

Chapter 6 “Thinking Through Race” by Ruth Frankenberg

Main Point: In this chapter, Frankenberg furthers her discussion of how white women interact with race. Frankenberg argues that the concept of race is not an isolated one and is linked in various aspects of experiences and functions of society (like power, social and monetary capital). Through a variety of interviews with white women from different backgrounds and ages, she has determined that race is “thought through” by white women in three “discursive repertoires”/ methods: essentialist racism, color and power evasion and race cognizance. Frankenberg argues that the idea of white women thinking through race can be a fluid process where shifts in repertoires are dependent on a variety of factors that include but are not limited to interactions with other races, family background, historical time period, education, and social status. Ultimately, Frankenberg argues that white women are never not “thinking through race” instead, they are thinking about it through different methods.

Central Issues and Concepts: Essential racism is the prominent ideology on race that has “dominated white thinking on race for much of US history,” (138). Essential racism is a basic form of racism that links inferiority/ inequality as being a product of biology or phenotypic differences. Thus, “race was made into a difference” (139) that made skin color denote certain characteristics. The most basic example of this can be seen in slavery, Africans were determined to be inferior by the lone signifier of their skin color. Expectations of being lazy, animalistic, and savage were projected onto them because of their skin color and were linked to biology.

Another view of white women thinking through race is seen through the ideas of color and power evasion. Color evasion is a basic idea that is defined by white women who seek to highlight similarities instead of noting racial differences or markers. White women who engage in this method of thinking focus on basic similarities between blacks and whites like the fact that we both bleed red blood and are human. By avoiding the differences that non-whiteness denotes, white women are also disregarding the power that is distributed unequally to them. Power evasion deals with white women who think broadly of race (and the differences that emerge) and classify these thoughts as negative and as separate from their personal thoughts and experiences.

The third view of race that Frankenberg describes is race cognizance. White women in this method of thinking understand that race is a difference that affects various aspects of people’s lives and that being realistic about the presence of race and racism are important to understanding modern society. Essentially, this stage rejects the idea of color blindness (as seen in color evasion) and explores the contradictions within racism.

Two Key Quotes:

“The very use of the term ‘race’ raises the idea of difference, for ‘race’ is above all a marker of difference, an axis of differentiation. What kind of difference race is and what difference race makes in real terms are the questions that are contested in competing modes of thinking through race.” (138)

“Race cognizance articulates explicitly the contradiction that racism represents: on the one hand, it acknowledges the existence of racial inequality and white privilege and, on the other, does not lean on ontological or essential difference in order to justify inequality or explain it away.” (160)

Two Questions:

Is the concept of a post-racialized society possible, or will race always carry some sort of social value even if it leads to the eradication of discrimination based on race?

Frankenberg does not mention the effect of these methods of thinking about mixed race people. While the idea of hypodescent will come into effect, how do you think those who are half white and half black think through race?