

White is a Color!

by Glenn E. Singleton, Pacific Educational Group, Inc., San Francisco, CA. ©1997

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Developing and facilitating “Beyond Diversity” - a two-day seminar on de-institutionalizing racism - has served as a powerful way for me, personally, to get in touch with the pervasiveness of racism in the United States. In fact, I am convinced that racism, more so than any other technical, social or pedagogical condition, prevents us from actualizing our professional and moral obligation to develop and liberate the innate imagination and intelligence of every American.

As I interact with seminar participants throughout the country, thought provoking questions about racism abound. One that continuously emerges is, isn't White a color? “Isn't White a color too?” an angered high school teacher shouted out in response to my reference to some participants as people of color and to others as White people. “I feel I am a person of color,” she said. Initially, my reaction was to calm this woman's rage by simply agreeing with her premise that White indeed is a color. Later, I suggested how the descriptor “people of color” carries with it seemingly inescapable persecution, terror and a circumstance of perpetual struggle that was foreign to most people with white skin. I felt that neither of us was content with my immediate response.

After a decade marked by the passage of raced-based legislation in California such as propositions 187, 209 and 227, I must say I have devoted significant attention to this woman's conjecture about “Whiteness”. What began as a dispassionate, intellectual probe into her question, “Aren't White people also people of color?” has led me to the highly emotional and enlightening investigation into what it means for one to be White. A simple resolution is that White truly is a color. The more detailed discovery is...oh, boy...what a color White is. Perhaps “Whiteism” - not recognizing White as a dominating color nor the unearned power and privileges associated with having white skin; having a sense of (White) entitlement and lacking awareness of the experiences and perspectives of non-white skinned people - is a condition that more White people must begin to recognize, understand and acknowledge for the sake of us all!

I highlight a recent business trip to New Orleans because I believe it illuminates the presence and reality of Whiteness. My adventure began Saturday morning at San Francisco Airport where I decided to upgrade to first class on a rather large plane. Twenty-three of the 24 seats in first class were occupied by White people...perhaps a new definition of “White flight”! Quickly into the trip, one of the six White flight attendants circulated through the cabin to receive our meal requests. When the attendant arrived at my row, I was offered both options. My choice of an omelet limited the selection of the White gentleman seated beside me to the fruit plate. He became instantly irate. He reprimanded the flight attendant for servicing him last and threatened to stop flying United.

Although I have witnessed similar situations before, I was far more attuned to the racial dynamic of this particular episode. I believe the gentleman assumed his flying status was higher than mine was, which, incidentally, was not the case. His assumption, however based, suggested his belief that I, rather than he, should be served last. To pacify his soon-to-be “pain” of reverse discrimination or political correctness - two White created phenomena - I offered him my omelet. Without hesitation, he accepted my meal without offering me as little as a “thank you.” At the end of the flight, I politely asked the entitled one “if he should not be served last, who should?” Many White people will individualize this man’s indecencies and suggest that “he being a jerk, has nothing to do with his being White.” Conversely, I insist that his behavior is “typically White.” In fact, to individualize the countless episodes like this that people of color document is what enables White people to not notice that someone is always last, excluded or ignored and perhaps those least accustomed to being “passed over” sometimes should be last as well in our multi-racial “democracy.”

My flight connected through Denver International Airport where I quickly spotted the 12 non-White people, all of whom were wearing airport or airline service uniforms, amidst thousands of White people. I wonder if the White passengers felt the racial security with which they traveled. My White travel companion certainly did not notice his White dominance but took no time to gently accuse me of being “racist” when he noticed that I greeted only the African American workers. As the thought of greeting all 7000 White people on the concourse amused me, with the gate agent as the one last non-White person to acknowledge as we boarded the connecting flight, I said to her, “hang in there!” Once again, the first class cabin was entirely White as was the cabin and cockpit crews. My colleague remained “politely angry” with me for the remainder of the trip.

