

## **Confessions from a Teacher About My Race Oblivion**

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### **Abstract**

In this piece, I write about the obliviousness to race in which many whites are insulated. In this spirit, I have attempted to poke holes at the innocence claimed in my previous state of oblivion (a not uncommon state for white teachers). I claim no authority on the real and horrendous suffering, humiliation, and degrading realities that racialized people often feel on a daily basis. My goal here is to help open up the conversation by offering my own confession of obliviousness and to challenge other white teachers to confront the inequitable and oppressive systems they are functioning in. I offer a few suggestions for places to begin or continue this journey of awareness.

Keywords: White identity; Emotional tension; Racialized; Students; White teachers; Racism; Education

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It is with great humility that I confess this: As a white, high school English teacher for over 15 years, I did not once consider my skin color to be contributing to the drastic racial achievement gaps that I witnessed on a daily basis. Sure, I'd heard of books and articles about white teachers and their Black and Brown students, but I dismissed them as books that were meant for those teachers. The ones who didn't care. The ones who were overtly racist, and said nasty things about their racialized students.

I, however, considered myself a teacher who cared deeply for all of my students, including my disadvantaged students, those pushed to those margins by class, ability, sexuality, race, or other factors. I had relationships with my racialized students, or at least I tried to form them by inviting dialogue, respecting cultural differences, and highlighting the contributions of various ethnic groups throughout history and literature. I wanted all of my students to be successful, to get into the university if they wanted, to care about their education, to appreciate argumentation, a properly placed comma, and Shakespeare. Surely the indictments written to white teachers were not meant for me—I treated my students equally.

Or so I thought. This is my story. I am certainly not representative of every white teacher, but I offer my personal story as an example.

Instead of feeling at all personally implicated by the racism evident around me, I attended many workshops and meetings about how to better engage my racialized students. I read tips and strategies about how to motivate learners from cultures who did not (I was told) value education as highly as they ought. I participated in activities designed to help me understand other ways

of learning that were relevant to people from “other” cultural groups. I learned mapping strategies intended to invite better literacy skills for racialized populations (proven in research!). I kept trying. But the more “strategies” I attempted in my classroom, the more I suspected that they were merely band aids on a deep wound. Many of my colleagues and I made valiant efforts to address and mitigate the achievement gap that clearly disadvantaged racialized students, and still does. Yet, over the years, the gap kept worsening instead of improving. I saw with my own eyes in my own “Essentials” classes filled with Black and Brown students, the drastic contrast to mostly white students in Advanced classes just down the hallway. The sharp division that cut across race was certain to determine future prospects (for exploration on the term “color line” see Douglass, 1881; and Du Bois, Blight, & Gooding-Williams, 1997).

I came back to higher education to dig deeply into this problem. I wanted to understand the root, to examine the underbelly of a system that is seemingly ignoring the urgency of this reality.

Early in my studies, one of my professors recommend that I look into some critical whiteness scholars. What? Me? Why? I need to look at the problems that racialized bodies are facing, not my own, I thought. “They” are the root, not me, I'm just “normal”; “whiteness” is just normal. But of the many things I have learned while pursuing a PhD, one of the most painful has been humility. Fine. Okay. I will. And I did.

What I explored over the next few years changed me deeply.

One of the first things I had to wrestle with were my own biases that had been deeply entrenched in me since childhood. I

recounted my own exposure (and lack thereof) to race: From the moment I was born, all the arms that held me and fed me were white. All of my teachers, from pre-school to university: white. All of my dolls, my heroes in novels, the people I watched on TV, my neighbors, youth group leaders, coaches, and ministers: white. Almost all of the people that entered my home to visit and sit at my parents' dining room table: white. The police officers I felt safe to run to: white. The political and business leaders in my communities: white. Whiteness became, to me, synonymous with power, rationality, correctness, trustworthiness, appropriateness, morality, and "normality" (for explorations of white identity development and the social construction of whiteness see Feagin, 2013; Frankenberg, 1993; Helms, 1990; Kincheloe, Steinberg, Rodriguez, & Chennault, 2000; Tatum, 1994).

