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What is This?
Guest Editors’ Introduction to the Special Issue: Constructing a Color Line in the Twenty-first Century

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In the Souls of Black Folk, W. E. B. Du Bois ([1903] 2007, 3) presciently put forth that the “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line.” During a century characterized by racial strife and radical change, scholars used this phrase to interrogate everything from educational desegregation to quality of life across and within groups (David 1994; Farley and Allen 1987). For Du Bois, the color line demarcated the boundaries between black and white, which grew out of slavery and continued through Jim Crow laws that made blacks “...a poor race in the land of dollars” (DuBois 2007, 12). It was “the question as to how far differences of race . . . are going to be made, hereafter, the basis of denying to over half the world the right of sharing to their utmost ability the opportunities and privileges of modern civilization” (Du Bois 2007, xv). The color line relegated blacks to subhuman status, creating deep emotional fissures within individuals, which Du Bois famously characterized as a “double consciousness” and “two warring ideals in one dark body” (Du Bois 2007, 8).

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, demographic and socio-political changes call into question the implications of the color line, particularly in regards to “blacks” and “whites.” Individuals’ racial identities are increasingly multiracial or nonracial, fluid and complex (Harris and Sim

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They do not necessarily correspond to skin tone or economic status. Given these changes, should we, as Lee and Bean (2007) ask, conceptualize color lines, rather than “the color line”? Steady migration and changes in fertility patterns are persistently pushing non-Hispanic whites toward the numerical minority in the United States (Hixson, Hepler, and Kim 2011; Lee and Bean 2004). Is the United States now a tripartite racial system with whites at the top, honorary whites in the middle, “collective blacks” on the bottom (Bonilla-Silva 2004)? Many believe that the ideological supremacy of colorblindness and ascendancy of Barack Obama to the presidency challenge the existence of any color line. At the same time, the mass incarceration of black men with little education (Western 2006), stalled desegregation and even resegregation of some workplaces (Tomaskovic-Devey, Zimmer, Stainback, Robinson, Taylor, and McTague 2006), and appropriation of black culture and bodies (Collins 2006) suggest its hegemony.

The authors submitted the pieces contained in this special issue on constructing a color line in the twenty-first century independently and over the course of one year. Yet their pointed insistence at the continued importance of investigating a color line which references blackness as an identity, archetype, and social foil is striking. Where blackness is present, be it spatially or in the social imagination, actors construct whiteness, morality, and privilege in opposition to it. The underlying coherence of the articles led us to assemble this collection, which draws a complex, layered, multidimensional, yet surprisingly cohesive, picture of a twenty-first century color line. They approach the color line as a verb and process, negotiated and constructed relationally, as much as a by-product. The works display both unique and shared approaches to studying race, and in doing so using ethnographic methods.

Kristen Myers’s “Exotica: The Deployment of Intersecting Binaries” sets the stage for the issue. She examines how actors’ everyday talk constructs racial others in ways that eroticize racial difference yet uphold racial boundaries that privilege whiteness. Exotica, a form of “identity talk” at the intersection of racial, gendered, classed, and sexualized meanings, is the vehicle of othering. Actors deployed exotica to construct black femininity as polluting, white femininity as pure and needing protection, black masculinity as sexually predatory and dirty, and white masculinity as superior. Binaries provided a framework for positioning each in opposition to another, ultimately protecting the supremacy of white masculinity and relegating black femininity to a surplus status that actors used to police other statuses. Readers will be struck by the fluency and cavalierism with which actors used racist terms and stereotypes about blacks to speak exotica. Myers’s work demonstrates not only the continued hegemony of binaries, especially black versus white, within the popular imagination, but their constructiveness in interactions.
Amy Wilkins proffers the concept of “moderate blackness” in her article “‘Not Out To Start A Revolution’: Race, Gender, and Emotional Restraint among Black University Men.” She analyzes how middle-class black men at university negotiate their emotions to both distance themselves from the angry black man stereotype and create a “moderate blackness” identity. Moderate blackness provides university men a platform on which to build a common ground with whites, and facilitates overlooking racism in their everyday lives. In this work, Wilkins demonstrates the interplay of gender and race, for as men are using their emotions as tools to create a tolerable living space for themselves in a predominantly white university setting, they are also passing the buck of the angry black stereotype to their female counterparts on campus.

Rashawn Ray and Jason Rosow specify the social processes that create racial privilege for college whites in “The Two Different Worlds of Black and White Fraternity Men: Visibility and Accountability as Mechanisms of Privilege” by comparing how community size and a sense of obligation to one’s group racialize the experiences of black and white fraternity men. The large number of whites on campus and structure of white Greek life led to invisibility for white men, who could associate or dissociate from their fraternity identity at will. Invisibility diffused accountability so that peers held individual white men responsible for acting appropriately and allowed the group to enforce social boundaries that excluded others with little recourse. The small number of black students and familiarity of Greek affiliations, however, led to hypervisibility for black students, who felt obligated to interact with and represent well their groups, both Greek and black. Ray and Rosow argue that different courses of in/visibility and un/accountability create a psychological wage for whites and psychological tax for blacks.

Finally, Matthew Hughey examines how politically antithetical groups of whites similarly construct whiteness in opposition to blackness in “Black Guys and White Guise: The Discursive Construction of White Masculinity.” His study focuses on white nationalists and white antiracists. Despite their disparate political leanings and objectives, both groups constructed whiteness by characterizing black males as dysfunctional and white males as sexual saviors. But white nationalists spoke of black males essentially, as sexual predators, and themselves as protecting white women, while white antiracists framed black males as culturally dysfunctional through no fault of their own. They saw themselves as protecting black women. Both sets of discourse framed black men as the quintessential other.

Taken as a collection, the pieces of this issue demonstrate the persistent influence of twentieth century racial stereotypes in how actors negotiate identities, emotions, and ideologies. We hope they challenge readers, as they
did us, to consider how other forms of inequality, particularly gender and sexuality, alter or are implicated in color lines and to explore the implications for binaries and double consciousness. Finally, we hope they speak to the continuing importance of ethnography within the rapidly changing, increasingly global and multicultural landscape.

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