, whitewashing ‘paints’ the workplace white by imposing a dominant white culture of informality and business politics. I then discuss the result of these methods, namely, the normalization of white culture as ‘high-tech’ culture. My concluding discussion offers a cautionary context for these findings as well as suggestions for future antiracist work and organization.

## Method

I used primarily qualitative methods to explore the experiences of employees in the software workplace. During 2002 and 2003, I conducted in-depth open-ended interviews on workplace satisfaction, relationships, culture and diversity with thirty male employees in Seattle’s software industry.<sup>2</sup> These participants, listed by their pseudonyms in Table 1, self-identify as

Table 1 List of in-depth interview participants

Name	Race	Occupation	Age
Arthur	White	Web developer	34
Barry	White	Web developer	Late 20s
Ben	Black	Product marketing manager	30s
Bill	White	Software engineer	Early 30s
Charles	Black	Technical lead	40s
Chris	White	Product marketing manager	32
David	White	Product manager	30s
Duong	Asian (Vietnamese)	Software engineer	25
Dylan	Asian (Korean)	Technical account manager	31
Edward	White	Software tester	30s
Gary	Black	Software tester	24
Geoff	Asian (Chinese)	Project manager	25
George	White	Programmer/writer	27
Jeremy	Black	Software engineer	28
John	Asian (Indian)	Software engineer	28
Justin	Black	Software development lead	29
Karl	White	Web developer	Early 30s
Mark	Asian (Chinese)	Program manager	Mid 20s
Martin	White	Forms developer	30s
Michael	Asian (Vietnamese)	Quality assurance engineer	26
Neil	Black	Program manager	35
Philippe	Black	Web developer	30s
Rich	Black	Game designer	20s
Ravi	Asian (Indian)	Technical consultant	33
Rob	Asian (Vietnamese)	Software engineer	27
Sam	White	Program manager	28
Samir	Asian (Indian)	Software engineer	20s
Simon	Asian (Chinese)	Corporate development manager	25
Skip	Black	Software build manager	30s
Soon-Jung	Black/Korean	Software engineer	29

African-American, white and Asian, the three groups with the highest industry participation rates nationally.<sup>3</sup>

I asked participants to racially self-identify rather than assigning them racial identifiers to aid in determining various modes of racial expression. I interviewed only men to both control for gender discrimination, deserving of a separate study, and to further feminist work on the construction of masculinity in the high-tech workplace (Massey 1997). The range of participants' occupations allowed me to control for class, as they all fall within white collar middle-class professions, while attending to the diversity of technical and

non-technical positions in the industry. I contacted participants through both personal networks and formal organizations, engaging in snowball sampling to reach the desired quotas. I used grounded-theory narrative coding (Cresswell 1998) to uncover repeated themes in the interview data. I also drew findings from additional interviews with civil rights officials and analyses of court documents concerning a class action discrimination suit against a major software company.

Before turning to my analysis, I want to place myself in this research as a white, middle-class woman occupying simultaneous positions along multiple axes of power

(race, class and gender) (Katz 1994; Kobayashi 1994). In interviewing African-American, Asian and white men, I differ from my participants on at least one and often two of these axes (gender and race). I address varying power relationships, including the 'inherently hierarchical' (England 1994) relationship between researcher and participant, through the use of reflexivity to unmask my role in the research process. Following Frankenburg (1993), I told stories of myself to each participant during the interviews and included my contributions in the analysis in order to highlight our shared contribution to the research. The fact that I am white gives added necessity to these reflexive acts in that whiteness itself derives oppressive power from its constructed transparency and naturalization (Haney-Lopez 1996). Any attempt I made to reveal my whiteness as opaque and constructed often proved beneficial not only to opening dialogue with white participants often uncomfortable in addressing race, but also to disrupting traditional power imbalances with potentially marginalized Asian and black participants.

### **Whitening the workplace: critical white studies and antiracist and feminist geography**

To examine white places, I build on the efforts of Kobayashi and Peake (2000) to bring together critical white studies and antiracist and feminist geography. As largely agreed upon by recent critical studies, race is socially constructed and embedded in everyday, ordinary life (Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Guillamin 1995; Omi and Winant 1994). Racialization describes the process of attaching this social construction to people or places (Miles 1989). My analysis therefore examines

the common everyday interactions that attach whiteness to place, or the racialization of white places.