The few racialized people I remember coming into contact with fell under one of four categories:

1. People presented as worthy of my sympathy and charity, those we took offerings for during church, often accompanied by emotionally laden images of children far away who were starving and living in rags.
2. People who served me. People who mowed the lawns, worked the fields, cleaned houses, or made me a milkshake at a fast food restaurant.
3. People to be feared. Thanks to the media, the next major exposure I had to bodies of color were of those who were violent and angry perpetrators.
4. Lastly, I saw people of color as fascinating, exotic, whose cultures

were enviable, worthy of being imitated, stolen, copied.

It should not, then, be shocking that I developed deeply ingrained negative biases toward people of color: pity, sympathy, fear, and low expectations. Yes, I had a few racialized friends and colleagues over the years, but not nearly enough to counteract the repeated exposure during my most formative years.

Ta-Nehisi Coates recently defined racism this way: "Racism is not merely a simplistic hatred. It is, more often, broad sympathy toward some and broader skepticism toward others" (2012). It is this definition that has made the most sense to my life history. I was not raised by people who condoned racism, far from it. The real culprits were the subtle messages, repeated images, and consistent representations all around me that took root and helped to create the "broad sympathy" and "broader skepticism" I harbored toward bodies of color.

It was never explicitly stated, but constantly implied with every face that I looked to for trust, guidance, and insight, and every authority in my life that directed my fears and wove together my biases: My white body was somehow more worthy of protection, more worthy of achievement, more worthy of respect, more worthy of the benefit of the doubt. And conversely, racialized bodies were less worthy of trust, and more likely to receive my pity, suspicion, not the benefit of mine or anyone's doubt. I was at the top of a racial hierarchy.

I naively thought that I could simply choose not to have biases toward people of color once I became aware of them, as if it were an easy switch to pull or box to check,

and then just move on and live as if my biases were gone. To live this way, and to pretend that I did not still have biases without deeply interrogating my insular upbringing and recognizing how ingrained I was with biases toward people who looked like me, and against those who did not, was a shame.

This was a messy and complicated reality to face. To admit this brought me much shame, confusion, and fear (I have learned this is not uncommon for white people when they begin to examine racial realities, see de Lissovoy & Brown, 2013; Lensmire, 2010; Leonardo, 2004; Mills, 2015; Tatum, 1994). I wrestled for quite some time over how to navigate this new knowledge, how to reconcile it with my lived reality, my work as a researcher, and my many roles—often intertwined and intersecting—as an educator, wife, friend, daughter, and mother.

I have come to see that my current situation in life has as much or more to do with the color of my skin than with my own merit, even though I was oblivious to this reality for more than three decades. Despite my beliefs that I earned my place in life by my work ethic, my assertiveness, and my persistence, I have come to see that my many advantages, including my ease getting into the university, my lack of fear that my word will be trusted, the confidence I have as an authority in many realms, the police whom I have always trusted and never feared, my ability to be unique and rude and confrontational, the benefit of the doubt I am given at a border crossings, the profiling that results in added delightful attention that I enjoy while shopping, and so many more, are all easier because I am white (for more exploration on privileges, see McIntosh, 1992).

My white skin has benefited me tremendously in ways I never considered. My obliviousness was not necessarily my fault, but when I became aware, my next choice was most certainly my responsibility. I was not “at the table” when the decisions were made to set up my country with racist intent, to eradicate the Indigenous populations that were occupying the land my ancestors wanted, to segregate schools, to police borders, to profile racialized populations, to keep systems governed by white people, but as I become increasingly aware of how all of that and more has been and continues to function all around me, all the time, it is now my responsibility. The different reality that people of color endure every day is vastly different than my own. If I choose to deny this, then I become at fault.

I decided that I cannot benefit tremendously in this system that was set up for me without contributing to its ongoing functionality (see Applebaum, 2004, 2010). So I sought to understand how I am contributing to a system that benefits me. To pick apart my contributions, I could learn to challenge these systems all around me, particularly the schooling systems that I have been contributing to for two decades. I asked: How has my life—which is deeply entwined with the consequences of race and racism—been contributing to the same systems that offer me the privileges I enjoy? I have dwelled in this tension, remaining in this position of privilege while trying to challenge it at the same time.

I invite you into this tension. Especially if you are a white teacher who has not yet considered how much your white identity impacts your students and your colleagues. If you are perhaps realizing that you have been oblivious to the racial reality all around you, and have come to see that you would

like to understand this reality so that you can challenge its structure, please join me.

