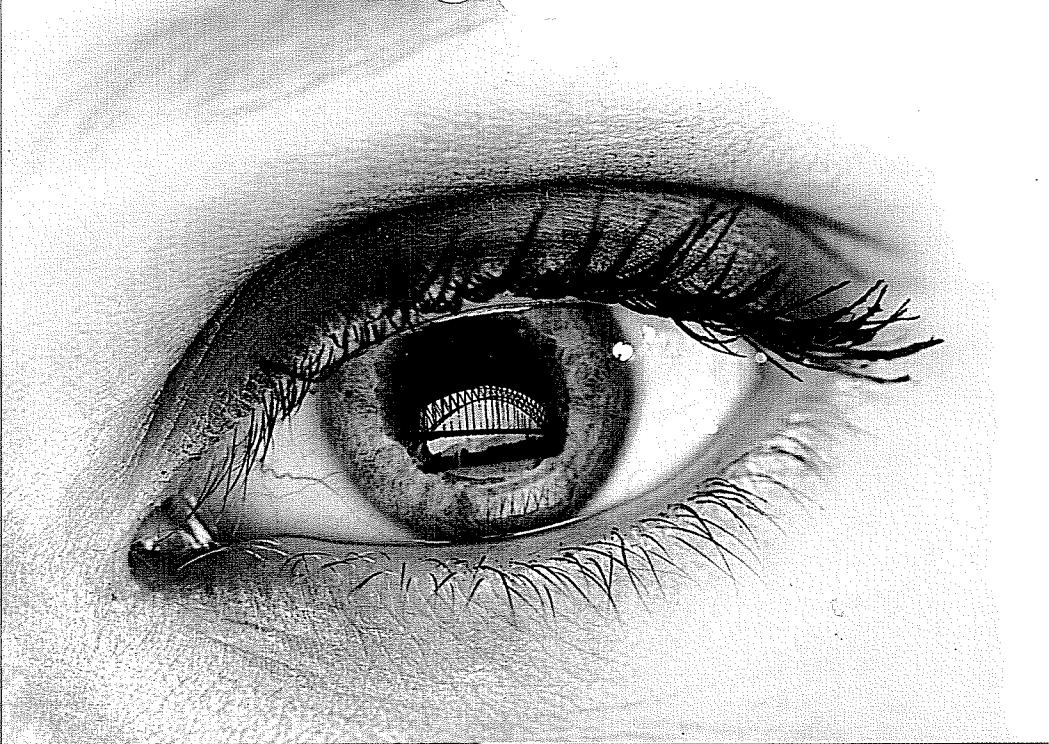


Witnessing Whiteness



**THE NEED
TO TALK ABOUT
RACE
AND HOW
TO DO IT**

HELLY TOCHLUK

Chapter 1

Naming the Problem

Racism has become unacceptable in our society. We outlawed discrimination and we are becoming a post-racial society. In fact, race has no biological reality. Focusing on our ethnicity is therefore a much better way for us to talk about, and appreciate, our cultural differences. Self-identifying as being white simply reinforces old problems of division, so I make sure to let people know that I am colorblind since I see us all as part of the human race.

There was a time when I spoke using this language. I have plenty of friends and colleagues who continue to describe their approach to race using these terms. Admittedly, this sounds like the right and healthy approach to most white people and some people of color. The trouble is what many of these statements ignore and deny. The trouble is what is left unexplored and unsaid. The reality is this: There is a deep dis-ease regarding race residing within much of the white community.

White people in general are ill-at-ease over issues of race, and we are not very skilled at naming the true nature of the problem. We are confused by its complexity and our discomfort arises in our multiracial schools, organizations, companies, and collaborative relationships whenever race becomes the focus of a conversation. Unfortunately, many of us choose a colorblind, transcendence-seeking optimism that ends up stifling the honestly difficult dialogue we need to have in order to deal with the very real-racial dynamics that continue to play out in our interactions. The strategies we use to avoid dealing with race, sadly, then allow us to behave offensively without awareness. What we need are witnesses who can help sound the bells of alarm and raise a voice in the interest of improving our ability to create healthier, more successful, and more productive relationships and institutions.

CAN I GET A WITNESS?

Have you ever been a witness? Witnesses see a situation clearly and speak out about wounding events. Can you recall a time when you found yourself in the midst of a situation where you needed to speak out? Was someone's safety or emotional well-being hanging in the balance? What did you do? If I were in a serious traffic accident, I hope a witness would be present to call for help. Without a witness, my injuries might prove unnecessarily fatal. If assaulted, I hope a witness would be present to disrupt the event and describe my attacker. Without a witness, my search for justice might go unrealized. Events that take place in the shadows might require concerted effort to witness. A scream in the night hopefully can bring someone running, someone close enough to see and interrupt the problem.

If I am ever in a situation requiring me to witness a trauma-filled situation, I hope I will have the courage to be present and speak the truth of what I perceived. Depending on the circumstances, I might be frightened myself—but I can only imagine what turning and running would do to my sense of self. My own soul would suffer if I attempted to justify turning away. Ultimately, choosing to disconnect from the situation at hand would damage my own spirit.

Depth psychology, the study of the unconscious, shapes my perspective. In a class on trauma, one of my mentors spoke of "percepticide" to describe the ways that we kill off our own perceptions when we feel that we are in a dangerous situation.¹ Although it is easy to imagine that we would shut down in the face of a lethal threat, we can do this even if the situation is not life-threatening. When we fear that we will be socially punished because people in our immediate surroundings cannot tolerate hearing about what we see, we often silence ourselves and shut down parts of our psyche.

Like a child who runs to tell a parent something only to be dismissed, we only say "Yeah, but . . ." in protest so many times before we turn away and stop trying. We become numb and disconnect from aspects of ourselves. What we know becomes exiled, and over time that information becomes unavailable as we move through life.² This idea is not new. Frances Kendall offers a somewhat related idea in her book *Understanding White Privilege*. She speaks of white people "anesthetizing" themselves to avoid guilt and other confusing feelings and refers to Charles Mills' explanation of "structured blindness and opacities."³

Regardless of what terms we use, this type of dissociation can also stop us from creating or maintaining emotional connection with others. If I am not fully seen, why should I see you? If my injury and perception does not receive attention, why should yours? If I have shut myself off from my own pain,

shouldn't you do the same? In other words, when we are not able to witness, or be witnessed, we end up with splits in our psyche that keep us disconnected from both ourselves and other people. Of course, our attempts to avoid painful emotional states are understandable. Unfortunately, once we split off from the aspects of our lives that bring us pain, we disown and reject them, casting them into the shadows of our psyche.⁴

This book argues that there is a scream to which we must respond, a traumatic situation that remains obscured in the shadows. We need people to come running because there is a deep distress to which we must bear witness. Repeatedly turning away has created deep injury. Undoing this damage requires us to face the painful situation and become clear-seeing witnesses.

RACIAL IDENTITY IN THE SHADOWS

I talk about race quite a bit these days, with family, colleagues, students, friends, and new acquaintances. One of the most common responses I receive when beginning this dialogue with white people for the first time is a sigh, a deep breath, and some type of statement indicating that they are not really comfortable naming "white" as part of their personal identity.

Bearing witness to this discomfort is important in order to determine corrective action. Unfortunately, racial identity for white people is a very blurry topic and we are not very good witnesses of our own whiteness. Our relationship with race involves a great deal of anxiety, and we ignore our racial identity for some very understandable reasons. But this neglect allows the ways race affects us to remain within the shadows of our unconscious.

As we leave our relationship to race unexplored, unquestioned, and untreated, our whiteness becomes analogous to the far side of the moon. We never see the mysterious far side that scientists tell us appears far more battered and beaten than the visible side facing the Earth. White people often act out of our unexplored whiteness and then feel injured when our attempts at overcoming racial issues fail. Witnessing whiteness involves not only shining a light into our shadows and facing the damage our history of race continues to do to our psyche but also clarifying our individual relationship to race and our racial identity.

