The Myth of the White Minority

Andrew Pierce, Sacred Heart University
Abstract
In recent years, and especially in the wake of Barack Obama’s reelection, projections that whites will soon become a minority have proliferated. In this essay, I will argue that such predictions are misleading at best, as they rest on questionable philosophical presuppositions, including the presupposition that racial concepts like ‘whiteness’ are static and unchanging rather than fluid and continually being reconstructed. If I am right about these fundamental inaccuracies, one must wonder why the myth of the white minority persists. I will argue that by reenvisioning whites as a minority culture struggling against a hostile dominant group, and by promoting white solidarity as a response to a (fabricated) crisis, such predictions actually serve to defend and legitimize white supremacy.

Keywords: census; immigration; race; whiteness

“It’s the end of the world as straight white males know it.” Thus proclaimed the *Los Angeles Times* on November 8, 2012, the morning after Barack
Obama had won reelection, by a significant margin, over white Republican challenger Mitt Romney. The article, like many other commentaries in the wake of Obama’s reelection, chalked the victory up to the growing numbers, and so, presumably, the growing political power, of women and racial minorities. In the background of this proclamation lies the proliferation of demographic projections about the declining number of whites in the contemporary United States—projections that, it seems safe to say, have caused significant anxiety for many whites, as well as significant hope for the future on the part of many nonwhites (and some antiracist whites as well). But whether or not one would celebrate or mourn this demographic development, projections of impending white minority are misleading at best, as they rest on several questionable presuppositions: that racial concepts like whiteness are static and unchanging rather than fluid and continually reconstructed; that all Latin-American immigrants are nonwhite (in spite of the fact that many self-identify as white); and that nonwhite immigrants and their descendants will always be nonwhite, no matter how integrated and intermixed, socially, culturally, and biologically, they become. Additionally, the idea that increases in number translate into increased political power represents a woefully naive understanding of American democracy and the persistent ideology of white supremacy that underlies it.

If I am right about these fundamental flaws (and I am not the first to notice them), one must wonder why the myth of the white minority persists. I will argue that by reenvisioning whites as a minority culture struggling against a hostile dominant group, and by promoting white solidarity as a response to a fabricated crisis, such predictions play a role in the preservation and promotion of white supremacy. Somewhat ironically, achieving “minority” status allows white efforts to dominate other races socially, culturally, and politically, to be understood as a matter of protecting one’s “endangered” community: white supremacy masquerading as multiculturalism.

I will begin then, by looking carefully at a representative study of the sort described above, and detailing the flaws I have briefly outlined. I will then make the case that the proliferation of studies of this sort in spite of these serious flaws can be understood as ideological, providing support and justification for white supremacy. I will end with some brief reflections on the political implications of white minority for antiracist praxis, focusing on the debate between white eliminativists and critical conservationists.
1. The Projections and their Problems

A simple Internet search of the combined terms *white* and *minority* produces literally hundreds of articles reporting roughly the same “facts.” Due to increased immigration from non-European countries, the higher birth rates of nonwhite immigrants, and other factors, whites, these articles claim, are projected to become a minority in the United States, roughly around the middle of the twenty-first century. The more responsible of these reports do note that “all population projections have inherent uncertainties, especially for years further in the future, because they can be affected by changes in behavior, by new immigration policies, or by other events.” It is worthwhile to begin by emphasizing just how uncertain long-term population predictions can be. Perhaps the most striking case of this uncertainty is Thomas Malthus’s infamous population predictions.

In 1798, Malthus published his “Essay on the Principle of Population,” which argued that, since the population had begun to expand exponentially, and since available resources like food increase only linearly, the massive population growth of the modern era would inevitably produce famine, disease, war, and other depopulating catastrophes. What Malthus failed to recognize was the power of technology to massively expand agricultural productivity, as well as the now well-known fact that even modest increases in living standards produce significant decreases in birth rates. And while some neo-Malthusians may still anticipate the kinds of catastrophes that Malthus foreshadowed, food insecurity today is generally a result of distribution problems rather than scarcity, a fact that seems to refute Malthus’s dire predictions.