Like most things worth doing, this journey is not easy or quick, but it is so necessary. Not only for the vast populations of racialized students who are not experiencing the equitable and affirming spaces teachers are mandated to provide, but also for our own humanity. Once we see the world unveiled, and see the vast inequities that exist to keep us in a place of privilege, we have to choose whether or not we will continue to live as if it isn't true, as if we have somehow earned our privileges. The easy choice is to choose helplessness, or complicity, perpetuating the very things that we claim to oppose.

We cannot choose to be neutral here, to be neutral is to contribute to our own comfort (see Apple, 2011; Kumashiro, 2000). When a group is part of the dominant identity, in this case white people, we tend to see ourselves as normal; we see ourselves as neutral and objective, claiming that the "other" (racialized, marginalized) groups have agendas and biases. Certainly, this is the easier and more comfortable choice. White people are encouraged to remain unaware of their privileges, yet racialized bodies are highly attuned to them, often their very survival depends on it (Goodman, 2011). White people rarely have opportunities to hear about how our behavior affects people of color; it is often unsafe for people of color to reveal it.

Rather, the harder choice is to dwell in this messy, complicated space, and wrestle. Here are some things that I've tried to do, and if you're looking for a place to get started, I recommend these. I claim no expertise or success in any of these, rather these are some things I have been attempting to do, as they were recommended by people

who have been doing this work much longer than I:

1. We can't learn to talk about race and racism without talking about race and racism. Similar to learning any new skill (riding a bike, playing a musical instrument, speaking a language, practicing a sport) we cannot get better by only reading about it from a distance, we need to jump in, pluck the strings, speak the words, get moving. It can be awkward and messy. It certainly isn't easy at first. Learn to see race, notice it, watch how it functions all around you, bring it up in conversation. Ask questions. Choose to see the world unveiled. Listen.
2. We need to take risks and be vulnerable in order to do this—we need to be willing to be wrong, to be told we are wrong, and to say thank you when someone points it out. This is an extremely difficult challenge for me, and perhaps for many teachers like me who are used to being "right" in front of our students and are yearning to establish and maintain our credibility. Many of us have developed fears of being exposed and vulnerable, not shocking in our high-stakes testing environments. In spite of this, we need to be willing to be exposed (see Freire, 1970; Hooks, 1981).
3. We need to face our own biases. This may involve looking deeply at ourselves, our childhood, and our racial identity, and examining and unlearning how we've been taught to think about and avoid race. This is not a simple check list or quick activity. This involves an ongoing

interrogation of everything we've often held dear, valued, and been taught to think about race. This is ongoing throughout life, never finished.

4. An important caution I've heard and read from many scholars is this: Never, ever dismiss knowledge coming from oppressed groups (see Allen, 2004). The people who have been in oppressed positions are the ones who can speak about it best. They have the authority, credibility, and deserve our attention. I have tried to learn in this journey how to listen better, how to allow difficult knowledge to soak over me without justifying it, defending it, rationalizing it, or dismissing it.
5. To those of us who like to take control, it is also apt to take a back seat. Our agency as white people doing antiracist work is delicate. We need to be careful not to take over, and to allow our voices (who are positioned to be considered more credible) to take precedence. Looking at the history about how many white people have succumbed to roles of "white saviors" is helpful to see what to avoid (see Allen, 2004; Matias, 2014; McIntyre, 1997; Titone, 2000) As antiracist allies, we need to speak up against inequitable systems, not seek to "help" victims of racism (Tatum, 1994). Rather, let us seek to be true allies who "neither apologise for others nor require exoneration" (Kitossa, 2016, para. 6).
6. We need to look at strong antiracist white leaders as role models and examples. We would do well to see

how others have paved the way, and learn from them (see Moore, Penick-Parks, & Michael, 2015).

7. As we develop as more confident antiracist allies, we will develop skills and courage to interrupt racist comments and situations. This is best done in love and in relationship. In a Keynote speech at the White Privilege Conference in 2015, Loretta Ross said we need to learn how to call people "in" to join cross-racial alliances, not call them "out" by acting as the racism police. She continued with this challenge: When we ask people to give up hate, we should be there for them when they do. To walk around calling "out" negative comments and actions only serves to create an environment of fear. Spaces filled with love and grace will allow more progress to be made; thus, authentic cross-racial relationships need to be cultivated. Some of us need to deliberately and literally move out of our comfort zones to enable this to happen. Sit in different places. Move out of our white neighborhoods. Change where we worship. Volunteer in different spaces. Shop in different places. Switch hobbies. Make new friends.
8. Lastly, we need to think carefully about how we address race in our classrooms. This is the area where my whiteness as a teacher is most powerfully implicated. Leading young people into a critical understanding of race, and all that it entails, is an immense responsibility. It is one that I took too lightly for too many years. Race is a weighty and urgent topic that presents itself often in our classrooms, whether we seek

to explore it or not. I offer a personal example from my time spent in high school classrooms.

