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The star-spangled banner, US military veterans and the category of whiteness

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The Star-Spangled Banner and the Category of 'Whiteness': US Military Veteran Perspectives

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Understanding the American national identity as an ethnic identity is the theoretical foundation for arguing, in this paper, that an axiomatic relationship between American-ness and 'whiteness'¹ informs diverse interpretations of collective symbols and ideals, such as the Flag. What makes it an ethnic identity is that it is established and maintained in the transactional process of social identification between the boundaries of 'us' and 'them' (Barth 1969; Jenkins 1997). As long as there is a 'them', or Others, to identify against, there will always be a sense of American community. Depending on space and time, this 'them' can reside outside the territorial borders of the US, such as the Soviet Union during the Cold War. However, a sense of Otherness can reside within America itself. Cohen's (1985) notion of community, which is drawn from Turner's (1969) work, is significant here. Community is a multifaceted concept sheltering, like an umbrella, *differences* and a sense of *similarity* simultaneously. Individuals are

aware that their lives are structured by caste, class, or 'race', however there remains a sense of *communitas* – an undifferentiated unstructured sense of 'we-ness' (Handelman, 1990; Jenkins 1996: 145; Sturken, 1998; Turner 1969: 96).

This paper attempts to examine the 'us' and 'them' dichotomy that is dramatised by 'whiteness' within the national collective. Some have already touched on an association between American-ness and 'whiteness' (Du Bois, 1903 [1989]; hooks, 1990; Morrison, 1998; Omi and Winant, 1994; Ringer, 1983; Roediger, 1998). 'Whiteness' as understood here is a process (Frankenberg, 1993; 1998; Madriaga, 2005; Ware and Back, 2001; Wellman, 1981) demarcating those who are included from the excluded, dividing 'us' from 'them' (Barth, 1969; Jenkins, 1997). As some have argued (Allen, 1994; Ignatiev, 1998; Jacobson, 1998; Roediger, 1991; 1998), the category of 'whiteness' helped European immigrants easily shed their ethnic differences and become American. What will be examined here, using Cohen's (1985) model of community, is how 'whiteness' is represented in the collective symbol of the Flag.

To explore an axiomatic relationship between the category of 'whiteness' and American-ness, this paper argues there is an *official* interpretation (Bodnar, 1992), or a *public face* (Cohen, 1985), of the Flag that in principle binds together all Americans providing that sense

of 'us', regardless of ethnic and racial differences². It is this interpretation of the Flag that leaves 'whiteness' unmarked and *invisible* in notions of American-ness. It is the axiomatic relationship between 'whiteness' and American-ness that makes it difficult for people of colour to participate meaningfully within the American collective. Their subjectivities are restrained and hidden *in private* (Cohen, 1985) behind 'white masks' (Du Bois [1903] 1989; Fanon 1967). Being racialised and having to wear a 'white mask' *in public* (Cohen, 1985) can skew one's attachment to the symbolic ideal of the Flag.

The Symbolic Significance of the United States Flag

The Star-Spangled Banner is the most recognisable and holiest of all American national symbols (Leepson, 2005; Warner, 1962). It holds much symbolic significance and has been compared to artefacts such as the Christian cross (Craig, 1996: 11) or a totem necessitating human sacrifice (Marvin and Ingle, 1999). To preserve reverence and a sense of the sanctity of the Flag, legislation has often been proposed to prevent the symbol from desecration (see Goldstein, 1996; O'Leary, 1999). Currently, the flag desecration debate revolves around the issue of flag burning. Should it be legal or illegal? Because of recent US Supreme Court rulings, such as *Texas v. Johnson* (1989), that

declare flag burning to be warranted under the Constitutional right of freedom of speech, many Americans are angry and have lobbied for an amendment outlawing flag desecration. A national veteran organisation, the American Legion, and a citizen organisation, The Citizens Flag Alliance (CFA), are two major interest groups that continue to advocate this legislation. For Bodnar (1992), these interest groups would be categorised as official interests for promoting a sacred, nationalistic, patriotic culture. Juxtaposed to official interests, 'vernacular' interests would be in favour of flag desecration as warranted under freedom of speech. Goldstein (2000) has suggested that the proposed legislation is less about the act of desecrating the Flag and more about ideological deviation from the official interpretation of American patriotism. In other words, the issue has more to do with notions of community and silencing deviant, vernacular interests within it. The continual conflict between the many divergent interests is a process that defines the meanings attached to collective symbols such as the Flag. Thus, meanings attached to it are always changing, dictated by varying interests within the collective.