Fortunately, mythology can offer us something to take with us as we journey into our racial shadow. A primary figure linked with the dark moon is Hecate. For those unfamiliar with this figure, Hecate, a Greek goddess who shared powers with Zeus over the heavens, Earth, and underworld, could give humanity anything she wished. Shown frequently as having three heads, she could see in all directions. Symbolically, she holds the torch of illumination

that reveals the treasures of the unconscious and she represents the dark within us that we do not wish to acknowledge.

Each of her multiple aspects offer guidance as we move forward. On one hand, Hecate is often seen as the hag, a witch practicing evil. As a bearer of uncomfortable truths, she offers unwelcome light emanating from the shadows. This book assuredly offers uncomfortable truths regarding our relationship to race. So, in the minds of some readers struggling against descending into what remains hidden, the image of the hag—a harping woman continuously poking and prodding—might arise.

On the other hand, Hecate is also the fairy godmother stirring up brews for magical transformation. She represents the wise mother holding deep wisdom. She is the ruler of the crossroads, asking us to consider that the messiness of our lives is also the raw material used to create soul. For those of us willing to descend into the depths of our own unconscious, these images remind us that becoming more attuned to the hidden sides of ourselves increases our wisdom and can help us make better choices as we reach new crossroads in our journeys. Inviting the image of Hecate to join us can be helpful because the uncomfortable truth is that white people have neglected the consequences of race for such a long time that we can hardly define our own discomfort.

CLARIFYING OUR VIEW: DEFINING OUR TERMS

Let us start by naming our distress. Speaking generally, white people are uncomfortable being called white, naming ourselves white. But, admittedly, we are not at ease with anything having to do with race. So we have to start there, acknowledging that this mess called “race” is problematic at its core. Without time to sort through the overwhelming collection of evidence, I will simply say what many already know: It is true that race has no natural, biological reality.⁵

Of course we see physical differences among people from different environments. Yes, we turn to science to help us understand these differences—but science cannot find any coherent and absolute way to locate race. Yes, many of us have been taught that certain physical characteristics go together with a certain race. But when we look closely at the subject, we end up confused if we try to pinpoint where many people fit within racial categories. Variety outweighs consistency. Ultimately, we made up the concept of race as we tried to increase both our understanding and manipulation of our world. In other words, race is *socially* constructed. Because of this, our experience of racial identity follows no absolutely consistent physical markers or experiences.

That said, regardless of the false nature of racial categories, the concept of race holds great social force. Our society uses race in spite of some people’s disavowal and often treats us differentially as a result. Race has truly gotten under our skin, into our psyche, and lingers within the layers of our unconscious. To begin honestly, we must discuss what may be the most challenging aspect of any discussion of race. We must deal with the terms *racist*, *racism*, and *systemic white supremacy*. We must also confront the fact that some people might ask us to associate those words with our speech and actions.

Understandably, these words can appear inflammatory and many of us shut down as soon as they are spoken. We see ourselves as essentially good-hearted people doing the best we can within a society deeply impacted by the wounds of our country’s past. Our resistance arises, in part, because individually we avoid behaviors historically considered racist. To be a racist, to be associated with racism and a system of white supremacy, is tantamount to saying that we represent the worst of what the United States has to offer. Being a racist means that we are mean-spirited, closed-minded, and lack essential goodness.

Imagine a list of negative attributes one might use to criticize, a set of characteristics that inspire a defensive reaction. Consider the emotional reaction you might have if labeled that way. For most whites, the label *racist* will spark a more defensive reaction than almost any other slight. I would certainly rather be called narcissistic, greedy, or insensitive than be called racist. For this reason, we have great difficulty withstanding any conversation that asks us to consider ourselves related to that term.

But if we do not at least investigate and understand how we have developed opinions about what the term does or does not mean, we do ourselves a disservice. For example, close your eyes for a moment and imagine a racist. What is the image that forms in your mind? Take a moment and write down a few descriptors. Some might have a picture that looks something like a Southern or Midwestern rural or small-town person who drives a truck and wears a baseball hat. This was the stereotypical image I grew up ingesting.

Others might imagine a conservative lawmaker who enacts policies that disproportionately benefit whites. Still others might imagine a social liberal who advocates for differential treatment of people based on race. These are just a few of a thousand possible images that different people might have. The big question is, how many of us imagine ourselves when we think of a racist? If I were a betting person, I would wager that few of us see ourselves in that category.

The problem with this is that our images can amount to psychic finger-pointing that results in a personal distancing from the issue. Imagining

only a neo-Nazi or member of the KKK as racist psychologically cuts us out of the problem. This book argues that we *all* are part of the problem of race in the United States and we *all* can be part of the solution. This includes well-educated people who already see themselves working toward social equity. This also can include many people of color since we *all* have been negatively affected by the social conditions of our country.

Although it is certainly true that social and economic benefits and privileges have been heavily bestowed upon white people throughout our nation's history, playing our various roles within an inherently inequitable system has exacted a heavy psychological toll on us all. What this means is that everyone who lives in this country has a personal stake in healing our relationship to race if we are ever going to be able to move past it. *Everyone*.

However, we still need to define what is meant by the term *racism*. For the sake of brevity, this chapter offers an abbreviated analysis from a couple of more thorough sources. In short, racial prejudice and racism are not interchangeable concepts. The first few pages of Beverly Daniel Tatum's bestseller *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* discusses the difference between the two ideas.⁶

According to Tatum, *racial prejudice* is a preconceived judgment or opinion based on insufficient knowledge. Tatum argues that we all have prejudices by virtue of living in a society offering a preponderance of misinformation about different groups. We might consciously reject overt prejudices, but very often prejudices remain due to misunderstandings, an incomplete knowledge base, or isolated experiences.

Racism, on the other hand, involves a system that offers advantage based on race. White people might consciously reject prejudice, yet we are often completely unaware of how the structure of our society continues to advantage whites over other groups. In this view, racism is not necessarily about the belief system one holds as much as racism involves the systemic inequity maintained through both individual and institutional means.

In *Institutional Racism*, Shirley Better defines and compares *individual racism* and *institutional racism* and illustrates how each relates to beliefs, attitudes, practices, and structures.⁷ To offer just a few of the ideas presented, on the individual side of racism a person might believe social and economic inequality are acceptable, hold an attitude of blindness to racism, say negative statements based on race, and follow both conscious and unconscious behavior patterns that reinforce inequity. Although this is just a sample of what Dr. Better offers, the list illustrates that not all aspects of individual racism are necessarily conscious. Individual racism can involve following customs and patterns that people consider race-neutral but actually uphold social and economic inequity.

On the other hand, institutional racism includes the maintenance of white-skin privilege, segregation, and formal and/or informal politics, practices, and procedures. Overall, this is what some people are talking about when they refer to *systematic dominating whiteness* or *systemic white supremacy*. Essentially, these terms calls us to notice the basic fact that white people, and our social norms and patterns, continue to wield controlling power within our social, economic, political, and educational structures in ways that maintain inequity. (The overwhelming power held by whites remains in effect even when we have isolated figures holding high positions of power, such as President Barack Obama, and when increasing numbers of people of color are beginning to influence public policy.)

And yet it is also true that as individuals we may not have created these structures. True, we might even disagree with how racial inequity continues. But the fact is that systems of inequity largely remain unchanged and we are related to these systems of inequity because our continued existence within them usually supports the status quo.

Our ability to notice *systemic, institutional racism* expands with our consciousness regarding unintended *individual racism*. The model of witnessing described in this book depends on increasing our ability to notice both individual and systemic forms of racism and dominating whiteness. But in order to even begin to do that, we must be willing to fathom that our lives are not as far removed from the concept of racism as we hope.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE WHITE?

