What’s Whiteness Got To Do With It?

Jen Willsea
“American identity is defined as white, and whiteness is used to examine, without being examined. The invisibility of whiteness in a white-dominated culture is similar to the invisible presence of the narrator in a story told from the third-person point of view. The ever-present subject (i.e., the author) has the power to name and define the object without ever calling explicit attention to his or her presence or perspective. This perspective then becomes the unexamined framework by which objects are described and defined.

The invisibility of the related ‘white gaze,’ as well as of whiteness itself, enables whites to simultaneously recognize that non-whites have been denied opportunities and resources and yet to assert that whites have achieved their own societal status through personal merit.”

John A. Powell, Racing to Justice
Changing demographics of US population

1965:
- White: 84%
- Black: 11%
- Hispanic: 4%
- Asian: <1%

2015:
- White: 62%
- Black: 12%
- Hispanic: 18%
- Asian: 6%

2055:
- White: 48%
- Black: 13%
- Hispanic: 23%
- Asian: 12%

Source: Pew Research Center
“[White people] are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it. They have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men. Many of them, indeed, know better, but, as you will discover, people find it very difficult to act on what they know. To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity.”

-- James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*
WHITENESS IS A LIE, AND YET IT IS REAL
Where did the idea of Whiteness come from and why was it created?

In contrast to Blackness, an idea invented to justify the stealing and brutal enslavement of Africans; and to justify the freedom of Europeans in the colonies

1640 John Punch

To eliminate the possibility of multiracial alliances and uprisings; to strip Blacks of any rights previously held as indentured servants

1676 Bacon’s Rebellion and the 1705 Virginia Slave Codes

To exclusively endow landowning, voting, citizenship rights and other forms of power to Whites only; to establish multi-class alliances among Whites

1790 Naturalization Act

*1691 Virginia Houses of Burgesses law included first documented use in English speaking colonies of the word “white” (rather than European or Christian) to legally limit citizenship to White men who were single or married to White women

Source: Seeing White podcast by Scene On Radio (guests Ibram X. Kendi, Nell Irvin Painter, Racial Equity Institute)
WHITE SUPREMACY IS TAUGHT TO US AND PRACTICED BY “GOOD PEOPLE”
New Poll Finds Majority Oppose White Supremacists—Even While Sharing White Supremacist Views
OVERT WHITE SUPREMACY (Socially Unacceptable)

- Lynching
- Hate Crimes
- Swastikas
- KKK
- Burning Crosses
- The N-Word
- Racist Slurs
- Racist Jokes
- Neo-Nazis

COVERT WHITE SUPREMACY (Socially Acceptable)

- School-to-Prison Pipeline
- Confederate Flags
- Not Believing Experiences of POC
- Virtuous Victim Narrative
- Denial of White Privilege
- Denial of Racism
- "Make America Great Again"
- "But what about me?"
- "But we’re just one human family"
- "It is just a joke!"
- "Don’t blame me, I never owned slaves"
- Bootstrap Theory
- Cultural Appropriation
- White Savior Complex
- Tokenism
- Colorblindness
- Racist Mascots
- Claiming Reverse Racism
- Not Challenging Racist Jokes

Source: Safehouse Progressive Alliance for Nonviolence, adapted by Ellen Tuzzolo
Conflict mediation and racial equity facilitation team: Ana Perez and Jen Willsea

Reducing Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Bernalillo County from Generation Justice on Vimeo.
WE MUST EXPOSE AND TRANSFORM WHITENESS
What can white people do? What does action look like?

1. Look out for policies and practices at your school, church, company, etc. that (un)intentionally racially discriminate and change them (note that colorblind policies and practices almost always have racially inequitable consequences)

2. Learn about the racialized history of your town, neighborhood, and the U.S.A.

3. Learn more about racism at the internalized, institutional, and structural levels (it’s not just interpersonal)

4. Seek out and amplify the voices of people of color who are doing racial justice work, and writing and researching about racism

5. Notice your own biases and blind spots

6. Name whiteness; notice where white superiority shows up in your day to day life

7. Notice when emotions like shame, guilt, fear show up for you and work with them

8. Learn to hear “that was racist” and not couple it with “I’m a bad person”
What can white people do?
What does action look like?

9. Beware of reacting defensively or dismissively when people of color point out racism and share their experiences, especially if you feel implicated or accused; questioning, countering their stories is hurtful and blocks your own learning and growth

10. Pay attention to relationships you have with people of color; seek to deepen them genuinely without tokenizing or fetishizing

11. Donate to racial justice organizations led by people of color

12. Speak up about racism, whiteness and white superiority—especially with white friends, family and colleagues for whom these conversations are not the norm

13. Begin conversations about race and racism with children at a young age because if you're silent, children will learn the message that it's not ok to talk about race or racism while simultaneously seeing racial differences and hierarchy in their world (the research shows that children as young as two know how to use racial slurs)

14. Show up for racial justice events, including marches and rallies

Overall… Risk more. Take less personally. Every action counts.
“The tiptoeing around race and other forms of difference as if in fear of waking a sleeping lion is one of the most subtly toxic attributes of whiteness in our culture right now. Everyone fears making mistakes.”

--Rev. angel kyodo williams, *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation*
“So much has been invested in whiteness that it is hard to let it go. It is often defensive, resentful, full of denial and amnesia. The only way to save our nation, and, yes, to save yourselves, is to let go of whiteness and the vision of American history it supports. I’m not asking you to let go of your humanity, but, in the best way possible, to find your way back to it.”

Michael Eric Dyson, *Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America*
Stay in Touch

“Intro to Racism for White People--A List of Resources for Learning” compiled by me (link on my twitter profile)

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