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The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics – Book Review

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George Lipsitz

Review by: Chris Friday

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The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics. By George Lipsitz. (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1998. xx + 274 pp. \$59.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper)

I have been waiting for this book, not because I knew about it in advance, but because George Lipsitz has sculpted a set of essays into a masterful volume that engages the critical questions of the last several generations of Americans. He provides stunning insights into the ways in which whiteness has been formulated and put into action in the past century, how it has shifted and changed, how it is in itself a fractured and mutable construction, and what its current manifestations are. In the first two chapters, Lipsitz outlines how home ownership, education politics, inheritance patterns, and federal policy have made “being white” a valuable commodity in economic and cultural terms. He effectively unmasks the unmarked racism inherent in each of these. Subsequent chapters give attention to the ways in which consumer capitalism generates “cultural practices and products [that] have played crucial roles in prefiguring, presenting, and preserving political coalitions grounded in the fictions of whiteness” (p. 99). He touches on many topics: school desegregation, California’s Proposition 187 (the denial of social welfare benefits to “illegal” immigrants), wars from Vietnam to the Persian Gulf, Rambo, the “new patriotism,” O. J. Simpson, Robert Johnson, Dizzy Gillespie, Renee Stout, and George Rawick. This is no glib, facile discussion. Lipsitz provides serious considerations of the events and peoples that are reflections of our current condition. At each turn, Lipsitz presents these stories with humor and stinging political critiques, but his playfulness and polemics cannot mask the seriousness with which he approaches, researches, and presents this material.

The middle chapters of the book best reveal this combination. One chapter includes autobiographical sketches of Lipsitz’s life as well as that of his mentor, George Rawick. No self-promoter or fawning apprentice, Lipsitz explains eloquently how he takes seriously Rawick’s life example of combining scholarship and political action. The chapter is a call and a blueprint for action. Elsewhere Lipsitz introduces Dizzy Gillespie’s 1964 presidential bid and his earlier release of “Swing Low, Sweet Cadillac” to illuminate the ways in which people in racialized groups articulate a resistance to oppression. Lipsitz also uses these examples to drive home the point that “[r]acism may never disappear, but we know that it does change. . . . New racisms may always supplant old ones—just like this year’s Cadillacs roll off the assembly lines to replace last year’s.

Old Cadillacs never die, but they sometimes become too expensive to maintain. White supremacy and antiblack racism may never die, but that shouldn't stop us from trying to see what we can do to help them fade away" (pp. 182–183).

Scholarship and criticism emanating from ethnic studies provide deep understandings of the forms of contemporary racisms, and Lipsitz highlights that scholarship in an early chapter and consistently throughout the book. In the penultimate chapter, though, he pushes beyond the all-too-familiar black-white binary to suggest how recent scholarship on interethnic relationships reveals possibilities for interracial antiracist ways of thinking and ways of building political coalitions. We need these, Lipsitz argues, to combat the new forms of racism most visible in today's California—the new Mississippi, the new Cadillac.

The Possessive Investment in Whiteness is a polemic of the best sort. It provides biting political commentary with careful reasoning and research. It pulls from a dizzying set of examples that range from economic factors and public policy to popular culture, but does so in ways that support and sustain the fundamental argument of the book—that whiteness is a social construction that can “possess white people . . . unless they develop antiracist identities” (p. viii). Lipsitz has exposed the dark underpinnings of whiteness. His effort is of inestimable value. I used it just yesterday in a lunchroom argument, I will use it today in my scholarship, and I will use it next term in my classes.

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CHRIS FRIDAY

Viva Baseball! Latin American Major Leaguers and Their Special Hunger. By Samuel O. Regalado. (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1998. xvi + 224 pp. \$39.95 cloth, \$16.95 paper)

Samuel Regalado, professor of history at California State University, Stanislaus, is also the nephew of Rudolph Valentino “Rudy” Regalado, once a promising young Mexican American third baseman in the Cleveland Indians organization. A contribution to the University of Illinois Press’s Sport and Society Series, his *Viva Baseball!* relates the experiences of ballplayers from Spanish-speaking countries—going as far back to the Cuban Esteban Bellán in the 1870s—who made it to the top in North American professional baseball.

Latin American players, says Regalado, have had a “special hunger” to succeed. Of course, being “hungry” has hardly been