Just as the term *race* poses difficulty, the term *whiteness* is similarly troublesome. As part of the social construction of race, whiteness suffers from all of the same confusions as race in general. The concept is not clear. What do we mean when we say that someone is white? Are we simply talking about skin color? Skin color is actually a poor predictor of whether or not someone is considered white and anthropologists now generally agree that race itself has no biological reality.

In fact, the American Anthropological Association put out a "Statement on Race" to reflect the thinking of most contemporary scholars.⁸ Within the statement they note:

In the United States both scholars and the general public have been conditioned to viewing human races as natural and separate divisions within the human species based on visible physical differences. With the vast expansion of scientific knowledge in this century, however, it has become clear that human populations are

not unambiguous, clearly demarcated, biologically distinct groups. . . . Historical research has shown that the idea of "race" has always carried more meanings than mere physical differences; indeed, physical variations in the human species have no meaning except the social ones that humans put on them.

So, what is whiteness? In my experience, when interacting with people living relatively segregated lives, the question provokes a tilt of the head and a frowning of the brow. "What do you mean?" comes with a queried look. Upon further prompting, a great many respond that being white means nothing. If anything at all, being white may be described as being either just normal or neutral.⁹ On the other hand, when speaking with people living in areas with a high degree of diversity *and* whose lives are marked and shaped by that diversity, a common response is that being white is something bad, that it is connected to an unjust history.

If some whites consider whiteness as being normal, then the question becomes normal how? Is whiteness a way of being in the world? Is there a white culture? Some say yes, some say no. If yes, what does that culture look like? For many, white culture is an amalgamation of a variety of variables that any particular person may or may not exemplify. Some of these include skin color, a position of racial dominance, the ability to avoid issues of race, the primacy of individualism, the achievement of middle-class economic success, and often a residentially, socially, and/or socioeconomically segregated life.¹⁰

And yet we occupy so many social positions that each individual's experience necessarily varies. My conception of whiteness is surely different from that of someone coming from a different region or socioeconomic class. My experience, having grown up in a middle-class suburb with white-collar, college-educated parents, is undoubtedly far different from that of someone from either a rural town or a working-class, urban area. Even so, the general concept of "white culture" remains widely used. The term "white culture" means something to a lot of people. Taking a step back and considering to what degree each of us fits into that picture is helpful. Later chapters will investigate both how our country's history shapes these meanings and how they continue to be enacted and perceived.

Viewing whiteness as a process, as suggested by Ruth Frankenberg, can be helpful. Whiteness is not a thing that can ever be fully captured and nailed down.¹¹ Whiteness is irregularly experienced and dynamic, always shifting and changing. This perspective helps me understand why there are moments when I see whiteness so clearly that I am ready to dedicate years of my life to making it visible for other people and then only a day later the meanings of whiteness practically disintegrate in front of me, seemingly too fragmented

and illusory to grasp. Now that I have been party to this dissolution a sufficient number of times, I know that it will only be a matter of time before my perception of whiteness reconstitutes.

An important aspect of our blurriness over our whiteness is the fact that whiteness is simply invisible to many of us. Some authors use the analogy of a fish in a fish bowl in an effort to help us understand. Does a fish notice the water in which it lives? The idea is that white people are accustomed to living in a world dominated by whiteness. We are saturated with the whiteness in our social world. Our position has sustained us in ways that we do not perceive.

Another approach is to use the analogy of handedness.¹² In a world dominated by right-handed people, we of the dominant group rarely perceive that our world has been created for our benefit. I recall arriving late one day to a college class and sliding as quickly as I could into the first available seat, which happened to be along the left aisle. I was a bit put out as I tried to pull up the collapsed writing desk, finding it on what I considered the wrong side! I had unwittingly sat in the few seats that catered to left-handed people and I sat rather uncomfortably for the rest of the class period. My perception of the writing desk as on the *wrong* side illustrates how white people often experience situations that are not designed specifically for us as problematic.

When our normal, daily experience includes items and services oriented toward our needs, it is a real surprise to be in spaces that do not cater to our preferences. In this way, many white people take things for granted that people of color recognize as benefits of being white. Peggy McIntosh's well-known article "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" offers a list of advantages, both significant and minor, that she receives because she is white.¹³

At a conference I attended a number of years ago, Dr. McIntosh described how she developed the list. After making a prayer asking for guidance in her ability to understand racial disconnections more clearly, the examples came to her in the middle of the night. She awoke and hurriedly wrote them down, convinced that in the light of day they would be irretrievably lost to unconsciousness. Even she, noted for her ability to perceive the privileges of whiteness, admits that she struggled to keep them in mind. One might suggest that Hecate, that mythological carrier of wisdom related to the moon, was accessed during the unconsciousness of sleep.

We all can use some help in perceiving what has been left unspoken, and therefore unnoticed, for most of our lives. Thankfully, many others have been doing this work for some time and offer their realizations as helpful aids. There are even those who have used Dr. McIntosh's work as inspiration to highlight how white privilege emerges in their own fields, such as in schools.¹⁴

Unlike those living in fairly segregated areas, for white people in diverse environments the water in the fish bowl can become visible fairly quickly. We are faced with mirrors that remind us that we are perceived as part of a white group. In these circumstances, the dis-ease of naming our whiteness can take on a different feeling. This is where the majority of my white colleagues and students fit in.

We live in a multiracial environment in which the political and historical associations with whiteness are readily understood. In our context, being white means being an oppressor. Whiteness symbolizes our history of slavery, the genocide of the Native American populations, racism, and the Ku Klux Klan. Whiteness is bad. To claim whiteness is to associate oneself with irreconcilable damage to humanity. Being white is shameful.

No wonder that the white community, in general, is not at ease with its own whiteness. At best, being white is just normal or neutral. At worst, whiteness aligns us with a shameful history to which we do not want to be connected. Sometimes both occur at the same time in the same person. We might feel that being white has no effect on our thoughts and behaviors, but we recognize that others associate us with negative aspects of U.S. history.

When I felt this way, my reaction was to be both saddened and angered at feeling simultaneously misunderstood and under fire. Top that off with the proposal that we are part of a white culture. Seeing our white selves as part of a culture of whiteness automatically throws us into a collective that may offer little of which to feel proud. I understand why our resistances go up at this point. Not only is our individuality at stake, so is our fundamental ability to see ourselves aligned with goodness. Used to seeing ourselves as decent, good, hard-working people, this whole idea can catapult us into a fight-or-flight reaction. For this reason, focusing on our whiteness can feel like an attack on our sense of self.

White people in general have several common responses to this perceived threat to self. Each of these can involve an effort to reframe our understanding to avoid alignment with racism. Each of these can also allow us to deflect our need to give meaning to our whiteness. Each of these can also create difficulty in our relationships with friends, colleagues, and community partners. Collectively, these responses involve turning away and leaving our racial identity very blurry, which renders us incapable of truly witnessing the dis-ease we face.

RESPONDING TO OUR DIS-EASE: LOOKING AWAY

Avoidance of our whiteness can manifest in several different forms. We can deny the continuing effects of race and its categorizations, move toward ethnicity, become colorblind, or believe we are post-racial and transcend

race altogether. Important to acknowledge is that we can take up one or all of these approaches with the best of intentions. Some of us were taught these strategies as the best way forward, and therefore naming the approaches *avoidant* might feel wrong. For others of us, the flight from the discomforting meanings of whiteness is not made consciously. We are not aware that we are distancing ourselves from the problem of our whiteness instead of working toward a solution.