Remembering Malthus’s failures reminds us that long-term population predictions typically depend on so many unknown variables that they are rarely accurate or useful. The projections about the future racial makeup of the United States, while less far-reaching both temporally and geographically, suffer from similar uncertainties. Not only would the predictions be affected dramatically by changes in immigration policy, but by changes in fertility rates as well, which, insofar as they are linked to economic factors, depend upon whether subsequent generations of immigrants achieve some semblance of middle-class security, or whether they remain locked in systematic, intergenerational poverty. And insofar as economic factors like income and wealth track along racial lines, the perceived race of immigrants could make a difference in this regard.
Still, despite these unknown variables, these projections do point to real demographic changes in the contemporary United States, changes resulting primarily from shifting immigration patterns. It should not be particularly surprising that whites have constituted a large majority for most of U.S. history. For most of that history, white majority was more or less dictated by law, beginning with the Naturalization Act of 1790, which limited citizenship to “free white persons of good moral character.” And while this act was invalidated by the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment, implicit and explicit racial exclusion continued to drive immigration policy for another hundred years. The Immigration Act of 1924, for example, attempted to manage racial demographics in an ostensibly race-neutral way, via the “national origins” formula, which limited the number of immigrants from any one country to 2 percent of the number of the existing U.S. citizens of that national background. The national origins formula thus effectively preserved the existing racial demographic of the country, a goal that its authors were not shy about making explicit. It was only with the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965 that the national origins formula was abolished, and the stage was set for a significant shift in the sources of the U.S. immigrant population. Previous to 1965, eight of the top ten countries of origin of U.S. immigrants were in Europe (the other two were Canada and Mexico). In 2010, by contrast, no European countries even appear in the top ten. Mexico is the largest source of immigration by far (11.7 million Mexican-born immigrants in 2010), followed by China in a distant second place (2.2 million), followed closely by India (1.8 million) and the Philippines (1.8 million). The rest of the top ten is populated by a combination of other Latin American and Asian nations (in descending order: Vietnam, El Salvador, Cuba, Korea, the Dominican Republic, and Guatemala).

So it is certainly true that the geographical sources of U.S. immigration have shifted dramatically, away from European countries and toward Latin American and Asian nations. And the common understanding of white as meaning something like “of European heritage” would seem to suggest that the claim about white minority follows logically from an understanding of this new trend in immigration. But upon closer analysis, the claim falls apart. To see why, one can begin by looking at the U.S. Census Bureau’s actual population projections, the source of almost all of the claims about impending white minority. If one looks closely at those numbers, one will notice that they do not actually make the claim so frequently attributed to them. The population of those who reported only one race, white, on the 2010 census
form, was around 223.5 million, just over 72 percent of a total population of 308.7 million. This population is projected to increase steadily to 283 million in 2050, keeping pace with the projected increase in the general population to just shy of 400 million. That represents a decrease of just over 1 percent over the next forty years, and at 71 percent, still a clear majority of the population. So where do the claims of white minority find traction? It is only after disaggregating race from “ethnicity,” particularly “Hispanic” ethnicity, that non-Hispanic whites appear to be declining toward minority. Then the 2010 population of non-Hispanic whites (197 million, or 65 percent of the general population) gradually decreases as a percentage of the general population, until it falls under 50 percent around 2043.5

This is much more than a technicality. It represents a serious conceptual confusion on the part of those who have interpreted the data to say that “whites” are destined to become a minority (again, the report itself makes no such claim). It also demonstrates a significant disconnect between Hispanics themselves, a majority of whom identify as white and white alone (at least for the purposes of the Census), and non-Hispanic Americans, who seem to interpret “Hispanic” as a racial identity, one that is decidedly nonwhite. So even for those who might be tempted to defend the predictions of white minority in terms of current “folk” conceptions of race, concerns about whose perspectives are taken up in such a folk understanding should give such defenders pause.