This paper draws upon critical white studies, a branch of critical race theory that highlights the historical and contemporary means by which whiteness maintains a position of supremacy within a racialized society (Delgado and Stefancic 1997). One major component of this supremacy, or privilege, is the casting of whiteness as the 'normal' race against which all other groups deviate. By virtue of its normalcy, whiteness often becomes invisible to whites themselves, leading to an understanding among whites that race is unimportant to societal dynamics. In response, whiteness theorists work to reveal the significance of whiteness in everyday relationships (Haney-Lopez 1996; McIntosh 1997; Twine 1996) and the distribution of material goods (Lipsitz 1998; Oliver and Shapiro 1995). Dyer (1997: 3) argues, 'the point of seeing the racing of whites is to dislodge them/us from the position of power, with all the inequities, oppression, privileges and sufferings in its train, dislodging them/us by undercutting the authority with which they/we speak and act in and on the world'. The act of making whiteness 'strange' takes away its ability to speak for the truth of all people, revealing it as a particular perspective empowered with a universal likeness.

The discourse of colorblindness interacts with the invisibility of whiteness in complex ways. The desire for a colorblind society is historically rooted in the 1960s Civil Rights movement and is often associated with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1963 'I Have a Dream' speech. However, the contemporary usage of the term 'colorblindness' is much more varied in its perspectives on racial justice. O'Brien (2001) argues some types of colorblindness lead to a 'nonracist' perspective in which

whites, by claiming to not notice unequal relations of power, evade responsibility for them. Other types allow for antiracist action by acknowledging certain kinds of racism. The desire for a colorblind society is one supporting narrative behind the 'new abolitionism' movement (Ignatiev and Garvey 1996). Far from encouraging power evasiveness, this movement directly confronts whiteness as a harmful fiction that needs to be destroyed. For the purposes of this paper, I employ the term colorblindness to refer to 'nonracists', those who seek to expel race consciousness without addressing racial inequities. A non-racist perspective is antithetical to antiracist work since 'to banish race-words redoubles the hegemony of race by targeting efforts to combat racism while leaving race and its effects unchallenged and embedded in society, seemingly natural rather than the product of social choices' (Haney-Lopez: 1996: 177). The suppression of race consciousness normalizes the predominant system of white privilege rather than engaging in its dismantlement.

Critical white studies also investigate what it means to be Asian within American racial dynamics. Wu (2002) argues Asian-Americans must combat simultaneous racialized identities of 'perpetual foreigner' and 'model minority'. The perpetual foreigner is never truly American, while the model minority upholds the American dream. Kim (1999) argues this contradictory un-American-and-too-American positioning results in a unique triangulation of Asian-Americans within US racial dynamics. Asians as the 'model minority' are acceptable to whites as proof of individual responsibility who do not threaten white dominance by remaining 'foreign'. This positioning helps obscure white oppression by designating power struggles as competition between Asians and African-Americans rather than between these groups and dominant

whites. As I argue elsewhere, these dynamics of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion, acceptance and rejection result in a quite complex positioning of Asians and Asian-Americans within the software workplace (Reitman 2004). As presented in this paper, Asian and Asian-American employees sometimes aligned themselves with the tenets of whiteness, for example, by promoting 'global village' multiculturalism, and sometimes they did not, as when they were excluded from white office politics. I attempt throughout the paper to retain this sense of fluidity in Asian identity and belonging.

Work in antiracist and feminist geography has been instrumental in exploring how the process of racialization occurs in place. These theorists see places as integral to the negotiation of power between groups. Places take on particular identities (racial and other) that reflect and reproduce the dynamics of their participants. Anderson's (1991) early work in antiracist geography suggests the historical segregation and institutional disempowerment of Chinese residents in Vancouver creates a separate space of Chinatown, and thereby a separate characterization of Chinese residents. Ruddick's (1996) analysis of public space explores its role in recreating racialized myths of 'black beast/white goddess' and 'good immigrant/bad immigrant'. Dwyer and Jones (2000) and Kobayashi and Peake (2000) bring in critical white studies to explore the ability of whiteness to create segmented space that dictates groups' mobility and belonging. This work, together with analyses of racialized labor markets (England and Stiell 1997; Jackson 1992), highlights the role of racialization in defining racial groups' position within public and private space.