Within the confines of the collective, an 'us' and 'them' dichotomy is conjured up, as well as perpetuated through debate over the meanings of national symbols. As observed by Marvin and Ingle (1999) and Goldstein (2000), the issue of flag burning is not only a

conflict between flag worshippers and free-speech advocates. It is just one aspect of continuous conflict between a variety of groups in a pluralistic society, to define and legitimate their own interpretation of national symbolism.

There is relatively little literature that actually examines the relationship between notions of 'race' and interpretations of the Flag. O'Leary's work (1999) is considered exceptional here. Her overall study presented an historical account of how patriotism and notions of American-ness were racialised. She argued that American patriotism is paradoxical, in that in order to have a sense of 'us', racial inequality is normalised. Excluding O'Leary's work, most of the literature already cited here (Craig, 1996; Goldstein, 2000; Marvin and Ingle, 1999) highlights the spectacular, such as the issue of flag burning, in defining the interests of competing groups. With this in mind, not much is said about the ordinariness of the Flag in everyday life, such as when it is hoisted up in front of post offices, or placed in front of children classrooms. Billig (1995) argues that the ordinariness, the banality, of the Flag is just as significant in determining who is included and excluded within the community as flags waved in parades, military funerals, or in war protests. The point made by Billig takes attention away from the spectacular and places the focus on the impact of national symbols constantly flagged in our everyday lives. This

frequent flagging reminds members of a collectivity of the boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. Who comprises 'us'? Who comprises 'them'? These questions of identity have racial dimensions (Chatterjee, 1999; Fanon, 1967; Jenkins, 1996, 1997; McCrone, 1998; Memmi, 1990; Said, 1993, 1978[1995]). This means differences of people of colour could stand out as un-American.³

The Study

An objective of the research was to identify commonalities binding the nation together, and the ways in which they are implicated in, and shaped by, 'race'. Americans have varying interpretations as to what binds them into a national community. Although respondents' meanings and attachments to the 'cultural stuff' (Jenkins, 1997) are sometimes contradictory and divergent, they still identify themselves as being American. In addition to exploring commonalities, I also consider how the symbol of the American Flag serves as a homogenising/alienating agent, unifying/dividing the nation. Data gathered on the American Flag was to examine how respondents from different ethnic and racial backgrounds attach themselves to this central, imposing national symbol.

This research has been sparked by my own life experience. Depending upon time, place, context, I find myself either at the centre

or at the margins of American society. Being a son of Filipino immigrant parents in the US, I have always been racialised. I am swayed to believe that being American means being 'white' or vice versa. Nevertheless, when the opportunity arises, I am eager to make known to anyone who questions my American authenticity that I do belong. This constant negotiation between my attachment to all things American and my awareness of my racialised identity is an ongoing daily exercise. I knew going into the field my racial position was going to be a factor. I understood I had a 'standpoint' to explore the effects of 'whiteness' due to my *difference* (Harstock, 1987; Memmi, 1990). However, I was also aware that this 'standpoint' is limited in its insight into commonalities between the researched and the researcher (Ware and Back, 2001; Wellman, 1977)

Fieldwork was conducted in the United States from July 2000 to August 2001. It was centred in a particular place along the California central coast. This place was a prime spot to gather veteran respondents for the study because it contained the largest military installation on the west coast of the United States. The research revolved around life-history interviews conducted with military Veterans. Military Veterans have social standing (O'Leary, 1999) in determining what is and what is not patriotic. Having social standing,

they, in essence, help to define the boundaries of national identity and what it entails (Marvin and Ingle, 1999; O'Leary, 1999).

Twenty-five Veterans were interviewed. Other than settling in the California central coast, being male⁴, and being military Veterans, there are not many commonalities between any one of them. Ten of the respondents were white, nine were black, and six were Latino. They varied in age, from twenty-eight to eighty-five years old.