Again, the more reflective of these projections do seem to recognize this problem. The projections published by the Pew Hispanic Center, for example, note that:

these projections assume that definitions of race and ethnic categories will remain fixed and that self-identification does not change over time. In reality, the growing numbers of births to parents of different racial and ethnic groups, as well as changing social norms about racial and ethnic self-identification, are serving to blur the boundaries of racial/ethnic categories. Consequently, the future sizes of race/ethnic groups could be higher or lower than the projection values even if the underlying demographic assumptions about the future prove to be correct.6

Yet even these reports underestimate the extent to which these problematic assumptions—that “race and ethnic categories will remain fixed” and that
“self-identification does not change over time”—undermine any attempt to project current racial categories into the future.® One need not speculate about the future to appreciate this point. A basic understanding of the past—of the ways in which U.S. history has been shaped by immigration policy and of the ways in which that policy shaped and was shaped by shifting ideas of race—makes the point quite clear. In fact, the earliest worries about white minority are older than the United States itself. Decades prior to independence, Benjamin Franklin celebrated the fact that, though “the Number of purely white People in the World is proportionably [sic] very small,” the promise of America lied in the fact that it was on the path to become home to a majority white population. Yet this promise was already jeopardized by the “Palatine Boors” (Germans), who had begun “to swarm into our Settlements, and by herding together establish their Language and Manners to the Exclusion of ours.” Franklin goes on to ask, rhetorically, “Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a Colony of Aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them, and will never adopt our Language or Customs, any more than they can acquire our Complexion.” Further, it was not only those German Boors who threatened white dominance. Anticipating the strife surrounding the “new immigrants” of the early twentieth century, Franklin also excludes “Spaniards, Italians, French, Russians, and Swedes” and others of “swarthy Complexion” from the ranks of whiteness, concluding finally that it is the Saxons and the English who together “make the principal Body of White People on the Face of the Earth.”8

If whiteness were still understood in this limited way, it would surely be accurate to say that whites have long since become a minority in the United States. The difficulty of finding specific evidence for this claim goes directly to the point I am after. No one seems to care much about that data set, because virtually no one today thinks of Germanic and non-Germanic whites (nor French and non-French whites, Nordic and non-Nordic whites, etc.) as racially distinct groups. These immigrant groups have by and large successfully integrated into the fabric of (white) American society, intermarried with Anglo-Saxon and other “white” (in the contemporary sense) groups, and, in spite of Franklin’s skepticism, adopted the language and customs of mainstream (white) American culture. They are, for all intents and purposes, white.

But of course, as Franklin’s reflections indicate, this was not always the case. His narrower view of whiteness was not at all uncommon, and his
comments foreshadowed heated debates surrounding successive waves of immigrants from Ireland, Italy, Poland, Russia, and other non-Anglophone groups who were considered nonwhite (or at least not “fully” white, whatever that might mean) well into the twentieth century. Indeed, the threat to “whiteness” posed by these and other European groups was the primary motivator for the “national origins” formula discussed above. The two decades preceding its passage saw Theodore Roosevelt encouraging “white” women to procreate at a rate that would prevent “race suicide” in the face of increasing immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe. It saw the publication of Madison Grant’s *The Passing of the Great Race*, which argued that “Nordic” racial superiority was under threat from the influx of immigrants of other European “races.” It saw the National Industrial Conference Board, a group of major U.S. corporations and industrial associations concerned about increasing labor unrest (perceived to be fueled primarily by radical immigrant transplants) claim that the immigration question was “essentially a race question.” These precursors to the 1924 Act demonstrate, as many historians of race and immigration have shown, that the conflicts over non-Anglo European immigration were widely perceived as *racial* conflicts, and that the contemporary use of “ethnicity” to mark these kinds of differences leads to confusion when anachronistically applied to earlier eras.

Still, like the Germans of Franklin’s time, most if not all of these groups are now considered white without (much) qualification. They are, as populations, integrated, intermarried, and generally enjoy most, if not all of the privileges that contemporary whiteness bestows. If history repeats itself yet again, one could expect that Hispanic immigrants will eventually become white as well, foiling once more the alarmist statistical projections of white minority, and representing, by Nell Irvin Painter’s count, a *fourth* “enlargement of American whiteness.” This is one possible outcome not considered by the most recent round of racial projections.