By focusing on the body, feminist geographers have been able to explore the negotiation

of power and identity in the workplace. Valentine (1993) argues the workplace is a site of oppressive heteronormativity, in which the power dynamic between heterosexual and homosexual employees is acted out in water cooler chats and public displays of relationships. Dyck (1999) also explores workplace marginalization, but focuses on everyday bodily inscription of physical disability. In her study of London's financial services industry, McDowell (1997) argues rigid constructions of masculinity and femininity are enforced through everyday discourse of sexual comments and jokes, giving further evidence to the importance of workplace practices in negotiating power between groups.

In my project, I bring together critical white studies, antiracist geography and feminist geography to examine how everyday practices in the software workplace create and maintain its construction as a white place. Critical white studies shed light on the construction of whiteness which, like masculinity and heterosexuality, draws power from a normative characterization. Antiracist geography positions this racialization in place, connecting its hierarchical power relationships to recurrent spatial interactions. Feminist geography investigates these mechanics in the workplace. Taken together, the racialization of the workplace as white implies the workplace adopts the tenets of whiteness, namely, the denial of racial politics as integral to workplace relationships. I therefore label white racialization 'whitewashing' to signify its intention to 'wash away' racial politics in place.

### **Methods, part 1: denying race in the workplace**

Contemporary white workplaces seek to 'wash away' racial politics by first denying

race as a vital part of the working environment. To this effect, people in these white places make everyday choices to depoliticize racial language and cloak themselves or others in racial invisibility. These methods also include promoting a particular kind of multiculturalism that claims racial harmony while suppressing racial dissent.

### *Depoliticizing racial language*

Employees choose to use particular language to avoid acknowledging racial dynamics in the software workplace. The dominant use of the word 'Caucasian' instead of 'white' effectively hides color behind a wall of pseudo-science. Despite a history of scientific falsification, 'Caucasian' was adopted into American vernacular in the mid-twentieth century as a means of reconsolidating whiteness as a biologically distinct category of people (Jacobson 1998). Regardless of its highly politicized role in dividing whites from people of color, some software employees seemed to believe in the term's scientific roots, leading them to embrace it as a neutral, objective alternative to the more political 'white'. George, a white programmer, used the term to connote a more 'accurate' representation of difference than that given by the 'myth' of 'white'. In reasoning why he used the term, Martin, a white developer, argued, 'I am what I am so why am I going to sit there and make a political issue about it'. George and Martin consciously chose 'Caucasian' in order to distance themselves from dialogue laden with mythology and politics toward what they felt was a more scientific, objective narrative.

The choice to use 'Caucasian' crossed racial boundaries. However, black and Asian employees, rather than adopting the term

for its scientific likeness, chose 'Caucasian' in order to avoid offending their white colleagues. Dylan, a Korean American technical account manager, claimed 'white' sounded 'like "dirty white something" ... it almost sounds derogatory to a certain extent. So Caucasian, while it's a kind of funny word in itself, just doesn't seem as derogatory'. John, an Indian software engineer, and Justin, a black software development lead, also felt 'white' might be understood as 'antagonistic', as negatively charged as 'colored', and therefore chose the more 'technical' term 'Caucasian'. These participants feared their use of 'white' will be taken negatively, as proof of racial animosity. In truth, the act of using 'white' only reveals to whites their own privilege, the historical politics of whiteness. In a white place, however, this choice threatens an intentional denial of racial dynamics.

White employees' language choices also deny race by focusing on multiple heritages instead of explicit racial identifiers. Mary Waters (1990) labels this type of white identity 'symbolic ethnicity'. She argues that contrary to other racial identities, white ethnicity is voluntary, costless and allows whites to express both individuality and community membership. I argue this symbolic ethnicity also allows whites to deny their racial identity and privilege. When asked how they racially self-identified, many white participants chose a long list of heritage descriptors, only reluctantly switching to racial identifiers when pressed. George, the white programmer introduced above, described himself as 'German, English, Dutch, Irish, Scottish'. He chose this identification because white was too 'vague', though his neglect in elaborating on any strong ties with these ethnicities in the rest of the interview suggested they were no less 'vague' but served some other purpose. This evasive pattern

included those who described themselves and other white coworkers as 'mutts'. Chris, a white product marketing manager, preferred to 'usually leave [my race] out ... I think I'm about as mutt as you can get'. The word 'mutt' implies an inoffensive, even self-deprecatory racial identification, implying a depoliticized sense of whiteness. In choosing to self-identify in these ways, white participants used language to whitewash racial dynamics from the workplace.