All respondents were not aware of the central interest of 'race' in the study. This indirectness was deliberate. The research was designed to examine the implication of 'whiteness' in taken-for-granted notions of American identity. In order to acquire data on how American nationalism and racism may intertwine, I decided it was necessary to be less than completely open about my intentions. I tried to avoid asking questions *directly* related to 'race'. I did not want respondents to have any suspicions that I was interested in issues of 'race'. My desire was not to contaminate or influence the everyday. It is in the everyday perceptions of American-ness that 'whiteness' is sought. This is the sole reason for choosing an indirect research approach. Although not completely open about research intentions, I do not consider my approach along the same lines as covert research. A distinction has to be made. Covert research usually involves a researcher hiding the truth about oneself from those being researched

(Bulmer, 1982; Burgess, 1984: 186-189; Holdaway, 1982). In contrast, the indirect approach I chose gave me the opportunity to not conceal my identity or my research. All respondents were aware I was a research student. They all knew of my research interest in American identity and patriotism. The only thing they did not know was of my interest in examining 'race'. This was researched *indirectly*.

White respondents

Despite the diverse range of interpretations, many white respondents upheld official, public conceptions of the Flag. Their interpretations were 'race'-neutral leaving 'whiteness' unmarked.

One major commonality that is shared between these respondents is their attachment to a past where the Flag was praised and its symbolic significance was not questioned. For them, they see the present-day as an unpredictable age where individuals do not honour the Flag like generations past. When they observe the present, they see young people burning the Flag. As one veteran stated, 'some of the things that happens today just makes my blood boil. One thing, for example, is when they start burning the Flag' (69)⁵. The issue of flag burning is perceived as a contemporary issue rather than an issue that has been a mainstay in the flag desecration debate throughout the nation's history (Goldstein, 1996). The past is upheld as an age where

the idea of community was firmly established, 'the poor [young] guys just don't know. They never have been exposed to what we were exposed to. We grew up where Memorial Day celebrations really meant something to a little town' (85).

Another common strand shared by some respondents is how the American Legion impacted attitudes towards the Flag. This national organisation conducts flag worship at each general membership meeting every month. Not only does it begin each meeting with the Pledge of Allegiance, it also asks members to recite the preamble of the American Legion Constitution. This preamble includes such statements as 'to foster and perpetuate a spirit of Americanism, to preserve the memories of our former members and the association of our members and our forefathers in the Great Wars'. Perhaps, participating in these rituals every month is a major reason American Legionnaires share similar sentiments towards the Flag:

I was a part of the American Legion for a while and we honoured the Flag in the American Legion. (85)

When my Dad died, the American Legion played a big part in his funeral service. I got the Flag from when he died. We always fly the Flag on the Fourth [of July] and on different times. (45)

From the evidence given, one does not, however, have to be a member of the American Legion to have a strong attachment to the

Flag. Whether they are American Legionnaires or not, a majority of the white respondents did not like the idea of the Flag being burned:

A lot of people say it is just a flag. But, it does stand for something. It stands for everything that we have been through in this country. (69)

I have no sympathy for them [flag burners] at all. It just irritates me that they could consider something like this. (75)

Although the American Legion has aligned itself with an official interpretation of the Flag, it has members who are not in agreement with pursuit of legislation against flag desecration. They see the act as a method of free speech:

I would rather see the American Legion spend more time helping out Veterans than worry about the Flag. The Flag will take care of itself. The Flag represents the Nation. It is not the Nation. (55)

Well, they [flag burners] are expressing their patriotism in a way. I am glad that we live in a country where you are free to express your... loyalty. I do not consider the individual as disloyal to the country... I think that is a very unreasonable type of freedom. I wouldn't encourage it but it's part of freedom... (84)

These American Legion members have been highlighted because the organisation is perhaps the biggest interest group in the US rallying politicians and the general public to consider flag desecration legislation. As the evidence indicates, there are some members who do not believe it should be pursued. They represent a vernacular view within the American Legion, whose voices is not considered because

their opinions are inconsistent with official, 'dogmatic' (Bodnar, 1996) meanings.

Talking with members from the Veterans for Peace group, whose views on the military and armed conflict are contrary to the American Legion, I assumed they did not have a favourable view of the Flag. I thought the following comment was representative of this particular group, 'Well, it represents a lot of things to me. It represents a lie. It represents a deep, terrible lie. The Red represents the blood of the Indians, the Vietnamese, and Nicaraguans. The White represents the bones' (59). However, another member of the peace organisation did not share this sentiment towards the Flag. Asked if he has the Flag posted in front of his home, this respondent stated, 'I put it out on holidays' (58). Asked if he thought it was unique to hold an anti-military stance and have a fondness for the Flag, the same respondent replied, 'Well, I know... I know what soldiers go through... You can look at a war either way you know. And, the Army looks at it on the one track and I look at it at another track' (58). He explains that combat soldiers are caught in a dichotomy when looking at the costs of war. One way is to observe the broken, blooded, ugly, death, and bodies. The other way of seeing the dead is as fallen heroes. By having this understanding, he straddles the vernacular and the official. This straddling is expressed in his membership of the Veterans for

Peace and in his friendships with those he served with during his time in the Vietnam War. Most of his friends did not join in anti-war, peace parades as he did.

