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“Whiteness In America”:
Ideas Arising from the Critical Studies of Professor Diane Negra

Diane Negra is a University of North Texas professor whose primary areas of study are Critical and Cultural Media Studies and Gender and Ethnicity in American Media. Professor Negra is the author of *“Off-White Hollywood: American Culture and Ethnic Female Stardom”*, which grew out of her dissertation for her doctoral degree. *“Off-White Hollywood: American Culture and Ethnic Female Stardom”* deals with various whiteness issues as they pertain to society. It presents case studies of three different eras of Hollywood films, which include the silent films from the 1910s and 1920s, studio films from the 1930s and 1940s, and contemporary films from the last 25 years.

In her presentation, Professor Negra spoke about Recent Hollywood Film and The White Ethnic Imaginary. The main focus of the presentation revolved around Whiteness in America, as it is often presented through American media. When the phrase “Whiteness in America” is used it does not necessarily refer to a person’s skin color, nor does it solely include Anglo-Americans who live in the United States of America. Defining whiteness is not as simple a task as it may seem when one first encounters the word. A large indicator of this is the fact that all whites don’t benefit from whiteness, nor does whiteness apply to all whites. According to Professor Negra, whiteness mostly refers to social approval and power in American culture.

Whiteness has no borders or boundaries that confine it to a particular trait or personality. There is a belief that there is an ongoing cultural crisis that has engulfed white America, causing members of this class of people to lose their sense of identity and culture. This has led to many whites in America trying to find a way to define themselves as ethnic. There is a joint feeling

that many other non-white cultures have an easily identifiable identity, which is made most in part due to their rich ethnic backgrounds. For instance, for most African-American and Hispanic-American cultures there is a strong sense of identity due to their understanding of the past struggles of their relatives and ancestors and the many adversities that they were forced to overcome in order to pave the way for such cultures to advance. This understanding of their individual culture backgrounds provides them with feelings of pride and history, which help build a strong and solid foundation for cultural identity. Because of this loss of identity, whites have felt that they have lost their once powerful and definitive place in American society. This is thought mostly to be the result of a combination of cultural exhaustion and the rapid development of multiculturalism in America.

There is a phenomenon called Downward Mobility, in which one believes that one generation outdoes the previous one. It is the theory that no matter what, as an advanced society of ingenious people we are always moving forward, constantly overcoming all obstacles and never doubting our ability to advance. However, in the eyes of some whites in America, this theory has neglected to include them and somehow fallen by the wayside. It has found a way to exclude whites during the recent development of the United States, leaving them in a state shock as they look at America in the late twentieth century and think to themselves what has happened to the power, glory, and prestige that was once synonymously paralleled with white culture in America. It also leaves them asking themselves the question, when did I lose these great attributes and how, if possible, I can ever attain them again?

While there was a strong feeling of absence of identity in white culture, there still exists an internal hierarchy of whiteness within white culture. There was a feeling that the lowest level of white society within the hierarchy, commonly referred to as "White Trash", may have been a

huge part of the problem leading to the decline of white identity and proving to be detrimental to white culture in general. The “White Trash” label commonly refers to white Americans who are of a lower economic or social status than the majority of white society. Imagine an invisible line that represents what white culture is all about and what it means to be a white American. A line that stands for power, glory, and prestige, and is the ultimate measuring stick by which all white Americans must compare themselves to in order to try and determine their worthiness. Those who are unable to meet or exceed this imaginary line of expectations are stigmatized with the label of “White Trash”, and informed that they and their efforts in society are being deemed sub par, and have failed to meet the requirement of whiteness.

The cultural exhaustion, loss of identity, and vulnerability that was felt by whites during their cultural crisis extending to the late twentieth century was no more evidently exhibited to society than in America’s bread and butter solution to expression, passion, and artistic freedom, which is better known as American media. Artistic expression and artistic freedom have played an important role in the development of America, and no media has represented the voice and ideas of society more boldly than Hollywood films. Recently in America, many Hollywood films, both mainstream and independent, have exhibited the weakening and steady decline of whiteness and white ethnic imaginary in a frightened and conservative manner. The three ways that the issue of Whiteness in America is commonly dealt with in Hollywood films is through defensiveness, nostalgia, and ethnic family dramas, which make use ethnic food fetishism. Each of these approaches present interesting tactics which allows issues dealing with whiteness, and its de-stabilization in America, to be explored and examined during the course of a feature film. While it can be argued that such films containing “whiteness” themes are purely coincidental, the presence of white ethnic imaginary in Hollywood films cannot be ignored.

When using defensiveness as a way of dealing with whiteness, there is an easily recognizable presence of white crisis narratives. It serves as an exhibition of whiteness with a strong masculine overtone. You are constantly dealing with strong white male characters, which represent heroic figures and are even slightly superhuman at times. These male characters consider themselves, and are viewed as, the center of their worlds. They constantly undergo a test of their character and personal identity, and often times are seeking revenge. They often encounter wicked oppositional forces of an ethnic, working class, or female nature.

In a few more recent films, these male characters are presented in a state of death, often times, in which their demise came at the hands of the same ethnic or non-white forces they were determined to defeat. This is true of such films as *American Beauty* and *Fight Club*. In these films, the dominant male character is no longer among the living, but they suspend their own belief and constantly try to convince themselves that are in fact still alive, or can eventually bring themselves back from the dead. Using defensiveness in film is a way to try and rescue and preserve the whiteness in America, and somehow win back that which you feel has been unjustly taken from you. It serves as a way to attain revenge and fantasize about the way things use to be before the age of multiculturalism in America, and in some way imagine how whiteness can return to the glory days of old. It tries to serve as a form of re-education program about what whiteness in America actually represents.