#### *Masking racial visibility*

White employees also desired racial invisibility, to see and be seen without racial markers, in order to reinforce a depoliticized workplace. I interpreted this desire as stemming from a nonracist model of colorblindness, in which racial harmony arises from blindness to racial difference. Whites' desire to become invisible was often expressed in distaste for visible whites. This 'race for innocence' (Pierce 2003) distanced white participants from those who more egregiously crossed the boundaries of racial propriety. This strategy resembled the propensity of urban liberal whites to disparage rural whites as racist 'rednecks' in order to define themselves in opposition (Jarosz and Lawson 2002). Chris, for example, spoke dismissively of 'guys [who] were just so hillbilly about some stuff ... they weren't comfortable with things outside of their realm'. By contrasting himself with these coworkers, Chris portrayed himself as racially indifferent, taking his own color and privilege out of view. In a manner similar to the use of multiple heritage descriptors to evade racial identification, white employees also used white subcultures to mask the visibility of white dominance in the workplace. Karl, a white web developer,



described diversity in his workplace as ranging from ‘Goth’ to ‘punk’ to ‘college student’. These subcultures were all white, but his focus on diversity *within* the racial group masked the predominance of white bodies *throughout* the workplace.

The nonracist model of colorblindness encouraged employees to ignore the racial identities of their colleagues as well as their own. Chris used a childhood experience of not noticing the race of the black doctor in town as a good model for how he wanted to raise his children. George also took pride in his refusal to see race, arguing he sees his coworkers ‘as employees of [Company] first and then race, gender second’. The rigidity of this stance led Barry, a white web programmer, to struggle in an internal ‘twisting act’. He described a situation in which he gave a friendly greeting to a coworker because he was black, and then worried this represented ‘a conflict between noticing and messaging that I’m not noticing that I feel is very false’. Barry wanted to use colorblindness to assure his coworker he considers him an equal, but in order to do this, Barry had to first notice that his coworker is black. He therefore found himself caught between the nonracist model of colorblindness, which tells him to ignore race, and a desire to address inequalities, which drives him to acknowledge race. Barry felt he was alone in this struggle, highlighting the power of the nonracist model to dominate the white workplace.

### *Promoting ‘global village’ multiculturalism*

The software workplace also promotes a particular kind of ‘liberal pluralist’ (Jay 1997) multiculturalism that de-emphasizes racial politics while keeping whites firmly in power. Hage (2000) argues this type of multiculturalism

positions whites as managers of national space who decide both whether or not to tolerate difference and how to value its potentially ‘enriching’ qualities. In the software workplace, this multicultural enrichment celebrates different nationalities coming together to work harmoniously toward a single goal. Employees take pride in this diversity, claiming it as something unique and desirable about the high-tech industry. Significantly, however, this type of multiculturalism does not engage underrepresented minorities, who disappear at the margins of the dominant white workplace. I argue promoting high-tech ‘global village’ multiculturalism whitewashes highly problematic racial dynamics.

Software employees often described high-tech diversity as including ‘people from all over the world’, defining demographic variety by nation of origin. Employees repeatedly described workplaces comprised of people originating from multiple Asian and European countries as truly harmonious ‘global villages’. This portrayal, in which ‘everyone sticks out, we are all different’, denies the marginalization of any one group. Employees recounted the excitement of seeing national dress when walking the hallways or hearing snippets of a foreign language in the cafeteria. For many employees, the gathering of nationalities was something exhilarating, enriching and somewhat unique to the high-tech industry.

However, this type of multiculturalism is built upon a very specific formulation. Justin, a black software development lead, points out that the industry’s claim to diversity relies on the important caveat ‘if you take out black people from the equation’. This caveat is key to the industry’s use of multiculturalism, as its claims of diversity rest on a conflation between the minority or nonwhite population and underrepresented minorities or African-Americans.

This confusion of terms both defends against charges of discriminatory practices and allows for continued overseas recruiting. In defending charges of discrimination in the workplace, one major company asserts, ‘over the past three years, [our] minority work force has grown nearly twice as fast as the company’s domestic workforce overall’ (Rosenberg 2001). In fact, that group of ‘minorities’ includes Asian employees, who are in fact overrepresented in the software industry (EEOC 2001). The use of the word ‘minority’ to include an overrepresented group makes no rational sense except to disguise the small numbers of truly underrepresented groups: African-Americans and Latinos. In addition, this confusion allows companies to recruit Asian immigrants through the H1-B program while claiming that they are supporting multiculturalism. This practice has caused several civil rights groups to accuse high-tech companies of discriminating against nationally

underrepresented groups (Shiver 2000) (Figure 1).