Although New Orleans boasts of a large middle class Black population - some are African, others Caribbean or Creole - the hotel front desk staffs, the waiters, the heads of schools, patrons of the arts, diners and obvious tourists were consistently White. Conversely, the housekeepers, school custodial workers, bus drivers and homeless were Black. As my personal stress level climbed to new heights, the downtown health club offered no respite, as only two guests in the entire facility were Black. I finished my workout in record time, in order to avoid the evening rush hour during which White men and women in suits hurried by older Black folk in fast food uniforms to board the “Streetcar Named Desire” headed for the wealthy Garden District, which has remained a White neighborhood.

There is very little interaction between White and Black people in New Orleans. A Black parent of a sixth grade student assured me that folks know their place in New Orleans and “we all just stick with our own.” A disproportionately high number of White educators in new Orleans reason away racial segregation in conversations focusing on the economics and social class challenges. They want me to believe that Black people do not exist in New Orleans’ middle and upper classes. I wonder where they believe

their fellow Black teachers as well as the numerous Black politicians and TV personalities expend leisure energy or have they not considered this possibility? Still, I boldly patronized restaurants, clubs and retail stores that were predominantly White. I am accustomed to being the only Black airline passenger, meeting attendee or audience member, but New Orleans offered me a reality that I often chose to ignore here in San Francisco. I truly felt invisible, left out and unwelcome in the “Big Easy.” New Orleans also invited me to reconsider whether Bay Area finer restaurants, hotels, shopping centers and schools are much different?

Given the stress of such a trip, one might wonder why I have accepted this work assignment in New Orleans for the past five years. Why would I continuously travel into the “eye of the storm”...go to a place where “Whiteism” is so pronounced? My response is simple. I love the architecture, I love jazz and I particularly love the cuisine...a unique combination and context that I find nowhere else in the United States. I imagine being White, though, would have afforded me the privilege of thoroughly enjoying these wonders of New Orleans.

On my flight back, I declined the upgrade and found myself seated by a White family traveling home to Denver. The youngest of three sons, Steven, sat next to me as I attempted to write this article; his attention to me from take-off to landing was undivided. Initially, he stared at me giving the first clue that Steven had never experienced a Black person up close. Unlike the 200 White passengers onboard, I felt the obligation to make this boy’s first Black experience a positive one. I wanted to get focused on my work, perhaps take a nap, but my Black skin once again bound me to duty. Before I could help Steven adjust his safety belt, with childish discretion, he cleverly brushed against my arm to discover how Black people feel. This “skin and hair” maneuver continues to happen to me in circles of White adults. However, Steven’s curiosity about my skin and hair seemed appropriate given his age and apparent lack of opportunities to experience non-White people. Although his parents were visibly embarrassed by Steven’s curiosity and gestures, I doubt that they recognized this child’s need and desire to experience a more diverse life than the current one which apparently keeps them comfortable.

So back to my angry teacher’s question, I suspect that White people are the last to recognize that White is a color. This realization undeniably shatters the White belief that theirs’ is a universal human experience; one which is color-blind, socially prudent and economically just. “Whiteism” is as defining for White people as are injustice, struggle and inequality for non-White people of color!

When I returned home to San Francisco on Tuesday, I was greeted by a phone call from my best White friend, Eric. “How was your trip?” he asked. As I instantly reflected on my racism-filled adventure, and then thought about how foreign my racial reality is, still, to even my closest White friends, I sighed and uttered, “it was great!” Why did I lie to Eric? Because in my experience, Eric and other White people tend to redefine these patterns of white behavior as an individual’s personal foible or character flaw. Clearly,

White people more often do not consider themselves to be part of a White collective experience or group. Frankly, I am simply too exhausted, sometimes, to shatter another White person's belief that his is a universal human experience. But, because I realize that as long as "Whiteism" is a defining reality for White people, injustice, struggle and inequality will continue to erode the spirit of non-White people of color! The very next day, I mustered up the energy and humility to tell Eric my personal truth about New Orleans...and San Francisco too, for that matter.

Prompts for Reflection:

What essential questions, comments or concerns arise for you as you reflect on your reading of *White is a Color*? How does Singleton describe and/or define "Whiteness"?

How closely does his description/definition align with your own personal concept of "what it means to be White"?

What, if any, connections can you make between Singleton's journey into Whiteness and your own everyday experiences as well as those experiences of students of color in your school?