

AS LONG AS YOU THINK YOU'RE WHITE...

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This body of work encourages white people¹ to recognize that their histories, perspectives, and experiences are not those of humanity, but rather those of white humanity; while simultaneously exposing the falsity of inherent whiteness. In other words, the exhibit and web site provide a space for white people to perceive their whiteness in the contexts of socialization, material culture, and economic location; and then to begin to disavow it within their attitudes, behaviors, and identities. Recognizing and disavowing whiteness concurrently may appear contradictory. Both are strategies necessary for the creation of white identities capable of acknowledging the gross historical injustices carried out in their names and accepting ongoing culpability in the maintenance of historical inequalities, without becoming paralyzed by guilt.

I grew up in an overwhelmingly white American town, nonetheless aware of the guilt felt by my parents for being white people. I grappled with it myself². Though the northern part of my state is home to the national headquarters of the Aryan Nations, and their ideology flourished behind many closed doors, overt racism was never publicly tolerated. At eighteen, my father took an unusual step for a young man of the region in driving across the country to the 1964 Democratic Party convention to cast a vote in support of the Civil Rights Movement. Years later, his mother uttered *nigger* in my presence. He rebuked her strongly.

However when puberty struck me, a fissure surfaced in my father's progressive façade. I could date boys with different skin colors than mine, yet was not to consider marrying them or having their children. "It's not fair to the kids." I sensed that something about this logic was suspect. I had already realized that past histories of genocide, slavery, and discrimination were related to present social and economic inequalities, but could not articulate why, or how they were, or my relation to it all, or for that matter, why my progressive father only accepted intimate white relationships for me. That was because I did not think of myself as white. Klu Klux Klansmen were white; I was American.

¹ Nomenclature for groups of people has long been problematic (Lippard 19-20). *Caucasian*, is closely associated with delusive scientific ideas of "race". *White* implies an importance of skin color over personhood. *European Canadian* etc., ignores the presence of Europeans who are not white. Risking tediousness, I only use *white people*. I dislike *non-white*, because it sets white as its cornerstone. *People of color* suggests that white people lack color. *Black* excludes many Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Indigenous Peoples. Instead, I use the cumbersome yet more precise *people who are not white*. For an in-depth discussion, please see Bonnett.

² Recently, scholars have acknowledged the importance of the author's location with in the structures being examined critically (Chambers 202; Dyer 1997, 4-8; Roediger 3-5). I write about my whiteness not as confession, but as a clarification of my background and experiences that have affected my thinking.

As just an American, I learned white history at school, read the classics of white literature, and sang white church hymns. I presumed my stories, myths, and songs were the bedrock of everyone's experience. I did not notice the white curriculum, nor did it occur to me that flesh colored bandages are white flesh colored or that nude nylons are not nude on most Africans.



Flesh Colored

Throughout the eighties and nineties—especially at university where multiculturalism and diversity were the order of the day—I continually heard and believed that divisions based on color did not matter. After all, “We are all the same color on the inside.” Now I wonder if life's realities are ever that clear. I studied art history, which meant class after class of white art history, punctuated by special exotic classes such as Japanese art history. My colorblind world was divided into normal and special, or more accurately, white and everyone else.

Given that normality is defined by all that is white, am I actually presuming that everyone is white like me with the same opportunities and experiences, when I claim that I am normal and we are all the same? Colorblind rhetoric ultimately fails as a helpful construct because we do not all share the same histories and cultures, and their influences shape our lives differently. In attempting to wrestle with these issues, I decided to concentrate my studies on histories and cultures not my own. I thought I could discover how to be antiracist and “help those people.” Such reasoning functioned so long as I remained in a white environment and did not know any of “them.”

That changed markedly when I came to Australia to learn about Aboriginal land ethic. At the Indigenous Peoples and Racism conference in Sydney³, I met many Aboriginal people. Though I had lived in Japan, Indonesia, Chile, and Taiwan, and was used to possessing one of the few white faces around, this was new territory. Never before had my skin color been in the minority, in a country where the majority of people look like me. No one was intrigued by my exoticness, or pleased about yet another foreigner's desire to “help.” Aboriginal people instead asked, “Why don't you *help* your own culture and take a look at it?”

I look white to most people, and I am sure at times, I still act white. For the most part, I still enjoy the economic and social advantages whiteness confers on me. However, I am beginning not to think white.

The Greeks and Romans never thought of themselves as white. Neither did early European settlers of the Americas. They were Puritans, French, or free, not white. Ann Louise Keating reminds one that, “It was not until around 1680, with the racialization of slavery, that the term [white] was used to describe a specific

³ Indigenous Peoples and Racism: Regional Meeting of Indigenous Peoples of Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii, Canada and the United States-A Satellite Meeting to the United Nations World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance. Sydney, Australia. 20-22 Feb. 2001.

group of people” (par. 31). The economic opportunities created by slavery, accelerated the generation of the “races.” Red, black, yellow, and white do not accurately describe human skin. White and black do however, retain ancient associations with purity and evil which were appropriated for the purposes of wealth accumulation (Dyer 1997, 67; Keating, par. 32).