This debate also represents a system of racial triangulation, in which the competition for software jobs is staged between African-Americans and Asians, while the white dominance of technical and non-technical occupations is less apparent.<sup>4</sup> The type of multiculturalism espoused by the software workplace thereby ‘washes away’ the dynamics of racial inequality and white privilege in favor of a harmonious global village.

### Methods, part 2: painting the workplace white

The metaphor of whitewashing pairs a denial of race dynamics with an imposition of white culture. I refer to racialized workplace cultures as specific ideologies and normative ways of



**Figure 1** This poster argues, ‘For years African-Americans have laid their life on the line for their country. And many have built successful careers as military leaders. ... They are given an opportunity to live up to their full human potential. Too bad America’s technology industry doesn’t feel the same way. ... Last year alone over 400,000 black workers lost their jobs while Congress filled tens of thousands of tech jobs with H1-B Visa foreign workers’. Source: Coalition for Fair Employment in Silicon Valley 2002.

behaving that are created by and about particular racialized groups. In the software workplace, white work culture emphasized informality and technical/corporate conflict. In the naming of white culture, I do not mean to essentialize whiteness as a natural, biological category of race that necessarily creates a particular type of culture. Rather, both race and culture are social constructs that exist differently in different spaces. The white culture adopted by white employees in the high-tech workplace is associated with the privilege of rebelling against traditional office culture. Black and Asian employees were more likely to discuss a different type of workplace involving employment insecurity, fairness concerns and interpersonal disconnection (Table 2). White and Asian participants were also more likely to feel satisfied by their workplaces' openness and fun than black participants, who focused on issues of privacy and respect (Table 3).

While Asian participants' responses highlight a somewhat ambiguous relationship with white culture, white participants were highly invested in it, discussing informality and technical/corporate conflict at great length. In addition, white culture was *about* white people, their daily relationships and concerns with one another, further supporting white

culture's centrality to white men's working lives. As the second step in white racialization, whitewashing covers over complex racial dynamics by painting white culture onto the canvas of the software workplace.

### *White informality*

White informal culture manifested in customs of dress and play. White participants spoke about informal dress at length, and not without some amusement. Arthur, a white web developer, claimed, 'they don't care what you wear just long as you're not filthy, and even in some cases they don't really care about that. I've worked with some rather smelly people'. Black participants rarely mentioned dress at all. Justin, one of the few black employees to bring up the topic, had a very different perspective on dress culture:

If it was a black workplace ... it would be more of a fashion show, guaranteed. Much as I would love to be working at a place that was mostly black people ... I would feel way more pressure to try to look good every day. ... Nobody at [my company] cares and people will sometimes be walking around barefoot.

**Table 2** Workplace cultures mentioned by race of participant

	Black/Asian	White	Total
Informality & technical/corporate conflict	34.30%	61.90%	44.60%
	12	13	25
Fairness, insecurity, disconnection	65.70%	38.10%	55.40%
	23	8	31
Total cultural mentions	35	21	56

Chi-square analysis; relationship is significant to the level of  $p < .05$ .

White participants were more likely than Black or Asian participants to discuss their workplace culture as informal or immersed in a internal conflict between technical and corporate groups. Black and Asian participants were more likely to concerns over fairness, job insecurity or social disconnection in reference to their workplace cultures.

Source: personal interviews by author (2002–2003).

**Table 3** Workplace satisfaction mentioned by race of participant

	Black	White/Asian	Total
Privacy & respect	55.60% 5	16.70% 3	29.60% 8
Openness & fun	44.40% 4	83.30% 15	70.40% 19
Total satisfaction mentions	9	18	27

Chi-square analysis; relationship is significant to the level of  $p < .05$ .

White and Asian participants were more likely to be satisfied with a sense of workplace openness and fun, while black participants discussed whether or not they obtained personal privacy and respect from their colleagues.

Source: personal interviews by author (2002–2003).

Justin's view from outside white culture suggests its association with informal dress. Those identified by employees as participating in this dress culture were always white. In fact, white bodies were necessary to white cultural expression; black bodies with similar levels of informality in hairstyles and clothing were often marginalized from white culture as not belonging (Reitman 2004).

