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New Book from IWU Sociologist Explores Continuing Struggle of Creating Dialogue About Race and Racism

Sept. 18, 2012

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – How does the racial privilege that comes from being white enter into the conversation about racism in our communities and in our nation?

That's the question posed by Illinois Wesleyan University sociologist Meghan A. Burke in her new book, *Racial Ambivalence in Diverse Communities: Whiteness and the Power of Color-Blind Ideologies* (Lexington Books, 2012).

"Color-blind" ideology posits that the Civil Rights Era legislation making state-sanctioned segregation and discrimination illegal leveled the playing field in the United States, where opportunities are available to all, regardless of race, culture or ethnicity. Burke's new book explores the ways that people who care about diversity struggle to reconcile their goals with the mandates of a color-blind society.

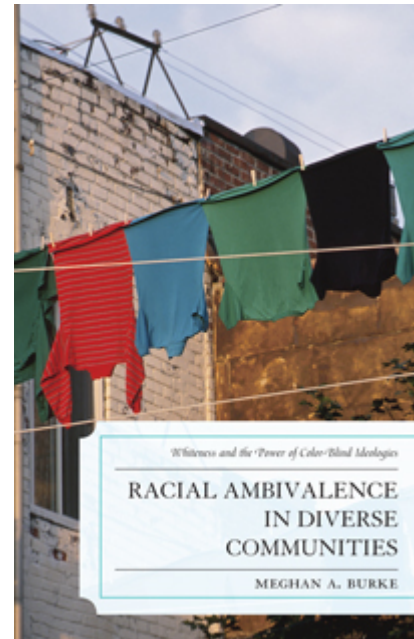
While a graduate student living in Chicago, Burke became intrigued with the notion of whiteness as experienced in racially diverse communities. She chose to study three communities on Chicago's Northeast side: Rogers Park, Edgewater, and Uptown.

"At the time I began to formulate my research, there was very little work out there differentiating how multiple expressions of white identity may still play a role in upholding white privilege, especially when that happens unintentionally," explained Burke, assistant professor of sociology at IWU. "Once I began my interviews and followed the community dynamics more closely, it quickly became apparent how somewhat superficial and sometimes counterproductive the levels of engagement with the community's diversity became.

"These were people who genuinely appreciated and tried to work to support their racially diverse community," Burke added. "But what they were most often doing with that appreciation were raving about 'ethnic' restaurants and their individual enjoyment and consumption of diversity, while also calling the cops on black teens who looked 'out of place' in 'their' community. They were looking out for their property values and consumer preferences far more than they were looking out for racial justice, which is of course what truly sustains diversity."

Burke said her research began to center on the deep contradictions and challenges that confront well-meaning and often politically engaged community members. "My hope is the book doesn't just expose those contradictions and challenges, but that it also prompts all of us to have deeper and more racially conscious conversations with our communities and with ourselves so that we can have communities that are both diverse and socially just," Burke explained.

Reviewer Doug Hartmann, professor of sociology at the University of Minnesota, said Burke's book "is at its most original in showing the tensions between color-blindness and ideals of diversity, and in exploring how these ostensibly liberal visions actually complicate the quest for equality and racial justice in America today."



A native of Michigan, Burke received her undergraduate degree from Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Mich. She joined the faculty at Illinois Wesleyan in 2009 after earning a Ph.D. at Loyola University Chicago.

In addition to her teaching responsibilities, Burke co-directs the Engaging Diversity program at IWU. The program invites interested white students from the incoming first-year class to help them understand and meaningfully engage diversity while at Illinois Wesleyan. First-year students who are interested come to campus three days early to participate in meetings and activities about diversity. "Much as I argue in my book, if we want to sustain a diverse community, we have to talk seriously about race and privilege," Burke said. "This program creates that space for white students, as well as opportunities to make lasting connections with the MALANA (Multiracial, African-American, Latino-American, Asian-American, and Native American) and international students who are also on campus early. Our hope is that this will truly shift the climate in ways that support diversity and underline our mission for social justice."

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