The following approaches can sound good, feel good, and follow a thread of logic that we believe will move us closer to equity and justice. It is precisely the feel-good nature of them, however, that disguises causes for concern. The nettle of race we are in is not so easily disentangled. Even if adopted as a way to move forward, these approaches disguise the ways that race continues to affect us all. Only if we allow ourselves to see the shadow side of each of these avenues might we begin to see a different path that will not simply cover over our symptoms but lead us toward the type of long-lasting, substantial healing that can transform our collaborative relationships and institutions.

Equal Protection under the Law

One way we allow our view to remain blurry and evade the need to look at whiteness is to point out that our country has outlawed racial discrimination. For whites who live in relatively segregated areas or who have little intimate, social contact with people of color (especially those from different class backgrounds), it is not that hard to assume that racism has been eliminated from most people's lives. Discrimination is against the law, right? After all, we elected a Black President. Racism must be over, right?

I was fortunate to grow up in a home completely absent of racial slurs. In fact, I do not recall my parents ever bringing up the subject of race. My friends and I never talked about race. My friends' parents never used race language. When my Black teammates began calling my parents "Mom" and "Dad," to include them in the larger family of sprinters during my freshman year in college, I think my parents smiled more broadly than when I performed well in a race.

My teachers did not seem particularly discriminatory either, except if you count Mr. C., my high school government teacher who bellowed at our newly-arrived Vietnamese English learners when they could not comprehend his directions. I remember his classroom vividly because it was perhaps the only time that I truly acted out in a class setting, challenging him on his cruelty. Truthfully, though, I did not interpret his behavior as being racist; I just thought he was mean. He had been mean to me too, calling me "tough

luck, Tochluk." Besides, he was only one person, and he was the exception to the rule. At least that is how I perceived his behavior.

All in all, I experienced very little that I would have termed discriminatory and I did not know anyone who espoused racist beliefs. I grew up learning about equality and the Civil Rights movement. Every adult in my world advocated equal treatment for all. Because of this, I walked in the world thinking that racism was not much of a problem.

The trouble is that when we focus on legal race neutrality and are not open to the possibility that both personal and institutional racism still exist, we cannot even hope to be able to identify existing racism. We thus give up our chance of making any additional positive change. In *Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past*, David Roediger explains that one of the greatest barriers to the continued fight against racism is the view that issues of race are in the past.¹⁵ Those who bring up the issue of race are now often considered the trouble since so-called race-neutral policies are now widely in effect. Many argue that if we would just stop talking about race that people would be able to move past our racial history.

One problem with concentrating on race-neutral language is that we often do not perceive how race is a factor in the way we look at social and economic issues and policies. For example, Roediger explains that when a governmental program benefits a predominantly white, middle-class population, such as home-mortgage tax deductions or subsidies for highway construction that benefit white suburbs, those policies are seen as race-neutral. On the other hand, when a program significantly benefits people of color, such as public assistance, those programs are often seen as race-specific even if they are universal in policy. Those programs are then seen in racial, often pejorative, terms.¹⁶ This habit of mind does not simply disappear when select people of color attain high positions in our society.

Roediger goes on to describe how although some might explicitly avoid speaking of race, there are those who make wordless racial appeals and offer coded messages by linking nonracially identified ideas with visually racial representations. This effectively denigrates people of color and links them with issues such as welfare reform, job-training programs, criminality, and sexual promiscuity.¹⁷ For example, a *US News & World Report* cover once used a picture of seven women to illustrate its article on welfare. Six of the seven women were women of color, most were Black, and only one was white.¹⁸

It is through this type of linkage of image with issue that the stereotypical image of a welfare recipient has become a Black woman in many minds, even though approximately one-third, or more, of all welfare recipients were white throughout the past two decades.¹⁹ A more in-depth discussion of this issue

can be found in Michael Brown's *Race, Money, and the American Welfare State*.²⁰

We swim within this swell of media images and social and political messages on a daily basis. When we ingest images and perceptions uncritically, we can unwittingly act out of them when engaged with those we encounter. Our relational patterns can easily betray the prejudices that our social conditioning engenders, and to imagine that they have no effect because we have outlawed discrimination is to seriously underestimate the power of the unconscious mind.

Essentially, our seemingly race-neutral policies continue to betray clear signs of racism, and we often unconsciously accept skewed and selective information from our media outlets. We would do well to realize that there are many factors that play into which stories are told in the media and how images and words are associated. The important point is that when we are unconscious to the differential attention paid to different groups and racist portrayals, then we are unable to do anything to stop the problem. That is just one way that we become party to racism's continuation. If we cannot even see racism in action, then we cannot be witnesses who call for change.

Let us take a few examples from the media to check our ability to witness racism in action. Do we take notice that African American women who go missing receive scant media coverage while a veritable media blitz takes place when white women are in danger?²¹ Sure, rich or famous women of color might have the social and political power to receive attention—but what of those without money or power? Most of the white women receiving coverage are neither rich nor powerful, yet they receive plenty of attention.

Once we notice this pattern, we have to ask ourselves, are we outraged? If not, why? Does this issue appear insignificant? If it does, imagine that it is your daughter, sister, or partner missing and you cannot get the media interested in running the story. This disparity of coverage is no small matter. The degree to which the media pick up a story can have life-and-death consequences. Local media attention can generate important leads in a time-sensitive situation. National media attention might also influence the degree to which local authorities call for additional aid.²² Only if we are aware of these racist practices can we raise our voices and call attention to the matter, letting news sources know that we see this as a problem.

Another example of how racism emerges in subtle and often unnoticed ways is the now-famous differential language used to describe victims of Hurricane Katrina. One aspect of differential coverage became widely known after Yahoo's image pages put news photos and captions near enough to each other for a comparison to be impossible to miss.

In case you did miss it, though, the Associated Press published a photo of a young Black boy wading through floodwaters with food. The caption read, "A young man walks through chest-deep flood water after looting a grocery store in New Orleans on Tuesday, Aug. 30, 2005." Within a similar time period, Agence France Press published a photo of a white couple similarly wading through floodwaters with food. The caption read, "Two residents wade through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store after Hurricane Katrina came through the area in New Orleans, Louisiana."

We have to question ourselves here. Do we more easily identify with other white people and therefore offer a more understanding view when white people are in a dire situation? Are we more inclined to consider a Black person as acting criminally even in similarly dire circumstances? Is it possible that we fail to question when people of color are characterized negatively because we are emotionally removed from their lives? How often does this happen unfairly without our recognition?

How many of us were offended at the onslaught of negative and racist portrayals of Barack Obama during the months preceding the presidential election in 2008? The group with which I work, AWARE-LA, created a blog to track the eruption of inflammatory and racist speech and images targeting him.²³ The barrage was unbelievable to witness, even for someone like myself who has become increasingly observant of these patterns.

Much of the differential media coverage that occurred was fairly subtle in nature though. To help us perceive more clearly, a widely distributed online article written by Tim Wise, a nationally-recognized speaker on issues of white privilege, named a long list of ways that racism and privilege shaped the portrayals and coverage of the candidates and their families.²⁴

Finally, consider the lack of sensitivity and unconsciousness required for the editorial board of the New York Post to allow a cartoon portraying a chimpanzee shot by police officers with a statement saying that someone else would need to write the next stimulus bill to run in its paper in February 2009. As this cartoon ran literally on the same day when a photo showed President Obama signing the stimulus bill he wrote into law, it is near impossible for race-conscious individuals to imagine that the chimp was not intended to represent the President. Although only a few discrete examples are offered here, we need to recognize that these eruptions of racism occur regularly without most white people's recognition or admission.

Although many forces combine to create these discriminatory practices and patterns, it is likely that many white people involved in their creation do not play their role consciously. I would venture to say that the majority do not perceive themselves as acting on prejudices. Those of us who passively

receive the media images and messages many times are not even aware that differential treatments are taking place.

But this does not excuse us from seeing the problem and recognizing that we play a role in its continuation. It is exactly because of our lack of consciousness that we need to train ourselves to become witnesses to discrimination. Our sensitivity must increase, because only when we can see racism and name it can we put voice to our internal sense of justice and begin to call people to account when they highlight subjects differentially, consciously or not.