This straddling that the last respondent describes, between the official and the vernacular, resembles the dichotomy of *public* and *private* faces of community derived from Cohen's (1985) notion of community. This particular respondent was aware of a duality in straddling the boundary between a vernacular interpretation of the Flag and his allegiance to the Veterans for Peace, and an official interpretation of the Flag with his allegiance to comrades he served with during the Vietnam War who did not participate in anti-war demonstrations. This duality can also be stretched to include a minority of American Legion respondents who understood that their respective veteran organisation applies pressure on government to draw up legislation against flag desecration. However, they do not believe it is worthwhile to do so.

What is key throughout all white responses about the Flag is the absence of a discussion of 'race'. For these white respondents, there is no parallel between the Flag and 'whiteness'. A desire to maintain 'whiteness' as a norm could perhaps be inferred from their embrace of a glorified past, where communities were close-knit and everybody

rallied around the Flag. In any event, 'race' was a non-issue in their interpretations of the Flag. 'Whiteness' was left unmarked.

Black respondents

In contrast to white responses about the Flag, many black respondents, when discussing their connection to the symbol, addressed issues of 'race' as well. By touching on 'race', these respondents simultaneously mark 'whiteness' in symbolic notions of American identity. Whether or not they were aware of a link between 'whiteness' and American-ness, they are committed to the Flag and nation. This best represents Cohen's notion of community. Their responses indicate that they straddle the public and private faces of the American Flag where senses of similarity (us) and difference (them) go hand-in-hand. For instance, responding to a question on his thoughts about the Flag, one respondent clarified that he is a patriot and knows the value of the Flag having fought for it twice, in Korea from 1951-1953 and in Vietnam. In the same breath he acknowledges that there is a problem with race relations within the nation:

... to me, the American Flag means freedom, freedom of expression even though it has a lot of flaws in race relations and stuff like that... So, I think as far as being an American patriot, things that you have been exposed to. You should appreciate those things. It has its faults but this is by far the greatest country I ever lived in. (66)

What was interesting about his response is that he positioned himself as a 'patriot' before criticising the racism prevalent within the nation. He did this by emphasising his combat experience and his affinity with the Flag. Perhaps, by listing his military achievements, he was declaring his authority to criticise. It did not appear sufficient that living out the black experience gave him the standing to point out that there are 'flaws in race relations'. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that racism and ethnic intolerance exists but remains steady in his adoration of the Flag.

Unlike the previous respondent, another black respondent did not position himself to criticise the nation while discussing his thoughts of the Flag. However, the latter did address racial discrimination in the same breath:

Regardless of the obstacles a lot of minorities faced, they still went into the military when they got drafted. They still went. You know what I am saying. That is something I look at. Well, things are bad on the outside. There are still some prejudices and discrimination in the military but it is not on the scale as it is out here in the civilian world. I think about it. I don't agree with everything the government do. But, I believe we have the best form of government, you know what I am saying. I believe the American Flag is an institution. It symbolises stuff because a lot of people have died because of the Flag. (43)

Both black respondents uphold the Flag as a sacred object. They make their enthusiasm for the Flag apparent. One stated that America is the best country he ever lived in. The other stated that the country

has the best form of government. In their reverence towards the collective symbol, however, they both express hesitation by acknowledging that racial discrimination continues to exist.

