

FACULTY INTERVIEW:

DR. IRA SHOR

As I enter Professor Shor's office in the Provost's offices in Raubinger hall, he offers me a cup of tea. I have many questions about this new class he will be teaching in the spring. I have never heard of this topic 'whiteness' and I know that other students haven't heard of it by their quizzical looks when I mention the class. Professor Shor's books (and there are many) have all focused on democracy in the classroom. When I went to the library to research the current topic, I left with as little information and as many questions as before I entered. Thankfully, he was ready to start at the beginning and explain the entire thing to me.

Dr. Ira Shor comes to us as a Distinguished Scholar and is a professor at the City University of New York. Next Semester, he will be teaching a class called 'Whiteness is a Color' on Wednesdays from 4:45 to 6:15pm. There has been a recent interest in what they call 'Whiteness Studies' and this will be William Paterson's first glimpse of just what it all means to us.

"What has emerged in the past ten years is a new field of studies called Whiteness, sometimes called 'Critical Whiteness'. It tended to emerge out of critical legal studies, which began to examine law cases related to the declaration of who was white in American history. We have a legal tradition where by about 1680 folks were being carefully defined according to skin color."

"Students say I am pink or a salmon colored person but this is white in our society."

We don't think about the fact that the literature that comes from Britain isn't called 'White literature', it is just called British literature, even though it was written by "white" men. We don't have to define it because it is the known predominant kind of literature that we study in the English department. We don't call Jack Kerouac a White Writer, we call him an American Writer, and more specifically a Beat Generation writer. Dr. Shor is asking us to stop glossing over the terms, to stop the generalization. He is asking us to consider our Whiteness as something as special and intriguing as any other culture, whether it be African American, Latino, Caribbean or Asian.

"We have to make the implicit, explicit. And by making the implicit explicit we will be understanding the construction of our whiteness and how that figures in to the maintenance of white supremacy even in the absence of the laws say that black people must be subordinated."

Dr. Shor's class will delve into the history of Whiteness from a legal and societal point of view. He will focus on why it is still the predominant ruling force in our society today. If racism is now illegal by law, why then, are many people still falling victim to it? Why are there still people in this country practicing it?

"Throughout history 'Whiteness' has been taking the initiative in constructing itself *and* blackness *and* all other positions in society because it has been the dominant place. We have to study this position of dominance and try to understand how it now infuses all aspects of society but yet is not named or studied so that we say 'white is a color'. And we have been designated 'white', even though, compared to a pad of white paper it's not even close."

"The question has emerged over the last 30 years, especially in the last ten: How does the system of racial supremacy and racial entitlement continue even when the legal foundations are gone? What is sustaining it? It used to be that in the south that it was sustained by law and jails and violence and so on and they had patrollers watching the roads to see if there were any slaves or run-aways and they had the Dred Scott decision, and the return of runaways and a whole apparatus to enforce this black/white subordination. Now that we don't have that, why is it still here?"

Dr. Shor wants us to think about how we learn to be white and what it means to live out an experience of Whiteness. Perhaps we'll find some answers to how to read 'whiteness' in literature, in law, in film, in education.