One might object, however, that those immigrants categorized today as “Hispanic” display far greater national, cultural, and phenotypic differences than the relatively homogenous groups of European immigrants of past eras. Indeed, those with any familiarity with Latin America will know that these nations employ their own kinds of racial classification that differ significantly from current (official and unofficial) U.S. racial classification systems, differences that the blanket category of “Hispanic” renders invisible. This fact forces us to consider another set of possibilities.
One possibility is that, unlike the various European groups that were eventually integrated as white more or less without exception, Hispanic immigrants may diverge racially, with some eventually being considered white, and others not. This divergence might occur along phenotypic lines, with lighter-skinned, more “European-looking” Hispanics integrated as white, and darker-skinned, more “indigenous-looking” Hispanics considered nonwhite. It might occur along class lines, with more economically privileged Hispanics able to integrate and “achieve” whiteness, while economically disadvantaged Hispanics remain locked out of whiteness and its corresponding advantages. Most likely, it would involve a combination of these and other factors. The fact that the United States remains intractably racially segregated along various axes makes the material implications of one’s racial classification even more significant, and means that class or appearance-based racial designations are likely to be perpetuated over time.14 Still, this possibility also troubles projections of white minority. If Hispanic immigrants are likely to divide along racial lines, the mere number or proportion of those immigrants tells us nothing about how this division might occur.

The previous possibility presupposes that the United States retains a basically binary racial system, with new immigrants sorted broadly into the categories of white and nonwhite, and with further racial distinctions reducible to that binary. But given the nonbinary racial classification systems common in Latin America, it is also possible that an influx of Latin American immigrants might transform our racial categories to look more like theirs, with racial classification occurring on a spectrum of light to dark, with various “in-between” categories.15 It is also conceivable, though unlikely I think in the short term, that increased non-European immigration and amalgamation could render current racial categories, and perhaps even racial categories in general, meaningless, a possibility that would be welcomed by racial eliminativists and others skeptical of the legitimacy of race itself. Perhaps most obviously, if such a state of affairs were to obtain, the idea of a “white minority” would be thoroughly meaningless.

All of these possibilities demonstrate that the projections about white minority are seriously flawed, and therefore likely to be inaccurate, due to their reliance on problematic assumptions about race. The question of whether whites will become a minority is a political question, not a demographic one. It depends upon a whole complex web of human actions, political decisions, and historical developments that fall far afield of
statistical projections. Indeed, as I will argue in the following section, these projections themselves serve a political purpose. They can be understood as attempts to reframe whiteness in the language of cultural recognition, and to thereby secure for whites the perceived advantages of minority recognition. As such, they can be understood as a powerful tool in the ongoing project of white supremacy and domination of nonwhites.

2. White Minority and White Supremacy: The Myth as Ideology

If the various predictions of white minority are indeed flawed in the way that I have argued that they are, one must wonder why they continue unabated. The fact that these predictions emerge repeatedly at certain key historical junctures provides a clue. David Roediger might well have been writing of our own time when he writes of Francis Amasa Walker, chief of the U.S. Bureau of Statistics and Superintendent of the 1870 and 1880 Census, that he “helped make the New England elite-led Census Bureau an ongoing source of dry statistics and alarmist predictions regarding the U.S. racial character.” Given the historical record of such predictions, one is tempted to think that accuracy is not their primary concern. Rather, these predictions can be understood as a kind of clarion call to whites to protect their power, status, and resources from nonwhite encroachment. In past ages, this was made quite explicit, as described in the previous pages. The difference in the post–Civil-Rights era is that public appeals to white supremacy are no longer considered morally legitimate in the way that they once were. Attempts to secure white domination must either be encoded in some ostensibly race-neutral way, or else whiteness itself must be reimagined as a threatened minority rather than a dominant majority. Predictions of white minority play a key ideological role in the latter objective. Whether or not they are likely to be accurate, they have been incredibly successful in shaping white worldviews.