Another black veteran also discusses the issue of race relations in regards to the act of praising the Flag. Contrary to the previous respondents, he does not embrace the Flag wholeheartedly:

When the Flag comes by, I have to salute it because that is military courtesy and that is tradition. You have to do it. You get into trouble for not doing it. I look at it in that context. I am obligated to do it. If I didn't want to do it, I should not have joined the military. And that was a difficult thing to resolve. And, the reason why it was a difficult thing to resolve was because we used to go to baseball games and at athletic events and they would play the national anthem and we wouldn't stand up when I was in college. We wouldn't stand up. We just sit down. And, people would say, 'Why are you not standing?' We say, 'That we are not free'. When we are free, we will go ahead and respect your Flag. So, we sat down at the national anthem.
(45)

This respondent testifies that he is not as confrontational now as he was during college. He does admit that he currently does stand and place his hand over his heart when he is in a situation that calls for a recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance. Asked if he did this out of respect for other people, he replied, 'Yeah, pretty much'. He is the only black respondent who is not very fond of the Flag. As a member of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which is an interest group committed to keeping Flag desecration as a method of free speech, he does not mind burning the Flag. As he states, 'Burning it is

a good thing as a tool of protest because it is such a readily recognisable thing. It just rattles people's cages'. Regardless of his opinion, he shares with other black respondents a commonality. They cannot discuss the Flag without recognising that 'race' continues to divide the national collective.

As discussed above with respect to the white respondents, being a member of veteran organisations, such as the American Legion, was something of an indicator of one's allegiance to the Flag. However, this relationship was challenged because some white respondents who were members of the American Legion demonstrated varying degrees of attachment to the symbol and believed it was acceptable for individuals to desecrate the Flag. The same can be said about the Veteran of Foreign Wars (VFW) veteran organisation, of which the majority of black respondents were members. The VFW also has monthly membership meetings beginning with flag worship, reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. There is a reverence for the Flag comparable to white respondents:

The American Flag, to me, means that I live in a free country and stay within the boundaries of the law, based on what they put out there for us to live under. But, we also have the freedom to contest it. (60)

I am proud to be an American. Me, I would die for the American Flag. That's how I feel about that. That's my country and that's what I love. (48)

It is not surprising that a majority of the black respondents who are members of the VFW abhor the idea of flag burning, considering that they participate in flag worship every month. As one respondent stated, 'I love [the Flag]. Should it be burned? I was always taught it was a living thing so you don't desecrate it' (49). Since it holds much symbolic significance, the Flag being desecrated is not taken lightly. By investing a large amount of meaning in this symbol, these respondents are quick to defend the Flag. Some of them even said they would commit violence against those who burn the Flag. Their extreme views are perhaps more intense than the views uttered by some of the white respondents. For instance, asked about his opinion of people who burn the Flag, one respondent stated, 'I think they are cowards. I don't feel that much for them. I treat them like the enemy. I'll destroy them, that's what I do... If you destroy somebody, they can't come back and bother you' (70). Another declared that it would be 'wartime' if someone were to burn the Flag in front of him, 'They wouldn't do it in front of me because I wouldn't let them. You got to light the match first' (48).

As evidenced here, there is much diversity that exists within the black responses towards the Flag. Despite the diversity, some commonalities were clear. The majority of black respondents exalted the Flag. This affirming attitude towards the Flag was much more

apparent within the membership of the VFW. These findings reflect an official, public outlook on the Flag that is consistent with the view of many white respondents where 'whiteness' is unmarked. However, at the same time, many black respondents in describing their attachment to the collective symbol took into account how racism continues to divide the nation. By doing so, they marked 'whiteness'.

Latino respondents

The responses made by this particular group of respondents are more varied than the other two groups. An explanation for this is that some respondents are aware of their recent immigrant past. This recognition impacted on their understanding of the Flag. Despite diverse interpretations of the Flag, all Latino respondents upheld an official, race-neutral interpretation. As one respondent, who is a VFW member and was a Flag bearer in the VFW colour guard, described:

The American Flag is the symbol of our country... I believe in the Flag. It stands for a lot of things. To me, it is about courage and sacrifice. Like, we talk about love of country. I always say that without sacrifice there is no love. If you really love somebody, you sacrifice. (68)

Another respondent, chairman of a local American Legion post, also holds a similar opinion of the Flag. Like the previous respondent, he touched on the term 'sacrifice' in explaining his thoughts on the Flag:

The American Flag is the only Flag I know and I think it is the greatest Flag there is. And, there were a lot of people who made a lot of sacrifices. But, also it has paid off in the end. We have a free nation, a big nation, and it is because of the people who made the sacrifices. (66)

It is interesting that this respondent states the American Flag is the only flag he knows considering that he was born and raised in Puerto Rico. His strong Puerto-Rican accent is still noticeable after serving in the military for twenty-four years and working at a nearby clothing chain for another twenty-four years. He does not think that Puerto Rico is much different than the US:

And, we are all Americans in Puerto Rico. And, since we were little children going to school when we are six-years-old, one of things we learned, we didn't learn about the Puerto Rican Flag, we learned about the American Flag as soon as we go to school. We had to learn English, which was mandatory. We had the Pledge of Allegiance, the same thing they have in this country.

