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Whiteness. A problem for our time

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The concept of 'Whiteness' as applied to humans is full of paradox and contradiction. No human being, even the fairest amongst us has skin that is actually 'white' just as the darkest is not 'black'. Yet this crude form of colour coding which came into being in the modern era has divided humanity and ensured white supremacy in the service of domination, colonialism, slavery and capitalism.

The deliberate use of this division for political and economic advantage was first recorded in 17th century Virginia when the first Africans were forcibly brought on slave ships to work the plantations. Anxious that the indentured European labour force would find common cause with the enslaved Africans, the term 'white' was used to transform the masters, plantation owners and European labourers into one all-inclusive group. Through a set of laws that privileged whites alone, any class solidarity with the blacks was disrupted ensuring that power remained in the hands of the ruling white elite.

Gathering all those with lighter-hued skin within the rubric 'white' not only allowed the illusion of common privilege but also tapped into our unconscious imaginary in relation to 'white' and to 'black'. These associations – albeit with some local variations – tend to be universal, based as they are in the nature of our bodies and the diurnal rhythms of the planet we inhabit. Mother's nourishing milk and father's productive sperm are white. White is associated with daytime, the dove of peace and the pure soul, whereas black belongs to the dark terrors of night, to war and sin. Devils inhabit the blackness of Hell and angels the whiteness of Heaven. Link those with a lighter hue of skin to 'whiteness' and the others to 'blackness' and much of the psychological work of justifying domination is done.

'Whiteness' implies purity and allows no contamination, no tincture or it ceases to be white. We are whitewashed, drained of our colours and all imperfections are located elsewhere. The creation of 'whiteness' forces 'blackness' into existence and turns distinctions of shades into oppositions. Since 'white' cannot allow darkness to exist within itself, shadows must be rejected and cast into what it deems to be 'black'. In the words of James Hillman: "White casts its own white shadow". This conclusion may be bettered to say, "white sees its own shadow in black,"

The category of 'Whiteness' like that of 'Blackness' includes within it an infinite variety of lived experiences of and relationships to the concept. The line that is drawn separating the two has shifted across history and geography leaving behind a variety of legacies. Where the dividing line is placed, who gets to be regarded as 'white' and thus to sit at the centre of this particular arrangement of power and privilege, and who is relegated to the margins, is not a fixed matter but shifts according to history and geography. At different moments in time Jews, the Irish, Latinos, Southern Europeans have all been regarded as 'black' – or at least 'non-white'. At other times and other places, they are accepted as 'white.' How this is decided seems to be an emergent process

depending on the political and economic forces in operation and what best serves the system at that particular time and location.

The division of the races is a deep, entrenched, social structure which creates and promotes white privilege and is one within which we all live. No one can be free from it. The statement 'I am not a racist' is meaningless in such a system.

Each 'white' person has their own relationship to 'whiteness'. Those who have grown up in societies with a colonial history carry a different cultural shadow than those who don't. The existence of the plantations and of institutionalised chattel slavery for several hundred years in the Americas leaves a different legacy than that inherited by the descendants of the European men who ran the trade. Few of us trace a direct hereditary line back to slavers yet we live amongst and benefit from the spoils of that trade. Many have ancestors who themselves were oppressed and discriminated against. Some experience discrimination now on the basis of gender language, class, sexuality, disability etc. These personal histories and experiences are important and to be honoured and it is for each individual to find their own relationship to their ancestors and to their life story.

And yet ... whatever our personal history, wherever we were born, into which class, however young or old we are, if we walk the world as 'white' we inherit an advantage not allowed to those designated as 'black'. We may have to bear the discrimination due to our class or sexuality or gender or disability, but we do so without the added burden of racism..

Doors are not closed to us because of our skin colour, we see ourselves reflected in places of power and influence and can take for granted a basic social justice across all our institutions from health to education to the law. We do not fear the forces of law and order in the way a black person does. We may if we wish remain disinterested in racism itself and have the choice to ignore or even deny its presence in the world we inhabit.

It is perhaps not surprising that we struggle to free ourselves just a little from the suffocating blanket of 'whiteness', assert our own subjectivity and apply a touch of colour. Because we are not taught to see ourselves in racial terms, and because the fact of racism challenges a benign sense of ourselves we employ a variety of defences to ward off accusations, including that of exceptionalism and what-aboutism.

Writing on 'white fragility' Robin DiAngelo (2018) makes a plea that when we face our whiteness, we need to set aside our sense of uniqueness. This, she says:

....is a critical skill that will allow you to see the big picture of the society in which we live; individualism will not. For now, try to let go of your individual narrative and grapple with the collective messages we all receive as members of a larger shared culture. Work to see how these messages have shaped your life, rather than use some aspect of your story to excuse yourself from their impact. (p.13)

The philosopher Charles Mills (1997) refers to what he calls '*white ignorance*' which he suggests produces '*the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made.*' (p.18)

Just as DiAngelo stresses that 'white fragility' is not a weakness but a way of protecting white privilege, 'white ignorance' is the means by which we at the centre close our eyes to our privilege and the impact on those at the margins. By staying blind and un-knowing, by assuming racism, disparity and prejudice belong to the past or to other individuals within modern day society, we

manage the tightrope of relieving ourselves of guilt whilst ensuring the advantages of our whiteness are maintained.