Numerous studies have shown, going back at least a decade, that whites already believe themselves to have crossed the dreaded precipice of minority-hood. One decade-old survey by sociologist Charles Gallagher has whites estimating their proportion of the population at just under 50 percent, at a time when the actual proportion was just over 75. Strikingly, these same whites tended to grossly overestimate the proportion of minorities, especially blacks, and especially when they had little actual contact with
nonwhite populations. Many respondents explicitly mentioned reports about whites becoming a minority as a factor in their misperceptions. Moreover, white estimates of relative population size seem to be closely linked to perceptions about relative power and status.

A more recent survey by the Public Religion Research Institute found that 53 percent of white Americans agree that “discrimination against whites has become as big a problem as discrimination against blacks and other minorities.” The two figures are not unrelated. In Gallagher’s study, when he confronted his survey respondents with the actual population figures, and challenged them to explain the discrepancy with their own estimations, they mentioned not only reports of impending white minority, but also their perception that minorities, blacks especially, were more vocal and demanding politically, and more willing to engage in identity politics as a means of securing power and resources. The following response from “Pam,” a middle-aged white woman from an almost entirely white county in rural Georgia, is representative:

I think that blacks are more vocal about what they want, wanting their rights. . . . It’s just like in this county when blacks wanted the right to vote . . . they didn’t hesitate to get out, march up and down the street calling attention to themselves. And we, the white people, will sit around and gripe about it, but we won’t get up and take to the streets and march. . . . We are not as obvious out there. . . . We tend to, I think, sit back and maybe gripe about things, and the blacks will get up, march around and be vocal and, you know, demand what they want.

This kind of response demonstrates that not only do perceptions of group size lead to anxiety about relative power, but perceptions of relative power can also influence perceptions of group size. It stands to reason that whites who perceive themselves as a numerical minority, and who perceive themselves as lacking power as a result, might follow the example of other minority groups who they perceive to have advocated successfully for their own advancement.

This set of structurally interrelated misperceptions is not limited to working class whites or those with limited education (though they do occur more frequently among those groups). One of the most remarkable examples in recent memory comes from Republican presidential candidate
Mitt Romney who, in leaked comments from a private campaign event, suggested that being Mexican would provide him with an advantage in the presidential election. Romney, whose father was born in Mexico (to U.S. parents), joked that “had my father been born of Mexican parents, I’d have a better chance of winning this.” Getting the joke relies on sharing the intuition that, in spite of being a white male billionaire, real political advantage in the United States is reserved for Hispanics and other racial minorities. Had Romney been Hispanic, then he could compete on a level playing field with Obama, whose blackness would no longer provide him with an advantage. This sentiment echoes that of many less-prominent whites who have become convinced, against all evidence, that the pendulum of racial justice has swung beyond equality, to the point where whites are now the disadvantaged racial group.

That large numbers of whites hold such beliefs lends evidence to Charles Mills’ claim that whiteness itself entails “an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made.”

The purpose of such an “inverted” epistemology is to lend support to the systematic domination of non-whites by whites, a political system in its own right that Mills refers to as White Supremacy. Importantly, this systematic cognitive dysfunction comes, Mills claims, “with the assurance that this set of mistaken perceptions will be validated by white epistemic authority, whether religious or secular.” Projections of white minority can be understood as a component of this kind of validation (if not creation) of white misperception and ignorance. It is, to use a term that has fallen out of favor, a piece of ideology.

The conclusions that Gallagher draws from his study of white misperception support this interpretation. He writes of white misperceptions about group size that:

The most obvious concern is that whites can ignore, discount, or negate claims that being white affords its members social, political, or economic privileges because there is the perception that with parity in size comes equal access to social resources. Maintaining and simultaneously masking racial dominance is consistent with the idea that U.S. race relations are embedded in ongoing racial projects
that continually reinterpret and redefine group dynamics in order to maintain white control and dominance.\textsuperscript{23}