This respondent is conscious of his Puerto Rican-ness but contends that his native land is America. He does not see a divergence between what he experienced as a child in terms of learning American Flag worship and what children are taught on the US mainland. Thus, in explaining his attachment to the Flag, he downplays his Puerto Rican-ness, or his Otherness.

Being members of veteran organisations may have had some influence on respondents' conception of the Flag and their perception of themselves. However, as also evidenced in the white and black

responses, Latino Veterans not affiliated with any veteran organisation still invest in an official conception of the Flag. As one respondent stated, 'no flag in the world is as powerful in what it represents as the American Flag' (64). Whether or not they were members of veteran organisations, these Latino respondents tied the Flag to notions of the Melting Pot and the American Dream. This association with the Flag differs from the responses made by both black and white respondents. Latino respondents reflected upon how their parents or themselves were able to migrate from Latin American countries into the US and were able to achieve the American Dream. One respondent, for instance, paralleled 'the story of the American Flag' with his immigrant past:

You can take my story. My story is typical for a lot of people. Like my folks came as immigrants from Mexico... [The Flag] is a big symbol and sometimes we take it for granted. I bring it out on everyday holiday that I could remember. Yeah. My folks came over here for the Dream. And, as far as I am concerned, since I was little, we always owned a house. (71)

Owning property and worshipping the Flag went hand-in-hand for these respondents. Asked what he thought the American Flag represents, another respondent stated, 'If not for that Flag and this country, I wouldn't have what I have now... I am not going to brag that I have two homes and that I have a house that is worth this much' (28). This respondent's reply to the Flag question does not end here.

Later in the interview, he discussed his ignorance of the Flag while growing up in a poor, predominantly Latino community. He also claimed that this ignorance extended into his time in the military:

Once you serve in the military, it is kind of funny because you don't really think you are serving your country. You are serving your Marine Corps. If anything, you are putting the Marine Corps Flag before the American Flag... If you do something good for the country you did it because of the Marine Corps... To me, when I am in the service, the Marine Corps Flag means more to than the American Flag. (28)

He knows that he is not supposed to place more prestige on the Marines Corps Flag than the American Flag. However, he does confess that he does not really know how to define the Flag given his isolation in a Latino barrio. He explains that he and his wife are becoming more aware of the official symbolism of the Flag since they recently bought a home in a white middle-class neighbourhood, where he sees 'about ten American Flags up' posted in front of homes. By purchasing property in this exclusive community, he and his wife also appear to be buying into official rituals of the Flag.

As he engages in flag worship practices, such as posting the Flag in front of his home, this Latino respondent has found himself in heated arguments with his Mexican workmates. Knowing that he is of Mexican descent, his colleagues argue that he should place a Mexican Flag in front of his home:

They would tell me that I should have a Mexican one. I would say that I am not from Mexico you know. I am not going to rip on Mexico but I am an American, simple as that. You get an argument big time over that. If there were a soccer game between Mexico and America, I would root for America, you know. (28)

He stands his ground in the face of criticism and makes it known that he is American. He does not see himself as an outsider or an Other. He believes he does what other Americans do. He worships the Flag, cheers for America in a soccer match, and cries whenever he hears the national anthem.

The previous respondent's interpretation of the Flag is not unique. It echoes the thoughts of many Latino respondents in the study. In contrast to the majority of Latino respondents, who praise the American Flag and de-emphasize their Latino-ness, one Latino respondent embraces the symbol while highlighting his ethnic distinctiveness. This respondent is similar to many of the black respondents. He affirms his adoration of the Flag, stating, 'I will fly the American Flag on special occasions. This is my country' (70). In the same breath, he is also aware of Latino accomplishments in the US military that go unrecognised, because of racial discrimination:

... if you look at the service, with the preponderant amount of Congressional Medal of Honour winners, they were Latinos. Give me a break. When these guys came home, they couldn't be buried in cemeteries in their cities because Mexicans were not allowed to be buried there, whether in Texas or California (70).