We who I refer to as 'white liberals' can dwell in this ignorance. Our racism is of a 'cordial' variety which conceals the violence within, which we project onto avowed white supremacists failing to see how we are linked.

When we white folk choose to stay blind, deaf and silent concerning our own privilege and its impact on the black 'Other', we are opting to remain unconscious of a crucial aspect of our lives and of ourselves. The tenacity of the problem suggests the political and the social has developed roots deep into the individual psyche and it made me wonder how the baby who is born pink learns to become white.

Recent research, mainly in the US but also in Europe shows that children recognise both the fact of difference and the inherent privilege in whiteness far earlier than is usually thought – as young as 3 or 4.

The evidence shows that the child growing up in a white liberal family comes to recognise that they are white and that there are black 'others' not so privileged without necessarily being clear about what physical characteristics are pertinent to either category. They are socialised into a world where, apart from the occasional exception, it is whites who are given the significant and interesting roles whilst blacks are more often relegated to those of service, sport, music or crime.

Children need help to think about what they observe about the racist structures of society and to connect their inherited privilege with a developing concern for fairness. They need a language for thought from which effective action can develop.

However, many white adults become embarrassed, hush the child, ignore or distract them, or resort to the short-cut of colour-blindness by insisting that everyone is the same and equal. Such an assertion is not only untrue and denies what the child has observed and experienced, by focusing on the universality of humans, the message is conveyed that it is the *recognition* of difference that is the cause of racism rather than the fact that the child has been born into a social system that discriminates against certain groups which they need help to acknowledge, understand and begin to think through how they might respond.

In most other aspects of her or his life, the white child in a modern liberal family can take their curiosity regarding the social milieu they seek to understand and find their place within to the significant adults in their life. For the majority of the time their experience will be of lively engagement, attention and interest. When they raise the matter of differences concerning race and ethnicity and they are responded to with the sterility of a blanket colour-blind position, the lively, engaged presence they had known previously disappears, and they are faced with a blankness, a shutting down and a silencing. There is a 'deadness' which relates to the subject and the child quickly learns that the topic is not welcome for discussion. Their curiosity and developing concern for others, their preoccupation with the troubled matter of social fairness is shut down and the defence of disavowal develops within the psyche.

This shutting down, this deadness and disavowal around matters of 'race' continues into adulthood. Discussions among white people around race are strikingly difficult. We can become defensive or struck dumb scared to speak for fear of 'getting it wrong', of saying something offensive, of using language that is no longer acceptable. Although it seems to me that often this is rooted in a fear of *appearing* racist, of being labelled as such, rather than a concern that harm might have been done to another and a wish to make reparation for the damage done.

The liberal narrative which, exacerbated perhaps by the 'purity' that is embedded in the very notion of whiteness, abjures the realities of racism whilst also needing to maintain the privilege of the white skin. Thus, the white individual – and the white collective – has to maintain *both* white privilege that includes our racism *and* an acceptable perception of the self. The tension between these two positions is 'solved' by disavowal which incorporates the assertion of colour-blindness and a distancing from the problem.

Conversations will often take place within groups and organisations where concern is expressed about the evident racial inequity within whereby the higher one goes in the hierarchy the whiter it becomes and other such symptoms of implicit racism. Genuine concern is expressed and 'solutions' discussed. However, these tend to locate the problem in the black individual and it is rare indeed for the white members of the organisation to seriously consider that work is needed by them.

Adrienne Harris (2019) writes:

What is ironic and infuriating to many contemporary people of color writing about racism is that the revelations and analysis of continuing racism by people of color is not leading to work within the white community. I use the word 'work' deliberately to mean the hard but necessary intellectual and emotional labor that will be essential to transform and unpack racism as it is lived and enacted among white persons. This is a way of suggesting that reparations, forgiveness, work across racial lines requires first work within white communities and individuals. (p.311)

A few years back I was presenting a paper on racism to an all-white group of therapists. A difficult and uncomfortable discussion followed in which the group seemed collectively engaged in finding ways to avoid the emotional work of exploring their own racism.

These included individuals separating themselves from the white group by asserting a different nationality, language, history, class or age. Questions were asked as to why we were not focusing on sexuality, gender, class – all important subjects but not the topic for the day. The hostility towards me as the person raising the subject was palpable. It was a depressing but very familiar event.

After some time, a woman who had been silent till then said she was thinking about an experience on her way to the seminar that day. She was waiting in her car at some traffic lights and another car pulled up beside her driven by a woman dressed in a Burqa. Looking across the thought came to her: 'Oh! So they can drive, can they?' She instantly pushed the thought away as she was aware of the racism behind it but had been turning the memory over in her mind throughout the discussion. As someone who usually experienced no difficulty in speaking in groups, she was puzzled by what felt like a profound reluctance to bring this thought into the discussion. She recognised her own internal condemnation of the prejudice tied up in the thought, as well as a fear of external attack were she to give it voice.