Let us keep in mind that these issues go largely unnoticed by white people because of our dominant racial position. We do not see our lives impacted by racism, and therefore we are usually less sensitive. By and large, however, people of color see these injustices, recognize their linkage to a long history of maltreatment, abuse, and neglect, and are justifiably angered. Several years ago, I sat with Dr. Shirley Better and invited her to participate in my investigation of cross-race friendships. We talked at length about what I wanted to do and my approach.

One of the things Shirley said that day that particularly struck me went something like this: "Do not be fooled. The majority of middle-class Black folks are angry too. We might have learned how to be successful in the white world and we might be very pleasant in our interactions with you. But we are angry about how racism continues, and you don't even see it." Hearing her made me stop and think. How many times have people of color tried to let me know what they experience? How do I respond in those moments? Might this have something to do with whether or not they feel close to me, able to really tell me the truth of their experience?

I have to admit that I still struggle with my almost knee-jerk reaction to hearing a person of color claim that he or she has suffered discrimination. For example, one of my friends of color might say, "You know, I went to the store and that white woman ignored me because I am . . ." My mind almost immediately begins racing and I begin to ask questions. One of the first questions is, "How do you know it was because of race?" A close second is, "How do you know it was not because of . . . ?" I start to imagine all of the possibilities of what might have happened in that white person's head that have nothing to do with race. I am quite sure I am not the only white person who does this, judging from what I have heard from people of color on this issue.

There are a couple of reasons why we do this that deserve attention. First, many of us are raised with the idea of being the "devil's advocate." We often respect the role of "the questioner" who pokes holes in someone's argument. I know that I do this same thing to my white friends and colleagues about all sorts of issues. Questioning is something I do. I question. I know some

people of color who have also been raised to do the same thing. But there is also another factor.

When a person of color suggests that a white person has acted in a discriminatory fashion, I start imagining myself in that white person's place. Very subtly, when I ask questions about the situation, I am looking for how I might have acted if I had been that white person, how I might have been misperceived had I been there. Admitting that the white person in question might have been prejudiced somehow seems to implicate me.

Without realizing it, I put myself in the psychological position of defending myself as I defend the white person in the situation. Not so subtly to the person of color, I engage in a battle to make sure that any discriminatory act experienced be provable in order to protect my sense of self and the world. Regardless of intent, these two combined characteristics—the devil's advocate position and the psychological defense of myself—create an infuriating experience for the people of color trying to share their story.

We can better recognize the problem with this if we take an example from our own experience. Whenever I start speaking about our need to work against racism, I invariably find a white person just itching to tell me the story of the one time when he or she was subject to a prejudicial act. I remember one moment especially clearly. A gentleman who had heard of my work approached me to make sure I was aware that racism is a problem that affects every group and that we should not just concentrate on white-against-people-of-color racism. He went on to narrate the one time, *the one time*, a person acted discriminately against him. An African American coach would not let him play the position he wanted on the football field and he recalled that this was because he was white. This experience had to have happened at least twenty years prior to our conversation.

This is not to diminish the pain of this individual who felt so slighted by his coach. Losing an opportunity because of your racial placement is understandably distressing. Many of us might be able to reflect on some moments where our whiteness was used against us in some way. But we would do well to think about how often this has happened.

True, just one instance of racial discrimination can be so impacting that feelings of hurt and anger still emerge quickly within conversations twenty years later. But imagine enduring consistent racist acts over a lifetime and throughout one's family history. Living in a world fraught with discrimination can shape a person and define perspectives about the world. Racism is painful in a way that time does not always heal.

That many people have worked hard to bring an end to racist policies and practices must be acknowledged. Unfortunately, we cannot take it for granted that seemingly race-neutral legislation translates into social equity in either

our wider society or in our individual institutions or companies. In our large social context, media outlets often offer us discriminatory views of people and their approach can have life-or-death consequences. We are also not immune from the various ways our experiences with race embed themselves in our unconscious and emerge in our relationships.

Race is not Real

Another way we try to solve the problem of race while unwittingly falling victim to its effects is by reminding ourselves that race is a social construction. We can then take the position that we simply are not white. I admit the logic here appears flawless and goes something like this: Race is an idea constructed by humans. Race is not biologically real. The whole concept of race is false. Anyone can see that my skin is not actually white. Rather, I can more accurately describe my skin tone as olive, tan, or some shade of pink. Therefore, I am not white.

I remember using this logic myself on numerous occasions. I have had graduate-school professors use this approach, one who proudly held out his arm one afternoon to show me that, yes, in fact, his skin truly is olive colored. A dear friend of mine proudly tells the tale of her preschool-aged son grappling with language one day and coming up with the word "toink" to describe her skin tone, interpreted as a combination of tan and pink. My friend uses this story to highlight that she understands the false nature of race language. She is not alone.

Many of us reject racial whiteness as a personal identifier when we are ready to say that we disagree with the divisions that race perpetuates, the false categorizations that do not offer exact, accurate self-reflection. We do this believing that we are striking back against prejudice and racism. Through this argument, we hope to demonstrate that we will not be fooled into continuing a fundamentally flawed system of naming.

Deciding that we are not white also, however, allows us to scratch racial identity off of our already crowded to-do list. We can move on with our lives, imagining that issues of race are taken care of as far as it relates to us. Sure, there are plenty of people who identify with race and prejudiced viewpoints—but we are no longer part of the "race problem" because we are not part of the race. Those of us taking on this approach generally are philosophically opposed to prejudice, so we do not see ourselves doing anything that would cause distress in anyone from another group.

Unfortunately, there is also a subtle implication in this approach that often goes unnoticed by white people, but it is hardly lost on a good number of people of color. The implication is this: If we reject being called white, we

also reject the idea that we are connected to a broader, white culture. Let me say it again in a few different ways.

If we are not white, then whiteness is meaningless for us. If we are not white, then there is absolutely no reason why we should concern ourselves with what people of color have been saying for generations about the features of white culture. If we are not white, then we have nothing to gain by investigating how our country's history of racism shapes us. If we are not white, then conversations about our unwitting participation in perceived racism is irrelevant. All of these statements become possible when we take whiteness off the table.

Our claim that we are not white is true, but only as long as we are talking specifically about skin color in its most literal form. The problem is that whiteness is related to a lot more than fair skin and we cannot deconstruct its effects by simply walking away from race. True, the idea of deconstruction might strike fear in anyone familiar with academic, postmodernist thought. For many, this approach leads one down a never-ending rabbit hole where nothing is real, no value judgment can be made, and existential trauma ensues. I am familiar with this hole. Just like Alice, I have been captivated at the wonders. I have also found the critique. Navel gazing ourselves to death is possible, and we could spend time analyzing our whiteness but never linking new understandings with real movement or action. That is not helpful.

Distancing ourselves from our discomfort with racial identity by claiming that we are not white betrays our hopes. Although we hope that the distance excuses us from being a part of the problem of race, our denials do not stop us from being treated as white. Philosophically rejecting whiteness does not stop us from escaping racial profiling. We will never have to deal with the frustration of being passed over by cab drivers due to our race. We will never be mistaken for gardeners when working in our front yards.

Worse, in our lack of investigation, we cannot recognize that social and economic benefits often come with our whiteness. We remain blind to the myriad ways that whiteness opens doors. We also do not stop enacting the whiteness that has embedded itself within us through years of social conditioning. Expectations of respect, attention, and courteous service from all people we encounter are experienced as normal. Then, as we remain unconscious of the ways we receive unearned benefits, we act in ways that are thoroughly infuriating to people of color in our surroundings.