He understands that a dichotomy exists between his enthusiasm for the Flag and his observation of racial injustice within the nation:

When I recite an oath to this country with liberty and justice for all and I see how blacks and Latinos are treated without justice, when I see so many of them incarcerated, where is the 'liberty and justice for all?' (70)

Acknowledging that he is torn between what the Flag represents officially and what he feels is just, he is still committed to holding 'this country's feet to the fire to promote justice'. If this means burning the Flag, he would do it out of desperation to get his community's attention in order to address the ills of racial inequality.

The previous respondent's uniqueness extends to him being the only Latino respondent who admitted a willingness to burn the Flag. The majority of Latinos had similar attitudes to both white and black respondents on the issue of flag desecration. They did not take too kindly to those who commit the act. As one respondent warned that if he saw someone burning the Flag he would 'take him to a fight and punch him' (64). He could not care less if the act was protected under the freedom of speech, because men have fought and died for it. Another respondent considered flag desecration un-American. Addressing how he felt about those who burn the Flag, he comprehended how the nation is divided by differences in religion and 'race'. However, he believes that, if 'you are in this country you should

be an American. You should act and behave like one. You should serve like an American. You should set an example of an American' (28). Does this mean de-emphasizing one's ethnic difference? A majority of the Latinos respondents, in interpreting their outlook on the Flag, did de-emphasize their Latino-ness. Their distinctiveness was cast aside. It became insignificant in terms of praising and worshiping the Flag.

Flagging 'whiteness'

The American Flag, like any collective symbol, is multifaceted in meaning. The versatility allows Americans to have different conceptions of the Flag, knowing that the cohesiveness of the nation will still be maintained (Cohen, 1985; Turner, 1969). For instance, a number of respondents remarked on the significance of the colours (red, white, and blue) of the Flag. One Latino respondent equates red, white, and blue to blood, truth, and purity respectively. A black respondent believes the red stands for the blood spilled for the fight of democracy, the white stands for purity in truth, and the blue stands for patriotism. A white respondent in associating the Flag with US military aggression perceives the red to be representative of the blood of the Indians, Vietnamese, and Nicaraguans and the white represents their bones. Although these respondents held different views, they all still

identified themselves as American. The same can be said about the respondents who identified themselves as either flag worshippers or willing flag burners. They are still Americans at the end of the day. As Ohta (1998) recognized, while observing Americans attending a controversial flag exhibition at a Phoenix, Arizona museum, an individual's interpretation of each symbolic representation affirmed her/himself as a member of the collective as well as confirmed her/his outlook on the symbol.

As a result of the versatility in meanings in *private*, an official interpretation of the Flag predominates in *public* where sacredness is bestowed. Having a recognised federal day to honour it, establishing a Flag Code to maintain its holiness, and having many Americans who worship it in their everyday lives, have legitimated this interpretation. A problem that O'Leary (1999) has already alluded to, in detailing the history of the legitimation of flag worship, is how racism has been intermingled with it. She has argued that racism was fused into notions of patriotism because many of the national veteran organisations, who were already participating in flag rituals before gaining federal recognition after the Civil War (such as the Grand Army, which eventually evolved into contemporary American Legion), emphasised 'whiteness' in order to attract membership from former Confederate soldiers who were nostalgic for an antebellum South.

From the responses gathered in this study, 'whiteness' still has a foothold in symbolic representations of patriotism such as the Flag. 'Whiteness' is negotiated differently according to each ethnic group. What differentiates the responses made by each ethnic group is the association between how they comprehend the Flag and how they are aware of their own ethnicity or 'race'.

For white respondents, a link between the Flag and notions of ethnic and racial differentiation was not made. It was not taken into account in their thoughts on the Flag. Thus, 'whiteness' was left unmarked and invisible in interpreting the national symbol.

In contrast, a majority of black respondents marked 'race', the pervasiveness of 'whiteness', while discussing their attachments to the Flag. Whether or not they were conscious of an association between 'whiteness' and the Flag, they identified it by distinguishing their blackness. This is significant because these respondents voluntarily spoke about their racial distinctiveness in the same breath as they elaborated upon their feelings towards the Flag. They were not asked questions about how their racial difference might affect their views. This duality, between having an allegiance to the Flag and signifying the importance of the black experience, is the dichotomy that Du Bois (1903 [1989]) refers to in his concept of 'double-consciousness'. This double consciousness is the result of American-ness being taken-for-

granted as 'whiteness'. Because they are black, they will forever be marked as Other. These respondents may have understood this. Perhaps, this is why they discuss their blackness at the same time as discussing their devotion to the Flag.