Nostalgia is often used in some Hollywood films to exhibit whiteness. Nostalgia deals more with the feminine approach to whiteness in America. When dealing with whiteness, nostalgia is exhibited through expatriate romances, in which a person or persons try to escape American whiteness by fleeing into a European romance. There is also sometimes a memory of the past, which is given more value than it actually has. A past experience, environment, or place

is imagined to be better than it actually ever could have been. Nostalgia must not be confused with a representation of normal memory of past things. It represents the romanticizing of the past in a way in which it appears to be the most glorious time or place, in which one would be willing to drop anything and risk everything in hopes of once again experiencing this past. This feministic approach usually involves a woman, who immediately becomes a heroine, and will eventually be able to find and realize the American Dream. But in the beginning this white heroine is unable to attain the American Dream while in America. This dream is usually realized in some romantic and exotic European paradise, in which the woman takes part in a Tourist Romance that will forever change the course of her life.

Tourist Romances as viewed as the most sensible solution to the white heroines quest for identity, forced upon her because of current conditions of social isolation, gender disempowerment, class difference, body anxiety and conditions of environmental oppression in the United States. In these tourist romances, the American and social environments must be corporate, but they must also retain a sense of maternity. Tourism films like this almost always ultimately transform into Expatriate Romances. This approach is evident in such films as *French Kiss* and *Four Wedding and a Funeral*. In these two films there is a plot formula, in which our heroine encounters several obstacles that she must overcome in order to achieve total happiness and romance, while still realizing the American Dream in an exotic European setting.

The third approach used by Hollywood films to exhibit whiteness in America, is that of the Ethnic Family Dramas. This approach usually focuses on Urban locations in America associated with Immigration. In these ethnic family dramas, there is a situational formula, in which the families usually stay and live extremely close together, and there is a tremendous amount of family togetherness throughout their locale. The eroticism in ethnic family dramas

comes with the preparation of the food and the belief that through some mystical source food has the power to solve problems. Food constantly plays the part of a sexual stimulant, in which it appears to have the power to seduce, while serving as a form of food pornography. The combination of food pornography and family togetherness is a new hybrid of fantasy in American culture in which you can have love, romance, and pleasure all together as one. It challenges the validity of the old saying of not being able to have your cake and eat it too. This fantasy is quickly becoming the norm in today's society and can be seen in current popular culture and the films that originate from it, where food is romanticized and has a nostalgic sense to it. This can clearly be seen in the advertisements of the Olive Garden restaurant chain, in which their slogan is "When You're Here, You're Family". This approach is also evident in such films as *Moonstruck* and *Chocolat*. In these films, ethnic food is fetishized in an attempt to recover family intimacy and nurturance in society. As Professor Diane Negra put it, "they view ethnic food as a sensual, reproducible sign of a mode of ethnic kinship that is simultaneously mourned, romanticized and nostalgically re-enacted in current popular culture."

There is also the Cinema of the "Angry White Male". The cinema of the white male exhibits his views and feelings of whiteness and how they have been affected by change. The angry white male is supposedly angry because of his sense that he and others just like him are losing power and identity in society. The angry white male mostly blames this on such things as affirmative action, political correctness, feminism, gay rights, and downsizing. He is unable to sustain his once powerful identity because of the vast amount of change and development that has been experienced in American society. The angry white male's actions and beliefs emerge from the belief that because of the current state of affairs in American society, the loss of his identity, and the inability to determine or recognize whiteness in general, America is destined to

go down in all her glory. He feels that the multiculturalism in America has cost him the most, and because of this his once powerful majority is quickly transforming into a minority. The angry white male feels that affirmative action, gay rights, and feminism are causing opponents who once failed to compare to him, to suddenly be placed on an equal playing field with him. He also feels that political correctness is forcing him to step down from his mighty pedestal and join the rest of society, while downsizing is causing him to lose his once confident sense of security and stability in the American workforce.

In conclusion, whiteness in America is a very broad and difficult issue to explain, or for that matter comprehend. In America, where whiteness is the measuring stick by which you are supposedly held next to in order to evaluate your status in this society, the loss of its identity seems much more like cultural development than cultural crisis. But one thing is for sure. Hollywood films play an important role in exhibiting society and sometimes helping to form public opinion. It is because of this that it is vital to constantly examine the way such a powerful media deals with this issue, as it serves a widespread impressionable audience throughout the United States and the rest of the world. The different ways that Hollywood films deal with whiteness varies, and the way that we deal with it in everyday American society varies as well. The approaches of defensiveness, nostalgia, and ethnic family dramas and erotic foot fetishism, each provide a different and intriguing view of how films deal with the absence and identity crisis of whiteness in society, and how they exhibit and combat this crisis through the arts. Some may argue that one should shy away from the supposed cultural crisis in America, while others believe that the issue should be tackled head on, in such instances as the cinema of the "Angry White Male". To both sides I point out that a loss of cultural identity, or whiteness, could serve as a way to increase awareness merely because of the desire of persons to try and regain this

identity that they have lost. One thing is for sure, white ethnic imaginary has been a part of America, her society, and her arts and it definitely won't be disappearing anytime soon.