Ethnicity Replaces Race

Another response to the challenges presented by the concept of race, and whiteness in particular, is to shift our attention toward ethnicity. There is

something really important about returning to our roots. Our assimilation story has left many of us without a rooted sense of self. The loss of our ethnic heritage and culture plagues many within the white population in this country. For that reason, we do need to attend to our ethnicity. Knowing more about the cultures we come from, the traditions that supported our forebears, and the lineage they represent can offer us a grounding that we not only deserve but also psychologically require. Ethnicity offers us a way to identify with something other than whiteness, which can seem rather hollow, false, and negative.

One of my African American friends first encouraged me to explore this side of myself during a period when I was struggling against my whiteness. I asked my parents questions concerning where, exactly, my great-grandparents came from in Germany, Italy, and Russia. Since I look very much like my mother, have held her up as a role model for years, and she is full German, I looked most closely for areas where I could connect to my Germanic heritage.

I went through all of my grandparents' old items, searching for remnants of cultural artifacts that might connect me to my ethnic heritage. A strange thing happened as I searched through my maternal grandparents' old trunk. I found that all of the artifacts were Chinese. My grandparents had spent a few years living in China prior to World War II and these were my grandmother's prized possessions. A hand-carved Chinese trunk I have at the foot of my bed was one that she brought back with her in the 1930s. There was nothing German to be found.

I had to get creative with the search, and less concrete. As I questioned my mother, I learned that it is a cultural tradition in Germany to eat salad at the end of the meal, as opposed to at the start, which is the norm in the United States. There is my German tradition. My family eats salad last! Looking deeper, I can recognize a certain discipline and order in the way I live my life, a particular rigidity I associate with Germanic culture. As anyone who has traveled in Germany knows, the trains there leave on time. Now, there is something that fits. I suppose I can call that my cultural heritage.

On the Italian side, there is far less, unless you count that I make good lasagna. Admittedly, however, it is meatless and I made up the recipe myself. I imagine my far distant great-great-grandmother would be less than impressed. During this period of time, I also came extremely close to changing my last name, Tochluk, back to its original Russian form, Tochilanko.

I benefit when feeling connected to something ancient, like when I read old Germanic fairytales and feel somehow related to them. I will continue exploring my ethnicity as I move forward, searching for fragments of a culture long lost to my family. For the truth is that my cultural connection is lost; I am not

German. That culture is too disconnected. My Germanness was traded in long ago for the benefits available in this country for European immigrants able to fit into the white group. Feeling connected with my ancestry is essential, but I cannot kid myself into believing that I share the same culture as contemporary Germans. I do not.

At the same time that this process of reconnecting with our heritage is essential, there simultaneously is a problem. The downside is not that we search for rootedness; the downside is that whites' uncritical movement toward ethnicity can act as a disguise that masks multiple issues. For example, Omi and Winant's *Racial Formation in the United States* explores the valuable contributions that an acknowledgment of ethnicity can offer. But, the book also expresses concern that ethnicity language often functions as a new form of race language.²⁵

Essentially, they remind us that there are many different ethnic groups, such as Japanese Americans, Korean Americans, and Chinese Americans, who are simply called Asian American by most people in the United States. Omi and Winant suggest that even though we would like to think that these specific ethnic categories allow people to retain their ethnic identities, the use of the broad category, Asian American, is "clearly a racially based process" because "the majority of Americans cannot tell the difference between members of the various groups."²⁶

In other words, the idea that we are avoiding the vestiges of race through a turn toward ethnicity is illusory. We have simply replaced the old, objectionable race terms for new terms such as European American, African American, Asian American, Latin American, or Native American. In our effort to deal with our country's diversity, we continue to collapse people into groups that closely mirror the parameters of the old race categories.

One problem with this disguise is that the language of ethnicity allows us to escape the negative associations with race without acknowledging the very real effects that our history with race continues to have on our perceptions. A focus on ethnicity allows us to more readily ignore our country's history of racism and its continuing effects. For example, seeing various groups within the country as ethnicities allows us to evaluate each group's assimilation into American society against that of the early European groups.

Oftentimes, white people will recall our own family history in efforts to understand and evaluate the experience and "progress" of other groups. We often justify the oppressions of some groups as we recount tales of discrimination suffered by our immigrant family years ago. White people often say something like this: "All of our ancestors went through the process of coming to the United States and figuring out how to fit in. All groups struggled when they first arrived and gave up aspects of their

heritage, and most had to learn a new language. So, why can't this group move past it like mine did?"

We see this emerge when we discuss the achievement gap between different ethnic/racial groups in regards to standardized testing, high-school graduation rates, college admissions, and employment statistics. We also tend to start pitting one group against the other, such as the well-known problem of holding up Asian Americans as "the model minority," without attending to groups' differential histories. This also allows us to ignore the very different experiences among various Asian Pacific Islander groups, some of which continue to struggle markedly.

Another deep problem with this is that however long European Americans search within our family histories, we will never find an appropriate comparison with those who remain hyphenated Americans in our social consciousness. European immigrants become Americans when they blend in. People who have long been considered members of races other than white based on physical features do not blend in. They remain racially typed and the fact that this alters their assimilation experience is pushed to the side with a narrow concentration on ethnicity. White people find some groups blameworthy for not assimilating while the different position they hold in the public's psyche and institutions goes ignored. Essentially, we blame those who have been most victimized by racism.

Admittedly, this is challenging in no small part due to our efforts to answer to the wishes of the various groups who prefer terms of ethnicity to the language of race. For many of us, the shift to ethnicity language is made in concert with requests from people of color. It might therefore feel inappropriate to criticize a focus on ethnicity. Because race is a fabrication, there are plenty of people who simply cannot locate themselves within race's ill-defined categories. Ethnicity simply makes more sense.

Since each racial or ethnic group living within the United States has a substantially different historical experience, we all have different needs. For example, many of my Latino/a students struggle to place themselves racially, and statistics from a past U.S. census report suggests that an important factor associated with whether or not Latinos/as consider themselves to be white is socioeconomic status.²⁷ This question of what it means to be white is a complicated one with which each group that has been able to claim the privileges of whiteness has to grapple.

White people who cannot fully recapture a lost cultural heritage, like myself, often experience a real sense of loss. Sure, there might be subcultures of whites that feel attached to what they see as a particularly American culture, like those who would claim a "Southern" culture. However, many of us find ourselves looking at other groups and longing for the connection we

imagine they feel with their roots, their homeland, their culture. Many white people can be heard saying, "We don't have culture. They have culture."

Even if African Americans do not choose to reconnect with their African ancestral culture, many white people generally assume that Black culture in the United States is rich with meaning. Many of us also travel and bring other group's cultural artifacts home with us. In my familial home, for example, we have puppets from Indonesia, figurines and baskets from Africa, a rug and bedspread from Guatemala, and carvings from Mexico. For a long time, I saw my inclinations toward tourism as evidence of my openness and respect for other cultures, having no idea how much it also betrayed my inner sense of loss.

In the mid-1990s, I attended a performance put on by the UCLA Drama Department. In one main hall, individual artists each had a roped-off section of space. Each enacted a cultural way of being. There was someone representing Santeria, another portraying a Middle-Eastern culture I cannot remember. And then I saw her, the white woman. I stood transfixed in front of the white female artist. She sat on a chair on a square stage four feet above the crowd in a glass case. She wore a delicate white dress and was holding a bag from Pier 1 Imports. She admired the exotic artifacts from lands abroad one after the other.

I stood transfixed for several minutes, trying to sort out the emotion rising in me. There was something very discomforting about seeing her that way. I recognized that woman. She was myself. Or at least, she had been me. She was my mother. She was my grandmother, perhaps to some lesser degree. I felt that, that blandness, that plainness, that whiteness. I felt her whiteness as a lack, a loss. I felt this loss in my bones. I could barely move as I was reminded of how I loved what other cultures have precisely because I know the inner emptiness that results when tradition is traded in for whiteness.