Once established, the category white was not and is still not stable. People who fall within the bounds of whiteness today, previously did not. In his revealing *How the Irish Became White*, Noel Ignatiev tells of the distinction between African slaves and Irish immigrants as so blurred that the former were often called “smoked Irish” (41). According to Carl Wittke, the poorest of Irish labourers were labelled “Irish niggers” (qtd. in Ignatiev 214). Jonathan W. Warren and France Winddance Twine note in their examination of the “ever-expanding boundaries of whiteness” that nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Italian immigrants to the US were often considered “just as bad as the Negroes” (5).

How did these groups come to identify and be thought of as white? An answer can be found in the formlessness of whiteness. White people, when asked what it means to be white, often struggle with their responses. In revelatory contrast, people who are not white have little trouble with queries about their cultural identities and are usually able to illuminate aspects of white culture that white people fail to recognize (Wuker 19; Haggis, Schech, and Fitzgerald 169–70).

Many white people find it far easier to describe Latino festivals or black cooking than their own cultural practices, leading them to define themselves by what they are not. A majority of white people—at least unconsciously—envisage white, as not black. Such a broad and ambiguous definition allows the entrance of people, who have historically not been white, into the flock of whiteness. However conditions do apply; they must be willing to conform to its norms. Warren and Winddance Twine write:

[. . .] because Blacks represent the “other” against which Whiteness is constructed, the backdoor to Whiteness is open to non-blacks. Slipping through that opening is, then, a tactical matter for non-blacks of conforming to White standards, of distancing themselves from Blackness and of reproducing anti-black ideas and sentiments (8).

If substantive definitions of whiteness prove elusive, can the white norms that non-blacks conform to be delineated? Contemplating this question is problematic, unless one acknowledges that white standards are actually “the” standards.



Irish Niggers

Such fundamental invisibility provides a wide platform for the creation and maintenance of enormous societal power. It enables white people to assert their values, ethics, and aspirations as universal; and yet insist that their individuality supersedes any group affiliation. Those who fail to meet white standards are rarely considered primarily as individuals; rather they are imagined as representatives of their group. Their individuality is almost always secondary. In “White,” a groundbreaking analysis of whiteness in film, Richard Dyer suggests:

It is the way that black people are marked as black (are not just ‘people’) in representation that has made it relatively easy to analyse their representation, whereas white people – not there as a category and everywhere everything as a fact – are difficult, if not impossible, to analyse *qua* white. The subject seems to fall apart in your hands as soon as you begin. Any instance of white representation is always immediately something more specific – *Brief Encounter* is not about white people, it is about English middle-class people; *The Godfather* is not about white people, it is about Italian-American people; but *The Color Purple* is about black people, before it is about poor, southern US people (1988, 46).

Whiteness as norm creates tangible benefits. In an influential essay, Peggy McIntosh identified numerous white privileges accrued from its normalness.



They're All A Bunch Of Drunks

White people watch television, read magazines or look at billboards and see themselves widely represented. They easily purchase posters, picture books, dolls, and toys for their (white) children featuring people who look like them. When they are told about national heritage or “civilization,” they are also told that people of their color made it what it is. If they wish, they can arrange to be in the company of other white people most of the time. Success in a challenging situation does not deem them a “credit to their race.” Swearing or dressing shabbily does not discredit their “race.” If they are experiencing a bad day, week, or year, they do not need to analyze each unpleasant episode to see if it has racial overtones (McIntosh, par. 7).

Still other privileges result from the dominant position normalness bestows. White people can be fairly sure that if a traffic cop pulls them over, they have not been singled out because of their skin color. They can go shopping without worrying about being followed or harassed. If they buy something with a check or credit card, their whiteness will not cast doubt on their financial reliability. They can be fairly certain that when asking to speak to “the person in charge” she or he will be a white person. If they require medical or legal

assistance, their skin color will not work against them. If they need to move, they can be reasonably sure of renting or purchasing a house they can afford, and in which they want to live. They can also be fairly certain that their neighbors will be neutral or pleasant to them. They can work for an affirmative action employer, without suspicions of having gotten the job because of their skin color. Most importantly, they can remain oblivious of the customs, languages, and situations of people who are not white (the majority of the peoples of the world) without penalty (McIntosh, par. 7).

Given that much of white experience, and hence white identity, is derived from privilege, white people will need to ask difficult questions of themselves if a more just and equitable world is to be achieved. How can white people extricate themselves from privilege? Some suggest that individuals disavow their whiteness whenever possible. For example, Ignatiev recommends responding to racist sentiments with neither silence, nor lecture, but rather with an identification with the ridiculed other (interview par. 70). “Ever hear about the raghead that... Excuse me. You probably said that because you think I’m white. That’s a mistake people make because I look white.” Others advocate increased cultural crossover, as evidenced in the popularity of hip-hop culture with white youth. Still others believe that a more accurate and inclusive understanding of shared histories must be presented to the public and taught in our schools. All are at best, partial solutions.

I am convinced that the white community at large will have more and better answers, once it engages in frank discussion. What exactly does it mean to be white? How is privilege related to white identity? What aspects of white culture exist independently of privilege? Finally, how can an examination of whiteness point us toward a fairer world?

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