White informality also included customs of play within the office. White participants, and to some extent their Asian colleagues, characterized the high-tech workplace as developing employee creativity and innovation through the encouragement of play culture. Many of these participants spoke of spending extended time in the 'game room' or staging elaborate jokes on one another. Barry's company even inscribed this informal culture into policy:

'Have fun' was the third pillar that the company was founded on. . . . We're going to work really hard and it's going to cost us a lot of effort and time and energy, but we're going to have a good time when we do it.

This play culture was key to defining high-tech as breaking away from more traditional forms of work. However, this culture was created by and about whites, and therefore treated white,

Asian and black employees differently. Bill and John both described their pride in being included in a workplace culture of familial fun, though their experiences were highly racialized. Bill, a white software engineer, acquired a nickname based on an individual characteristic (excessive coughing), while John, an Indian software engineer, was the object of an elaborate 'arranged marriage' prank that drew on Asian stereotypes. Bill's whiteness allowed his race to disappear behind his individualism, while John's Asianness became the center of caricatured attention. Informal culture in the workplace was maintained by and for whites, leaving those not identified as white to observe from the outside or participate in ways defined by their white colleagues.

### *White business politics*

In addition to informality, white culture in the software workplace included a system of business politics often deeply significant to its white participants. Interviews revealed stark differences in participants' engagement with, or disconnection from, political conflict between technical engineers and corporate businesspeople. White participants were far

more likely to discuss this particular type of business politics than Asian participants, while it was mentioned by only one black participant. The narrative about technical/corporate conflict is about conflict between two groups of white people: white businesspeople and white engineers. Black participants, save one, were neither included in this narrative as subjects, nor were they engaging in it from an outsider perspective.

The technical corporate conflict took many forms for white participants, ranging from more benign differences in dress and personality to more confrontational disagreements over corporate goals. Benign differences appeared in workplace nicknames and jokes, which characterized corporate employees as 'blue shirts' and engineers as socially inept. At a more confrontational level, engineers felt overlooked by company goals focused on profit instead of product quality. For their part, corporate employees felt engineers stubbornly worked at their own pace without regard for company needs. Heightened feelings on both sides of this conflict often led to white participants' absorption in the minutiae of power struggles. Often these business politics, along with discussions of informality, were the focus of interviews with white participants. The white workplace imposes white culture as a central narrative, though it remains a discourse predominantly by and about white people only.

### **Result: the colorless high-tech workplace**

Following through the metaphor of the whitewashed wall, even though the wall is 'washed' with white paint, it is seen as just a wall cleared of undesirable markings.

Similarly, even though the workplace is 'washed' with white culture, it is seen as just a high-tech workplace cleansed of racial politics. The process of whitewashing race in the workplace means white culture's whiteness is erased, and *white culture* becomes just *high-tech culture*. To industry participants and observers, high-tech culture *is* a culture of informality and technical/corporate conflict. White participants spoke confidently about 'the industry' revolving around both forms of white culture. The following quote from the Silicon Valley weekly newspaper describes high-tech dress culture:

Silicon Valley's entrepreneurial spirit, that 'roll up your sleeves and let's get down to business' mindset, has had its unique bearing on fashion. ... The 'nerd' prototype emerged ... eventually becoming the local uniform. (Colwell 2000)

By describing *white* informal culture as *high-tech* informal culture, the journalist denies the reality of whiteness in favor of a colorless workplace. Dilbert, the popular cartoon set in a high-tech firm, further supports this practice by conflating *white* technical/corporate conflict and *high-tech* technical/corporate conflict. The comic strip's many humorous depictions of managers and software developers at cross purposes are acted out by white (and sometimes Asian) men, though these interactions in fact become generalized as the norm for high-tech. The whiteness of the workplace becomes hidden behind a veil of universality. To clarify, I am not arguing that cultures of informality and business politics do not exist, but rather that they only describe the experience of those immersed in white culture. All other stories are silenced within the naturalized, standardized and invisibly white workplace.

## Conclusions: uncovering the white place

My findings show the white workplace is created and maintained through a process of whitewashing in which everyday practices seek to deny racial politics, superimpose white culture and normalize that culture in place. This characterization directly challenges the notion of the high-tech workplace as morally above problems of race. What distinguishes white places from those associated with oppressed racial groups is that they are constructed through a *denial* of identity rather than its explicit portrayal. It is this denial that makes these places so important to reveal. In making white places 'strange', they can more readily be viewed as complex environments of behavioral norms and cultural expressions that are unique rather than universal. White places become one among many types of places, removed from a position of authority to represent all 'normal' social environments.