I know I am not alone. I hear the same sentiments too much from other white people. If anything, this is one of the truest hallmarks of whiteness I have yet encountered. There is a hole within many of us, created when our families gave up our culture in order to be successful in the United States. Of course, there are plenty of people from other groups and cultures who also travel, collect artifacts, and shop at Pier 1 Imports. However, the collection of objects is not the focus here. What struck me most was the deep underlying pain emerging from many white people as they discuss what it means for them to feel disconnected from their ancestral culture.

At this time, with what I now see, there is nothing about that setting that feels coincidental: the glass separating the woman from the audience, the stage that put her on a pedestal, the center, privileged position within the room, and the way her presence commanded attention. Even given that secure foundation, she exuded a sense of loss, of being lost, adrift in the larger world . . . captured by the glass case.

The various meanings of this type of whiteness are very real for me. When I am able to witness these features of my whiteness and acknowledge them I gain the power to alter my relationship to them, to alter my relationship with myself. In this way, I am better able to navigate the world. I am better able to relate to people of color. I can admit to what they already know about whiteness. We can share in a conversation of complexity that seeks not to make it all okay, but grounds us in the understanding that we exist together without those particular barriers to our communication.

But most whites are not able to have those conversations if we hide within our focus on ethnicity. Instead, there are coping strategies many whites use, either consciously or unconsciously, in order to deal with the feeling of ethnic loss. (Please note that coping strategies are not necessarily healthy.) Although not an exhaustive list, some of the most frequent forms include:

- Identifying ourselves with our lost heritage to whatever degree possible (such as claiming that we are German even when we have little to no relationship to Germanic culture)
- Emphasizing other identities (such as our gender, religion, joining a subculture, etc.) as a more defining aspect of our lives
- Identifying with other cultures, taking on beliefs and/or practices from other groups
- Focusing on relationships with people of color
- Embracing mainstream American culture and its value systems

Each of these coping strategies can feel like it enhances our sense of self and helps us find grounding and connection. But each has a downside if we use the coping strategy to escape confronting our identity. Further, unfortunately, depending on how enacted, these strategies are often offensive to traditionally oppressed groups. Unhealthy manifestations of the above coping strategies can include:

- Denying our relationship with collective white America
- Uncritically appropriating cultural practices and behaviors from other groups with little consciousness regarding their deeper meanings
- Using people of color for the "culture" they bring into our lives
- Creating needy relationships with people of color wherein we seek validation and/or escape from the white community
- Holding up American culture as a product of diverse contributions without acknowledging the role of exploitation and the ways in which groups benefited differentially

Unfortunately, so many whites have trampled people of color as we ran away from our whiteness that many people of color are highly suspect when whites demonstrate an interest in their culture and participate in traditional ceremonies and practices or wear their cultural symbols and dress.

If we can understand that our cultural exploration or adoption is often warily perceived as related to appropriation, the exploitation of another group's culture for another's benefit, and a history of oppressive behaviors, then we can more effectively explain our intention to people of color. If we can avoid becoming defensive, we might be able to hear the concerns of people of color, then be offered the opportunity to explain the respect we have for the cultural tradition or faith. Further, we can enter a discussion about how our interest in a particular culture is related to our own sense of cultural loss. Even more helpful is an ability to discuss how we understand our approach in terms of our relationship with our own whiteness and the benefits that have traditionally come with membership in that group.

Overall, the more we understand ourselves, the reasons for our actions, and how our cultural explorations might be perceived in relationship to an oppressive history, the more we are able to navigate our way through challenging conversations, build authentic relationships, and break down the wounds built up over years of injury. Perhaps even more important, we might be able to avoid enacting a disrespectful form of appropriation.

To sum up, we benefit greatly from a healthy investigation of our ethnic heritage. Researching and reconnecting can help us deal with the loss many of us feel because of our assimilation into whiteness. We run into trouble, however, when we focus narrowly on ethnicity as a way to escape grappling with race identity. If we remain unclear about our own whiteness, then we do not perceive the negative, unhealthy aspects of the coping strategies that we use to help us manage the cultural loss we feel. We then both ignore the effects of historical and contemporary racism and offend people of color.

We Don't See Color

Being colorblind is a fourth way we distance ourselves from our discomfort with whiteness. This is not to say we *intentionally* use the term as a distancing technique. Most of us say we are colorblind as an assurance to others that we are *not* prejudiced. I learned this type of language as a child when my teachers would say, "I don't care if you are yellow, purple, blue, or green." I know when I used the term *colorblind*, my intentions were positive. I wanted to let people know I treated everyone equally. Many people told me being colorblind moved us away from our history of racism and toward a future of

equity, so I felt being colorblind was an attitude that aligned me with progress and humanity's evolution.

My understanding of this term completely changed after reading Ruth Frankenberg's book *The Social Construction of Whiteness: White Women, Race Matters*.²⁸ Reading her analysis of the use of the term, I recognized myself in some areas and saw differences in others. But the subtle implications she described altered my perspective. I was so shaken I asked people of color in my social and work circles if they, too, saw in that language what Dr. Frankenberg outlined. Indeed they did, and I have not used the term *colorblind* to describe my perspective since.

There are three basic problems with using the term *colorblind*. First, the entire idea of colorblindness is a lie. Of course we see color. Of course we perceive different skin tones and the physical features most commonly associated with racial categories. To tell ourselves differently denies reality. Colorblindness is a complete fabrication. Alone, this argument might appear unimportant, calling up a response such as, "Sure, I *see* color, but what I mean is that a person's color doesn't *mean* anything." This moves us into the second area of trouble with colorblindness.

When we say that we do not see another person's color, what we essentially are saying is that we do not see a person's racial placement as meaningful. Basically, we are saying that we do not see the ways that a person of color experiences the world differently than does a white-appearing person. Worse, being colorblind usually means that since we do not see differential experiences, people of color will have to convince us that race continues to matter in their lives.

In essence, when we say we are colorblind, we end up saying, "Race doesn't matter to me, and therefore it should not matter to you." That being the case, the alignment with colorblindness builds a shield to protect us from considering how lingering, unconscious prejudices might play out. Essentially, claiming that we are colorblind can stop us from being open to dialogues with people who experience and/or perceive racial injustice.

Finally, white people tend not to speak of being colorblind when speaking of interactions with other whites. Colorblindness really only comes up when we speak of how we see, or do not see, people of color. We are essentially saying that there is something about people "of color" that should not be seen. This implies that there is something negative about being associated with color and that there is no value in being recognized as a person of color. In essence, we are saying, "I don't hold this part of who you are against you." Although there are many people of color who use this term to indicate they do not hold our whiteness against us, there are far more who reject the colorblindness approach for the above reasons.

In addition to offending people of color and denying and dismissing their experiences, choosing colorblindness also has one glaringly negative ramification for white people. Being colorblind truly keeps us blind, blind to ourselves. Our whiteness, already a rather blurry topic, moves from being uncomfortable and out of focus to being purposefully hidden from ourselves. As we refuse to see the color in someone else's life, we refuse to see the whiteness in our own.

Our philosophic refusals to see our racial identity as significant do not translate into a psychological overcoming, and issues of race continue to affect us. We do have an option, however. To use Ruth Frankenberg's words, we can become race cognizant, or race conscious. We can develop a clear vision of how race impacts our lives and the lives of others so that we can move toward honestly witnessing the ways our whiteness plays a role in our daily lives.

We Transcend Race

A final way we turn away from our whiteness is when we say we are post-racial and have transcended race. This approach was often heard expressed during the months surrounding Barack Obama's election as President of the United States. Those claiming that he, and we, have transcended race sought to mark the profound and real progress we have made as a country. Yet, on the other hand, holding up this singular moment as proof that racism is no longer a deeply affecting aspect of people's experience in our country was also wishful thinking.