While blacks affirmed their distinctiveness in their interpretations of the Flag, a majority of Latinos downplayed theirs. These Latino respondents, like the black respondents, did not have to mention anything about their ethnicity by virtue of the nature of the interview question. By marking their Latino-ness unenthusiastically, they at least identified an association between 'whiteness' and the Flag, whether they were aware of it or not. Why did they frown upon their Latino-ness? There could be a number of explanations. Perhaps, in responding to a question regarding how they felt about the Flag, they wanted to delineate their commitment and allegiance to American-ness by deriding their Otherness. They uplifted one over the other, which is in contrast to the majority of black respondents who embraced both as equally significant.

All Latino respondents praised the Flag. Even a respondent who associates the Flag with racial inequality still praises it and believes it has positive value to symbolise change. This respondent was one of a few Latino respondents who had fair skin. He was the fairest of them, with his blue eyes. He understands the privileges of

having white-skin and is aware of his ability to straddle the racial divide. By passing as white, he remembers as a young Boy Scout, being assigned to always carry the Flag in public ceremonies:

I saw a person with my look had entrance into other areas. I saw that as a Boy Scout, where I was given preference over an African-American boy scout to carry the Flag. And, I said to myself, why are they selecting me? ...So, I saw that it was a privilege given to me because of what I looked like because they couldn't tell then that my name is [Spanish surname]. There was nothing visible about my name. There was nothing visible like my ability to speak Spanish. So, white privilege gave me entrance into areas that I normally would not have been afforded.

I end this paper with this quote because it is indicative of an association between the category of 'whiteness', the Flag and ideas of American-ness. It also shows the pervasiveness of this relationship. It is due to this taken-for-granted relationship between 'whiteness' and American-ness, as the respondent describes, that a black Boy Scout carrying the Flag in some public spaces is perceived as out of the ordinary. This paper shows that this racial dichotomy, between what is ordinary and deviant continues to haunt the nation, even more so after 9/11 with terrorism being synonymous with Islam (Sarder and Davies, 2002). It compels non-white respondents to discuss their racial and ethnic distinctiveness while discussing their allegiance to the Flag. By doing so, they not only flag their Otherness. They also flag 'whiteness' in notions of American-ness.

¹ Inverted commas are used for 'whiteness' to stress, like 'race', that it is a *social category*. The process of social categorisation takes into account power and hierarchy in ethnic relationships where *social categories* are identified, defined and delineated by others. This process is in contrast, but implicated, to the process of group identification where *social groups* define themselves, their name(s), their nature(s) and their boundar(ies) (Jenkins 1997: 75).

² It is understood that ethnicity and 'race' are of a similar vein in that they both mark difference (Fenton, 2003). However, these two concepts can be distinguished with Jenkins' (1997) idea that ethnicity is a first-order social identity while 'race' is second-order identity. This ordering is based on the notion that ethnicity, the social interaction between 'us' and 'them', has been around since humans have lived in social groups. In contrast, 'race', being an 'allotrope' of ethnicity, is a product of a specific historical circumstance (Jenkins, 1997: 59). 'Whiteness', as understood here, is a category derived (Allen 1994) from American colonialism. Throughout the paper, the terms 'race' and 'whiteness' are used interchangeably.

³ The same can be said of the United Kingdom, where people of colour stand out as not being British. Miles (1993), Hall (1996), and Gilroy (2002) have all argued that racism and nationalism intertwine in the context of the United Kingdom, marking people of colour as Other. Dandeker and Mason (2002) have seen this relationship between racism and British nationalism symbolised in the colonial image of the British soldier's uniform. Neal (2002) has observed the relationship symbolised in notions of the English countryside.

⁴ Men were more likely to participate in the study. I did not envision before the study that recruiting respondents on American patriotism would produce a gendered effect. I was surprised to find that when women were approached to be interviewed they usually referred me to someone male, such as their husbands or male friends who at one time or another were in the military. This is a reflection upon the literature intermingling gender and patriotism. Men sacrifice their lives to refresh the borders of a sense of nationhood while women remain at home biologically reproducing members within the borders (Marvin and Ingle, 1999; Macdonald, 1987; Yuval-Davis, 1997). However, there is literature (Enloe, 2000) that stresses women do participate in warfare.

⁵ To maintain the anonymity of the interviewees I give only their age.

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