I end with several cautionary remarks and hopes for future directions. In publishing research on whiteness, I risk supporting white dominance by re-making it central to issues of race and place (Bonnett 1996). Dyer (1997) warns this could present a 'green light' to those whites who wish to return to a narrow 'whites only' research agenda. In addition, *critical* studies of whiteness might lead to immobilizing white guilt, further limiting the research agenda. Instead of encouraging either of these trends, I hope this research incites action to unveil the normal, to challenge popular beliefs, and to continue to be reflexive about race relations. I hope to further expand true alliances between whites and people of color in the common goal of eradicating inequality. Moreover, I hope an active research agenda focused in uncovering whiteness in place will indeed transform relationships of power, and I look forward to the ensuing chaos.

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## Notes

- 1 I use antiracist writer Kendall Clark's (2003) definition of white privilege as 'a right, advantage or immunity granted to or enjoyed by white persons beyond the common advantage of all others; an exemption in many particular cases from certain burdens or liabilities'.
- 2 I chose Seattle due to its designation as one of fourteen 'high-technology centers' (Cortright and Mayer 2001) and the industrial prominence of its major employer, Microsoft.
- 3 'Asian' men include those who are South, Southeast and East Asian, foreign-born and native-born. Unfortunately, narrowing my research to these three groups meant excluding the perspective of Latino employees. Interviews with white, black and Asian employees suggest Latino software employees hold a delicate position of ambiguity with respect to whiteness similar to that held by their Asian colleagues.
- 4 The most recent trend of moving software jobs from the United States to India has unveiled this white dominance, as angry whites now threatened with job loss start to question employment practices in the industry.

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### Abstract translations

#### *Mettre au jour le milieu blanc: la mystification au travail*

Les travaux récents sur la racialisation du lieu ont mis davantage l'accent sur la racialisation de l'espace de groupes marginalisés. Dans cet article, le regard se déplace vers la racialisation de l'espace de groupes dominants, en l'occurrence la création et le maintien de milieux blancs. À partir d'une étude de cas sur un milieu de travail en informatique, je soutiens que les milieux blancs se créent à travers un processus de mystification qui, à la fois, fait abstraction de la race et superpose une culture blanche. La mystification se sert de la langue et de l'invisibilité pour nier la race et promouvoir une certaine forme de multiculturalisme en revêtant le milieu de travail d'une culture favorisant la simplicité et centrée sur les politiques de bureau. Le milieu de travail mystifié, tel un mur blanchi, est perçu être sans couleur au lieu d'être blanc et ce, pendant que la culture blanche s'universalise en tant que culture de haute technologie. Mes constats reposent sur des entrevues en profondeur sur le niveau de satisfaction dans le milieu de travail, les relations, la culture et la diversité, qui ont été menées auprès d'employés de race noire, asiatique



et blanche dans des firmes de haute technologie dans la région de Seattle.

**Mots-clés:** race, blanchitude, milieu de travail, haute technologie.

*Descubriendo el Lugar Blanco: 'Blanqueamiento' al Trabajo*

Trabajos recientes que exploran la racialización de lugar tienden a centrarse en la racialización del espacio de grupos marginados. Este papel cambia el enfoque para centrarse en la racialización del espacio de grupos dominantes, es decir, la creación y sostenimiento de lugares blancos. Haciendo uso de un estudio de caso de locales de trabajo de empresas de software, sugiero que los lugares blancos se forman por un proceso de

'blanqueamiento', el cual simultáneamente niega raza y superpone una cultura blanca. El 'blanqueamiento' hace uso de lenguaje e invisibilidad para negar raza y fomentar una forma de multiculturalismo particular, mientras que envuelve el local de trabajo en el manto de una cultura de informalidad y la política de negocio. El local de trabajo 'blanqueado', al igual que una pared blanqueada, se ve como 'sin color' en vez de blanco y la cultura blanca llega a ser universalizada como la cultura de alta tecnología. Mis conclusiones vienen de entrevistas exhaustivas sobre satisfacción al trabajo, relaciones, cultura y diversidad, elaboradas con empleados negros, asiáticos y blancos en empresas de software en Seattle.

**Palabras claves:** raza, local de trabajo, alta tecnología.