As an English teacher for many years, the lessons that presented opportunities to discuss race were abundant. Two of the books I taught repeatedly were *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, and *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain. In my lessons, apart from the literary and state-imposed benchmarks, I wove in many opportunities to analyse oppression of racialized people. I included carefully crafted discussion questions, historical timelines, data about the historical treatment of Black people before and after slavery and the Civil Rights Movement, primary documents that explored the depth and pain of oppression, among other prompts that invited dialogue and reflection about the unfair treatment of racialized people in North America. I wanted my students to be moved to compassion after learning about the suffering many people have experienced in the United States. I wanted this compassion to lead to action.

What I failed to do in all of this, however, was name the oppressor. I led my students through the content about unfair treatment, but I failed to name who it was doing the harm. Sure, we critiqued Jim Crow and slavery, and the laws, policies, and attitudes that left them in place, but I never connected them to the system of white supremacy. I never named whiteness, white people, white privilege. I left the oppressor in the past, and perpetuated the notion that we have moved on, that we have overcome unfair treatment of racialized people.

I recognize now that this dangerous thinking fuels the notion that if someone has not come out from the hole that was dug for them years ago, it is somehow their own

fault—the myth of meritocracy, which asks us to pretend that we are all competing on a level playing field. This is the same misconception that allows too many white people to blame the racially victimized for their situation. As a teacher, I was guilty of perpetuating oppression by leaving whiteness unnamed, unmarked, vague, and historical. With my efforts to induce compassion toward victims of racial injustice, I instead produced sympathy toward racialized bodies that served only to reimpose power dynamics, keeping white bodies—myself and my white students—in hierarchical positions as benefactors or saviors.

What I failed to do as a teacher was to implicate the systems and structures of white supremacy, and to invite my students into examining these larger forces that still function today. If I could go back to these lessons that included discussion about the victimization of the Black characters, Jim and Tom Robinson (though I acknowledge a need to reconsider teaching these books at all, there are strong arguments that these should be replaced with narratives that include racialized protagonists with powerful voices), I would include lessons about white privilege. I would name and define white supremacy, and I would help students to notice its still-functioning ideology. I would ask my students to compare the actions, the nonactions, the emotions, the silence, and the words of the white characters in the books to powerful white people speaking and remaining silent today. I would include historical and contemporary primary sources from writers who are racialized, journalists like Ta-Nehisi Coates, poets like Nayyirah Waheed, scholars like Michelle Alexander, activists like Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi. I would create opportunities to compare the many racist incidents in both

books to contemporary racial violence. I would ask them to investigate how power plays out in race relations—how power is embodied in whiteness. I would ask them to consider how each of us processes the world around us, and how we are all deeply affected by our biased notions of who is worthy of power, credibility, and dignity. I would share my own journey of awareness—how I began and continue to notice the whiteness I have been swimming in my entire life, and how I constantly have to interrogate my many blind spots. I would invite them to notice systems that keep some in power at the expense of others. I would show them how systemic racism is imbedded, and how it plays out in patronizing, condescending, and unfair ways—both big and small: from biased policing to a seemingly innocuous spark of doubt that a stranger might exhibit when they hear that a racialized student is going to an Ivy League school. There is a plethora of live, current examples of systemic racism all around us in every private and public sphere. These would be entirely different lessons than the ones I taught several years ago—they would no doubt be controversial, emotional, and risky. However, as a white teacher, I am convinced that these are the kinds of risks we need to take in order to challenge the systemic oppression our racialized students face daily.

White teachers, I challenge you to consider how you are implicated in a country and an industry—education—that continues to serve some populations vastly better than others, and I ask you to include discussions of white supremacy and white privilege in your conversations about race

with your colleagues and your students. We owe it to our profession, to our students, and to ourselves to consider our white identity carefully, and to rewire our thinking to truly value each one of our students.

There are so many incredible scholars and thinkers who have led the way, and who offer these and other excellent suggestions, a list of some follows the article.

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