Confirming this worry, a recent Associated Press article on increases in white poverty and economic insecurity (to levels \textit{slightly} less racially disproportionate, as the article notes in passing) considers that “as nonwhites approach a numerical majority in the United States, one question is how public programs to lift the disadvantaged should be best focused—on the affirmative action that has historically tried to eliminate the racial barriers seen as the major impediment to economic inequality, or simply on improving access for all, regardless of race.”\textsuperscript{24} That poverty and economic insecurity is increasing among all groups, whites included, is a fact not to be dismissed. And increases in white poverty in particular point to important economic, geographical, and cultural divisions within the white population. But while many whites face certain kinds of disadvantage, none are disadvantaged \textit{as white}, a fact easily grasped by contrasting white and nonwhite income, wealth, employment, education, or virtually any other standard of well-being.\textsuperscript{25} The attempt to use dubious “facts” about supposed changes in the racial demographic to justify attacks on affirmative action and other race-based social programs is just one example of the ideological use of white minority as a means of maintaining white supremacy.

The myth of the white minority however, does more than just provide justification for eliminating policies aiming to address racial inequality and further nonwhite interests. It also provides a framework for actively promoting white interests, and thereby furthering white supremacy in an even more direct way. By representing whites as a minority, the myth paves the way for a symmetrical view of white and nonwhite identity politics. Whereas there is a clear (though often ignored) moral asymmetry between the claims of a dominant majority and those of a historically oppressed minority—for example, between “white pride” and “black pride”—the reconstitution of whites as a minority aims to place the two on level moral ground. If whites are a minority, and if this entails, as many whites suppose, loss of political and cultural hegemony, then attempts to advance white interests, promote white “culture,” and secure white power appear no longer as racist, but rather as demands for recognition within a multicultural political framework, no different from those of other minority groups. This is perhaps the most direct way in which the myth aids in “maintaining and simultaneously masking racial dominance.”
Of course, even if whites were a minority, this would not necessarily entail the end of white supremacy. The long career of South African apartheid, the structure of power in the slave plantations in which white slave owners represented a tiny minority, and even the structures of oppression and inequality in contemporary, majority-black U.S. cities all demonstrate the folly of this association. But that the connection of group size and group power is specious is beside the point. That a majority of whites believe the association is valid is what gives the myth of the white minority its ideological force.

For these reasons, the myth of the white minority must be considered not only misleading, but also morally suspect, and politically dangerous. Whatever one feels about the prospect of white minority—anxiety, hope, ambivalence, or some combination of these—one must be wary of the way that such demographic projections have historically supported, and continue to support systems of white supremacy and domination. Let me conclude with some brief reflections on what this means politically for antiracist thinkers and activists.

3. Conclusions and Political Implications

Kant claimed that all human concerns could be encapsulated in three questions: What can I know? What ought I to do? And what may I hope? If I have heightened the reader’s skepticism that population projections of the type discussed here help us know much of anything about the nature or number of future whites, I will have accomplished an important task. But if I am right that the question of white minority is ultimately a political, rather than demographic issue, then perhaps the more important question is what ought we to do about it. Incidentally, those who see in white minority a cause for optimism might wonder also whether it is wise to hope for it, regardless of its likelihood. The answers to these latter questions would require delving into complex questions in democratic theory and the theory of power. It would involve, essentially, offering a more accurate alternative to the naïve assumption that group size and group power exist in a one-to-one relation. This is a task that must be reserved for another occasion.

But one’s answer to the latter two questions also depends upon one’s view of whiteness itself; whether it is capable of being transformed into a positive, antiracist identity, or whether it is fundamentally and inescapably
linked to white supremacy. This too is a complex and ongoing debate. In closing, let me briefly sketch the terms of the debate, and suggest a few of its implications regarding the question of white minority.

As racial eliminativists in general hold that the meaningless category of race should be eliminated from our theoretical vocabularies, white eliminativists (or self-styled “new abolitionists”) hold that, regardless of whether race in general should be eliminated, whiteness as a racial category should. Whiteness, they believe, is at its core nothing but a mechanism for providing certain people—primarily those of light complexion and European descent—power over others. As Noel Ignatiev argues, “There are a variety of cultures in America: Irish culture and Italian culture and German culture; youth culture and drug culture and queer culture, as well as others I have not named. People called white may take part in one or more of them, but there is no such thing as white culture.” Whiteness is conceived here as a purely political concept, inextricable from white supremacy. As such, white eliminativists call, provocatively, for the “elimination of the white race.”