Of the various approaches described in this chapter, this is perhaps the most deeply felt because when we see ourselves as "beyond race," we often align our belief system with our sense of spiritual being and a more hopeful future. It does not really matter to which faith community we belong. From this perspective, we focus on what is most inherently meaningful about our lives. We very often search for what "resonates" with us, that which rings true and feels right, that which fits with our individual experience of the world. Race, as a fabricated concept itself, understandably does not fit with our deep sense of self. And racism is something that strikes such painful chords that we wish for it to disappear altogether.

I know my core—my spiritual self, my soul—transcends race. The deepest and most essential aspect of who I am in the world is not related to race. Personally, I can still hold this to be true and simultaneously recognize that my current manifestation, my current physical form, exists this way for a purpose. To my way of thinking, the learning that my spirit/soul requires on this planet, in this time/space pattern, is related to me being a white woman.

For me, my spiritual self is connected to my physical form. I see my job as needing to learn as much about existence in this context as possible. For that reason, although I completely understand the personal nature of the transcendence approach and the intricate role spirituality plays in our sense of self, it is worthwhile to offer our idea of transcending race up for questioning. Just because our deepest spiritual nature is not related to race does not mean our socialized behaviors in the world are not. Similarly, just because our deepest desires and hopes are to be post-racial, does not mean our socialized behaviors in the world are.

For many white people, our belief that our experience of the world transcends race also comes with additional values. For example, many of us who are dedicated to transcendence as a broader ideal also have a sense of spirituality that manifests as a deeply felt connection with all people and things. This sense of connection can translate into a desire and push toward creating community, wholeness, togetherness, or oneness. Spiritually-oriented people are oftentimes committed to expanding consciousness, continued growth, and becoming more compassionate people in the world as well.

Although paradoxical, our efforts toward racial transcendence can sometimes thwart our ability to truly live out those spiritual goals. For instance, in some ways similar to the earlier mentioned approaches, transcending race can sometimes mean remaining unaware of how racial identity affects our way of being in the world. But if part of life's effort is to be more connected to others, then being less aware of how our whiteness plays out seriously jeopardizes our chances of truly coming together with other individuals. How can people tell us about how racial dynamics affect them if we refuse to acknowledge that race remains significant in people's lives?

Additionally, in an odd sort of way, transcending race can become a tool for reinforcing individualism more than a way to find deeper connection with others. Let me offer an example to illustrate this. A good number of years ago, I fell in love with a Black man. Although this gentleman considered dating me, he ultimately decided it was not a good match. Much went into that decision, but what I remember most was how race played a role. He argued that being with me would be painful for the Black women in his life due to the way white women had been represented as the epitome of womanhood throughout our country's history. Added to that was the history of Black men being persecuted for even looking at, or speaking to, a white woman, which eventually turned white women into prizes to be won—trophies, if you will—in the minds of some Black men.

The man knew many women who regularly talked among themselves about how this history lived on and he refused to add to their hurt. He recognized that the effects of our history are not over, and he was careful to

recognize how his behavior in the world would impact others. From what was reported, this same consideration is what prompted Denzel Washington to refuse to kiss Julia Roberts in the film *Pelican Brief*, if I recall the magazine story accurately.

At that time, I could not see why the injury to Black women was important, or more correctly, I did not want to care about what this man saw and what Black women would feel. I could not grasp why what someone else thought about our potential relationship made a difference. I recall saying things like, "We can't be responsible for their feelings." "Why should we be punished for something we were not a part of?" "Why can't we just be beyond race?" Even though I thought I transcended race and was ready to be in relationship with anyone, that very belief caused me to become insensitive to the effects my actions would have on others. I was only concerned about myself.

The point of this is not to say interracial dating is wrong. People will always follow love when truly deep and powerful. Love does not and should not know racial boundaries. However, sensitivity is in order. Transcending race should not mean refusing to acknowledge how our actions affect others. The very least required of us is to expand our awareness and understand the issues and perspectives involved. Besides, if we are going to function well in a diverse world, the ability to sensitively explain why we make the choices we do, in full awareness of the complexity of the situation, the better able we will be to really connect with those who might otherwise feel betrayed.

A last aspect of the transcendence approach that can prove troubling is how the effort to raise one's consciousness can sometimes become twisted into a view of oneself as more evolved than another. In reference to the above situation with my failed attempt at building an interracial relationship, I can imagine having said something like this: "We should not have to worry about those who are still stuck in race thinking. We are more conscious than that." The belief that those who see race and racism and feel its injury are less evolved, less conscious, and therefore less worthy of consideration completely contradicts efforts toward community, oneness, and compassion.

Still worse, within white people this approach can unwittingly reinforce the historically racist views of evolution that held that whites are the most evolved manifestation of humanity. This can affect how we interact with our world. If the majority of whites choose transcendence and claim we are living in a post-racial society, and the majority of people of color call out for an increased focus on race in efforts to hold whites accountable for continuing racism, then who is the more evolved? Whose perspective receives attention? Essentially, in white people, the idea of transcending race can unintentionally perpetuate

a sense of superiority that can prove exceptionally damaging when people of color and whites come together in dialogue and community building.

This is not to say moments of transcendence do not occur. My participation over the past decade in multicultural and multiracial groups, conferences, and events leaves me grateful for the many incredible people who offer their hearts to nurture others, regardless of differing backgrounds. Certainly, I have witnessed countless moments of true acceptance and understanding, ceremonies and dialogues where race fell away and only the human spirit remained.

That being said, those moments become possible when people have a deep resolve to ensure that their way of being in the world takes care not to injure another. In my circles, that has meant that those producing the events and conferences explicitly treat issues of race, placing their effects in the center of the room and asking participants both to acknowledge the trauma and the perpetuation of racial wounding and to hold themselves accountable for their actions, be they conscious or unconscious.

Similar to the other ways that we evade the discomfort of our whiteness, transcending race fails us in our efforts to demonstrate rejection of racism and prejudice. As with the previous four approaches, transcending race also asks us to remain ignorant as to how our whiteness plays a role in how we think and behave. Holding ourselves as beyond race can cause us to ignore the pain of others and see ourselves as more evolved than those who talk about the continuing effects of race on our lives. Lastly, the idea of being beyond race can have negative effects within efforts toward community-building unless we build the capacity to bring race into the dialogue and work it through on the way to deeper connection.

FROM BYSTANDER TO WITNESS

The methods most white people use to avoid facing our dis-ease about being white do not work terribly well. Yes, our various approaches can satisfy us on the surface, make us feel as though we are on the side of right, and offer us some good-sounding arguments for why we no longer need to focus on race. Unfortunately, the shadows emerge the moment race enters the situation and we find ourselves disconnected from those who speak of continuing problems. We quickly become defensive and resistant, unable to withstand the critique that we continue to be related to the problems. But we can do things differently. Instead of turning away from our whiteness, we can turn the other direction. We can face the dis-ease. We can clarify our vision.

Trauma theory can help us understand the needed shift. Within any traumatic situation there are several positions we might inhabit. We know each

of the positions fairly well, as we play each role at different times throughout our lives. We can be the perpetrator, victim, bystander, or witness. When we are the perpetrator, the cause of the trauma, justice then generally involves us being held accountable in front of the community. When we are the victim who suffers the brunt of the trauma, then care and attention is required to heal from the situation.

As a bystander, we might stop to look at the situation, but we are not involved in the remedy. This is in contrast to the witness. If we witness, we see the situation clearly enough to speak out. Continuing to turn away from the way race affects us places us either in the perpetrator or bystander position. We cannot interrupt racism, either someone else's or our own, if we cannot see how racism manifests in a systematic fashion. We do not have to remain blind, numb, and dumb to how race affects our relationships and the wider community. Instead, we can begin to witness.

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