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countering whiteness

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For five years, I have been leading district-wide racial justice work in my school district. Much of this work has focused on ethnic studies curriculum, which centers the histories and experiences of people and communities of color, although that's not what makes it anti-racist. Ethnic studies is anti-racist because in telling these stories and experiences, it deconstructs the systems of power that lead to racism. The thing is, when I go out into my district and talk to teachers and administrators, I often hear, "How does ethnic studies help white students?"

First, white people have ethnicities, too. White people also have cultures that are diverse in both ethnic identities and cultural practices. I struggled to understand why white people denied having a race, ethnicity, or culture until I shifted my reading from race and racism to whiteness and the creation of whiteness. Through laws, policy, and practices, white people have been taught to exchange their ethnic and cultural identities for the benefit of "whiteness." Our history tells us racism is the result of whiteness, not of race. John A. Powell of Berkeley University explains that being white was originally defined as not being Black. In response to Bacon's Rebellion, an uprising of European, indentured servants, and Black, enslaved Africans in Colonial America, elite Europeans created the white race to drive a wedge between the two groups and prevent further uprisings. This is when "Europeans" became white, giving up their ethnic and cultural identities, and whiteness became a sought after power structure. White, indentured servants were still economically oppressed, but their new status brought with it a sense of power and superiority; thus, whiteness created racial oppression. This pattern has continued throughout our history in the United States. For example, the creation of The Federal Housing Administration restricted housing opportunities to "whites only," so people who were previously considered "ethnic" groups, like Jewish Americans, chose to forgo identification as an ethnic group and instead selected whiteness. Ta-Nehisi Coates refers to this phenomenon as "the people who believe they are white." Participation in this system requires the belief that being white is somehow outside of ethnicity, culture, and sometimes even race, creating an environment in which white people study racism as if it's something outside of their personal experiences. Using whiteness instead of racism puts the onus for action back on white people.

In response to all the pushback I've received in this work, I no longer talk about "racism" but about "whiteness." I define whiteness as, "the cultural values, norms, behaviors, and attitudes that uphold White Supremacy." White people can't turn their backs on whiteness, but they try: when I bring it up they want to revert to ethnic identities. I get asked things like, "Can you please stop calling me white? I'm European-American." I say, "No." As Ijeoma Oluo says, this work isn't about the comfort of white people.

Here are a few things I've learned about why the language we use when discussing oppression, particularly racial oppression, is important and how we can change our language to hold people accountable for the deep reflection required to be anti-racists.

Colorblindness is a cancer. You think you have cured it, but later find out it's moved to another part of our language. Words like, *culture, diversity, inclusion, equity, and even justice* have all been co-opted to avoid talking about race and racism. Using the term "whiteness" in place of racism directly counters this phenomenon and places the accountability on white people by forcing them to look in the mirror and see how they are not only "part of the problem," but central to systems of power and oppression. I have found when white people are consistently confronted with their whiteness, they are more likely to move from "ally" to accomplice in fighting whiteness.

This pressure for accountability on white people is especially important in education. In the US, white teachers make up 85% of the teaching force. In my state, Washington, it's 90%. Students of color are quickly becoming the majority in the country, and yet they go to school often times never seeing a person like them at the front of the class. Students of color continue to be pushed out and disciplined at higher rates. Seattle Public Schools has the fifth largest disparity gap in discipline between Black students and white students in the country. In Seattle Public Schools, 46% of the student population is white while 75% of the teachers are white. This is a problem that the vastly white teaching force needs to address.

Using whiteness instead of racism reminds white people they have an ethnicity, too, and they've lost a piece of their humanity by perpetuating whiteness. In response to the teachers who ask how ethnic studies helps white students, I and others say, "White people need ethnic studies more than anyone." I appreciate the way Dr. Jeff Duncan-Andrade talks about this. He uses the phrase, "la cultura cura"; culture cures, or culture is medicine. He says when we lose our culture we become sick and start to hurt other people. Paulo Freire writes about how the act of oppressing others necessarily requires a person to give up their own humanity. White people need to find their medicine and restore their own humanity so they can stop hurting others.

People of color cannot be racist but they can engage in whiteness. I do not believe people of color can be racist. Never in history has any non-white group had the

systemic power to oppress whites or any other group of people. There are certainly examples of discriminatory practices between people and groups of color, but racism occurs on a systemic level. This does not mean that people of color do not engage in whiteness. We certainly do. Every person who grew up in the United States, regardless of ethnic identity, has been exposed to messages of anti-Blackness and messages that convey, "White is Right." From housing practices, to media representation, to racist and white-washed curricula in school, the message is clear: It's better to be white in America. Beverly Daniel Tatum calls this immersion in racist messaging a fog that we all live in and breathe in.

I am Xicanx, and I have seen first-hand how many Xicanx and Latinx people have bought into whiteness and engaged in whiteness. White supremacy is such a powerful concept that non-white people will betray our own people in attempts to benefit from it. Recent polling data shows that 25-30% of Latinx people support Donald Trump despite his racist, anti-Latinx migrant rhetoric. Those 25-30% of Latinx people are engaging in whiteness. They are trying to tap into the power that whiteness provides certain people.

Using the phrase, "engaging in whiteness," holds all people accountable for upholding and maintaining whiteness. It requires all of us to do reflective work and understand how our practices and beliefs are oppressing people. Being a person of color does not give you a free pass from anti-racist work. Whiteness can show itself in people of color who maintain the status quo to benefit from status, promotions, and to avoid criticism. This may include "acting white," or changing one's behavior and/or language to gain respectability and legitimacy from white peers and colleagues, like referring to oneself as "Hispanic." I hate the term "Hispanic" because it's a white-washed identifier, referring to any person whose native language is Spanish, including white Europeans. People of color engage in whiteness by promoting white-normed practices, like individualism over collectivism, passive aggressiveness, and decontextualizing racialized experiences.

Our young people are inundated with messages of whiteness -- from the president, to cartoons, to textbooks. All kids receive the message that it's better to be white. Whether intentional or not, erasure of people of color in these contexts erases our humanity. We have so little value that children's literature portrays more anthropomorphic characters than characters of color (<https://www.bustle.com/articles/183948-how-diverse-is-childrens-literature-this-infographic-tells-the-disturbing-truth>). According to children's literature, it's better to be a dog than a person of color. We need to be the people countering those messages, not reinforcing them. Words matter. How we use words and phrases determines how we act, and words have the power to change people from objects to agents. Whiteness turns us all into agents of anti-racism: it applies to all of us and centers the responsibility on white people to take on the majority of the work to change our racist systems.