Critical conservationists, on the other hand, recognize the problematic history of white identity, but maintain that that history does not preclude reconstructing, reimagining, and rehabilitating positive, antiracist notions of whiteness. Indeed, they stress that this kind of collective self-reflection fills the vacuous space of whiteness in ways that provide much-needed alternatives to traditional, supremacist notions of whiteness, notions which too often fill a void for whites with minimal options for collective identification. Moreover, critical conservationists are often skeptical of one’s ability to reject, betray, or disassociate with one’s whiteness, arguing that the very ability to see oneself as raceless is itself a component of white privilege.

At times, the debate seems to turn on semantics; on whether, for example, becoming aware of the privileges of whiteness and acting, where possible, to mitigate such privileges, amounts to “rethinking” or “betraying” one’s whiteness. The two camps often even point to the same examples—white abolitionists, for instance—as illustrations either of “race traitors” who rejected their whiteness, or as positive white role models for folks seeking to reconstruct their white identity. Yet the two positions do seem to have substantively different implications regarding the question of white minority.

From the perspective of the white eliminativist, white minority might appear to be a promising step on the way to white extinction. This would not require that all whites reject their white identity and its attendant
privileges, only that enough do that the structure of white supremacy collapses, leaving those who would still cling to white identity bereft of any of its material advantages. In addition to encouraging non-Hispanic whites to reject their privileged racial identity, white eliminativism would also (and perhaps especially) entail encouraging Hispanic immigrants to reject the Faustian bargain of inclusion in whiteness. Such a position, while coherent, is fraught with political dangers. It risks devolving into a kind of exclusion by sleight of hand, a closing of the ranks of privilege achieved by feigned solidarity. If such a project were to fail, the negative consequences would not be evenly distributed. One can imagine the non-Hispanic white eliminativist (NHWWE!), remaining, despite his or her own “best efforts,” safely within the ranks of the privileged, lamenting—“Well, we tried!” One wonders if there is not some equivalent of the “irrevocable act” of the rebel that Fanon observes, some way of rejecting whiteness with no possible return. I do not know what such acts might look like, but perhaps they might have the potential to mitigate the worrisome implications of NHWWEs encouraging Hispanic immigrants to refuse whiteness.

For critical conservationists on the other hand, it isn’t immediately clear how the size of the white population bears upon the substance of white identity. The positive reconstitution of white identity is certainly consistent with and perhaps even benefited by the expansion of whiteness to include Hispanic whites. Facing increasing numbers of Hispanic immigrants, many of whom self-identify as white, may force non-Hispanic whites to rethink the meaning of whiteness, its arbitrary and changing foundations, and the unjust privileges that accompany it. Given the demanding nature of such a project however, this encounter may also result in a reactionary defense of “traditional” whiteness, either in explicitly racist, or encoded nativist terms. In fact, this has been precisely the reaction of many whites to the current immigration “crisis,” as exemplified by the Tea Party, the Minuteman Project, and other anti-immigrant groups. Here then is one area in which critical conservationists must intervene if the project of rehabilitating whiteness is to be successful: convincing non-Hispanic whites that increased Hispanic immigration is an opportunity for collective self-reflection and improvement rather than a dire threat to the white lifeworld. Still, a more inclusive whiteness is not necessarily a less oppressive whiteness. As Mills remind us, white supremacy “evolves not merely by altering the relations between whites and nonwhites but by shifting the criteria for who counts as white and nonwhite . . . the overall trend is toward a limited
expansion of the privileged human population through the “whitening” of the previously excluded group in question.” Accordingly, including (some) Hispanics under the umbrella of whiteness does not necessarily transform or ameliorate white privilege. The largely white Republican Party, for example, is currently very interested in becoming more inclusive, especially of the growing Hispanic population. I take it, however, that they are much less interested in rethinking the meaning and privileges of whiteness.