By recounting her thought to the group who until then were firmly on the 'I am not a racist' side of the split, she articulated a reality from the other side. In my experience three main possibilities were then open to the group: The first was to isolate and scapegoat the individual so she carried alone all the guilt of having racist thoughts. The second was to normalise her response and wipe it clean of any racism thus bringing her over to their side of the divide. The third, which fortunately was what happened in this particular group is for her courage to give permission for others to recall similar instances in their own lives. The atmosphere shifted, the anxiety and the defensiveness became less intense and the level of communication deepened. There emerged the chance of ownership of just a

little of the destructiveness of our racism, making us more aware of its presence and the impact it might have on someone of colour.

This dynamic played itself out in a group of individuals, but it might also be seen as an illustration of what occurs inside the psyche. Racist thoughts will arise in our minds but they are likely to be quickly dismissed or even forgotten. This process of disavowal may mean we can preserve an internal sense of ourselves as 'good' but it perpetuates the ignorance that is such a central aspect of the maintenance of our white privilege and ensures nothing changes. As in the group, if the thought is surfaced and allowed, it becomes available for examination and we deepen our understanding of how this social fact of 'whiteness' affects and distorts our relationship to others in the world and to ourselves. This, I believe, is the sort of work within white communities that Harris refers to.

Because this system is biased in our favour and privileges us, because part of that privilege is the invisibility of our whiteness, taking on this work requires we white people to make active, determined and ongoing choices. The fragility in whiteness that maintains that privilege keeps pulling us away from the discomfort that is inevitable if we are to fully engage in that exploration. We are required to build a stamina and a resilience in speaking about the subject if we are to genuinely support anti-racist activities.

The work is not easy. Nor is it ever complete. We who are white do not have the resilience of our black colleagues who have had no choice but to face issues of racism from an early age. Guilt, shame, the attraction of the more comfortable position of colour-blindness all serve to pull us away from the work that we need to do if things are to change. My thesis is that this change is critical – not just in the cause of justice and the creation of a more equal society – but because we white folk suffer too from the continued grip that racism has on our worlds – both internal and external.

In his book *Partisans in an Uncertain World*, Paul Hoggett says: 'uncritical thought will not simply be passive but will actively cling to a belief in the appearance of certain things. It actively refuses, rejects as perverse or crazy, any view that may contradict it. To think critically one must therefore be able to use aggression to break through the limitations of one's own assumptions or to challenge the 'squatting rights' of the colonizer within one's own internal world' (Hoggett, 1992, p.29)

For those of us identified as white in the globally colonising white western culture, can, if we choose, avoid external pressure to make that act of aggression that challenges the 'squatting rights' of the internal coloniser. But ignoring this figure who inhabits at least a corner of our mind demanding compliance does not mean he does not exist. I suggest we are the poorer if we do not attempt to break through our assumptions for they then remain an area of internal life that is unexamined.

For me to think differently about my place in the world and the privileges it has brought me requires an undoing of a well-laid system of assumptions about myself. The fact that those assumptions existed and continue to exist does not make me an inherently bad person, but to break through their limitations is hard work. This is a not an easy subject to 'play' with. It raises feelings of guilt, shame, envy, denial and defiance, all of which are hard enough to face in the privacy of one's own life. To explore it publicly can bring up a fear of getting it wrong, of saying the unforgivable and of exposing a badness in me.

The ugliness of racism can only fully be challenged by white people facing the injustice of this system and recognising what we will have to relinquish in assuring a healthy society. My argument is that we too have much to gain in doing so. 'Liberal' is not only an ironic term but includes within it a longing for justice and equality and it is those instincts we need to call upon. As Kovel writes:

Racism, which diminishes its object to non-human status, also diminishes its perpetrator: all are losers by its terms. It does so, in the final analysis, by diminishing life, by reducing it to an abstraction, the better to manage it historically. And racism thereby becomes part of the wider problem of man's compact with the natural world in which he finds himself (p. 233).

As he was walking to his London studio one day in the 1960's, the Guyanese artist, Frank Bowling came across a large white swan trapped in a pool of oil from which it was struggling to fly free. Struck by the ferocious determination of the bird, Bowling painted sufficient versions of the image to fill the first room of the retrospective of his work at Tate Britain. As I stood before the canvas in the summer of 2019, I was struck by this picture of whiteness caught as it was by the consequences of exploitation of the planet and of people. I saw within it something of the terrible damage done by whiteness since its inception in the 17th Century, in its corruption of human relationships, between each other and with the planet. I am grateful to Bowling for giving me permission to use this work on the cover of my book.

Having to bear continual acts of racism – both extreme and subtle - is what the black individual has to suffer and is the price they pay for my privilege. But it harms us all and if I want to live in a world that is not divided, is not contaminated with the pathology of racism, where we re-find our connections, then I must acknowledge that this Covenant of whiteness is my inheritance. Then I must decide what it means, what it costs and whether I am prepared to give it up. But I for one, want my colour back.

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