As one can see then, these two positions on whiteness do have somewhat different implications regarding the desirability of white minority. Yet they both rely upon the insight that whiteness is less a description of one’s physical being and more a marker of one’s social and political status. Likewise, it can be transformed or even (possibly) rejected by uncovering and altering our thoughts, behaviors and habits, both conscious and unconscious. This shared insight renders purely quantitative projections of white minority meaningless. Therefore white eliminativists and critical conservationists can and should unite in opposition to these dubious projections and their ideological uses.

NOTES

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1. For the sake of manageability, I set aside the complexities of gender in this essay, though a fuller account of the functioning of the myth of the white minority would have to take them into account, especially since various assumptions about gender and reproduction play a central role in population projections of the type I discuss.


5. “Table 4: Projections of the Population by Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin for the United States: 2015-2060.” j (NP2012 T4). U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division. December 2012. In this article, I use the term Hispanic to refer to immigrants and other people from Latin America, in order to be consistent with the language used by the Census Bureau and those who make use of its data.

7. It isn’t clear from the report whether the assumption about the constancy of self-identification over time refers to the lifetime of an individual, or more generally to the self-identification of a group over time. But even the former, seemingly more plausible interpretation has turned out to be implausible. Recent studies drawing on long-term National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth going back to the 1970s have shown that a full 20 percent of participants experienced a change in their racial identity in their lifetimes, not only in how they are perceived by others, but also in how they self-identify. See Aliya Saperstein et al., “The Criminal Justice System and the Racialization of Perceptions,” Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences 651 (2013): 104–21; and Andrew M. Penner and Aliya Saperstein, “Engendering Racial Perceptions: An Intersectional Analysis of How Social Status Shapes Race,” Gender and Society 27 (2013): 319–43.


12. See Noel Ignatiev, How the Irish Became White (New York: Routledge, 1993); Matthew Frye Jacobson, Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); and Roediger, Working Toward Whiteness. These titles may strike many a reader as provocative today precisely insofar as he or she holds the same false presumption that the above projections make, that racial categories are fixed and immutable, rather than something one can “become” or “achieve.”


16. Working Toward Whiteness, 66.


21. In invoking ideology here, I mean to emphasize the ways in which a system or piece of knowledge can play a role in legitimating systems of power. Thus my use of the term does not stray entirely from its roots in Marxist theory (nor does Mills’ rehabilitation of the idea in terms of an “epistemology of ignorance”). However, I do not mean to suggest that projections of white minority are merely ideological, in the sense that they are just epiphenomena of deeper historical, economic, or other forces. I believe, as most do today, that what were once dismissed as “superstructural” forces can have genuine influence upon basic socio-economic structures. Accordingly, while projections of white minority can certainly be seen as a reflection of underlying socio-economic tensions, they can and should also be understood as affecting and potentially transforming relations at the socio-economic level. Indeed, part of my suggestion is that that their primary purpose is to do just this, to transform racially-defined relations of power by encouraging and attempting to legitimate white racial solidarity.


24. For a brief look at such inequalities, see U.S. Census Bureau, Income, Poverty and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States, 2009, Current Population Reports P-60-238 Tables 4 and POV04. See also www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty.html. For a more in-depth analysis, see Melvin L. Oliver and Thomas M. Shapiro, Black Wealth/White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality (New York: Routledge, 1996), and also Anderson, The Imperative of Integration.


26. Noel Ignatiev, “Abolitionism and ‘White Studies,’” talk given at the University of California, Riverside, February 1998, and published in the journal Race Traitor,


30. Of course, that the elimination of whiteness would “only” require a massive movement of white race betrayal and the collapse of white supremacy does not mean that this is not itself a tall order. Still, skeptical as I am of the project of reconstructing whiteness (see my “Reconstructing Race: A Discourse-Theoretical Approach to a Normative Politics of Identity,” *The Philosophical Forum* 43, no. 1 [2012]: 27–49), it seems to me that any such positive reconstruction requires the collapse of white supremacy as a structural prerequisite.