



Magazine Feature

## WHY TALK ABOUT WHITENESS?

We can't talk about racism without it.

By Emily Chiariello | Issue 53, Summer 2016

Bookmarked 233 times



*Editor's note: The author of "Why Talk About Whiteness?" is a white anti-bias educator. While the material in this story is relevant to all readers, many of the challenges the author poses are directed at white readers, hence the use of "we" and "us" in certain places.*

"I don't think I've ever come across anything that has made me aware of my race. I don't believe there is any benefit of anybody's particular race or color. I feel like I've accomplished what I've accomplished in life because of the person I am, not because of the color of my skin."

These are the observations of a white female participant in *The Whiteness Project, Part I*, an interactive web-based collection of voices and reflections of Americans from diverse walks of life who identify as white. Her statement illustrates why educators, activists and allies doing racial justice work are increasingly focused on the importance of examining whiteness: It's impossible to see the privilege and dominance associated with white racial identity without acknowledging that whiteness *is* a racial identity.

This fundamental disconnect between the racial self-perceptions of many white people and the realities of racism was part of what motivated documentary filmmaker, director and producer Whitney Dow to create *The Whiteness Project*. "Until you can recognize that you are living a racialized life and you're having racialized experiences every moment of every day, you can't actually engage people of other races around the idea of justice," Dow explains. "Until you get to the thing that's primary, you can't really attack racism."

Dow's work, among other activism and scholarship focused on whiteness, has the potential to stimulate meaningful conversations about whiteness and move white folks past emotions like defensiveness, denial, guilt and shame (emotions that do nothing to improve conditions for people of color) and toward a place of self-empowerment and social responsibility.

## WHITENESS, HISTORY AND CULTURE

Why does whiteness fly beneath the race radar? The normalization of whiteness and the impenetrable ways it protects itself are cornerstones of the way institutions function in the United States. In a 2015 interview, Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Junot Diaz said of the United States, "We live in a society where default whiteness goes unremarked—no one ever asks it for its passport."

This poses a challenge for educators committed to racial justice. We know it's important to make space in our classrooms to explore students' cultures and identities, but when it comes to white students, many are left with questions about how to talk about group membership and cultural belonging. These questions stem in part from the fact that, while it's true whiteness is seen as a social default, it is *not* true that whiteness is the absence of race or culture. As one male participant in *The Whiteness Project* puts it, "As a white person, I wish I had that feeling of being a part of something for being white, but I don't."

One place to start is by acknowledging that generations of European immigration to the United States means that our country is home to the most diverse white population anywhere in the world. Differences between Jewish, Irish, Italian, Greek, Polish or German culture matter—a lot—to those who

identify as *ethnic* whites. Part of “seeing” whiteness includes caring about these rich histories and complicating our discussions of race by asking questions about the intersection of ethnicity and race.

In her work on white racial identity development, diversity expert Rita Hardiman explains that, as white people become more conscious of whiteness and its meaning, we may simultaneously struggle with two aspects of identity: internalized dominance and the search for cultural belonging. The search for culture draws some white people to multiculturalism and appreciation of other cultures and heritages. Others find roots outside the container of race, woven into proud family histories. A small minority cling violently to their white cultural identity, sometimes with tragic consequences. (In any case, it is important to note that the ability to trace one’s genealogy is an inherited privilege not enjoyed by most African Americans, the majority of whom are descendants of enslaved people.)

Reconciling the meaning of white culture can be complicated by the fact that being white has not always meant what it means now. Whiteness—like all racial categories—is a social construct: Its meaning is culturally and historically contextual. The physical characteristics we now associate with whiteness have been artificially linked to power and privilege for the purpose of maintaining an unjust social hierarchy.

Attorney, scholar and anti-racist educator Jacqueline Battalora of Saint Xavier University studies the legal and historical construction of whiteness in the United States, what she calls the “invention of white people.” In her book *Birth of a White Nation*, she shows that white people didn’t exist—even as a label, much less as a race—until the end of the 17th century when the elite class enacted anti-miscegenation laws and other laws designed to keep black and white workers separate, both efforts to, in part, divide and control an increasingly ethnically diverse labor force. As students enter middle and high school, teaching about this history and about the concept of racial construction is another way educators can bring discussion about whiteness—and its relationship to racial justice—into the classroom.

---

Scholars Michelle Alexander (*The New Jim Crow*) and Jacqueline Battalora (*Birth of a White Nation*) both name Bacon’s Rebellion as a pivotal event in the historical construction of whiteness in the United States. During the rebellion, disgruntled white settlers, indentured servants and enslaved Africans joined forces to resist the ruling class and local Indian tribes. Their actions worried elites and led them to enact a more rigid racial class system. Read more about Bacon’s Rebellion [here](#).

---

## GOT PRIVILEGE? NOW WHAT?

In 1988, anti-bias educator Peggy McIntosh published her now-classic essay “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.” In it, she describes the phenomenon of white privilege as a collection of “unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was meant to remain oblivious.”

McIntosh’s essay launched the term *white privilege* into wider academic and activist circles (where the essay is still widely read), but recently the term has gained a mainstream audience. Examples include #OscarsSoWhite, Latina college student Thalia Anguiano asking Hillary Clinton for examples of her white privilege and Jon Stewart challenging Bill O’Reilly to defend why he believes white privilege doesn’t exist. White rapper Macklemore mused about Black Lives Matter in his nine-minute song “White Privilege II,” in which he asks, “Is it my place to give my two cents? Or should I stand on the side and shut my mouth?”

While these examples are positive in that they make whiteness and white privilege more visible, popular discussions of white privilege can also prompt backlash.

**Read more:** What is White Privilege, Really?

“I think it’s very hard in a culture that’s built around this myth of the individual American who makes their own way, to say, ‘Well, you actually have a built-in inherited advantage,’” Dow points out. “We view ourselves as just people, but that this country was founded on racist white supremacist principles is undeniable. I think people feel implicated because there’s a cognitive dissonance built into how Americans view themselves.”

But even if white students are able to overcome this dissonance and acknowledge their privilege, is that enough? Recognizing white privilege is a necessary but insufficient means for confronting racism and increasing opportunities for people of color. In fact, acknowledging white privilege but taking no initiative to own it or address it can be harmful and counterproductive. Molly Tansey, a member of the Young Teachers Collective and co-author of “Teaching While White,” says, “Early on in doing this work, I was definitely driven by the self-satisfaction.” She talks about the need white people sometimes have to make their non-racism visible, giving the example of someone who takes a “selfie” at a protest to post on Facebook.

We haven’t acknowledged our white privilege if we’re only talking about it with people of color—who are already well aware of white privilege. White allies need

to talk to other white people who may not see their privilege. Though it's less comfortable, Tansey says, naming whiteness and its privileges among white friends, family and colleagues is where the real work needs to be done.

We're also not adequately engaging the concept of white privilege if we leave intersectionality out of the conversation; doing so has the potential to render other identities invisible and obscures how multiple systems of oppression work. Blogger Gina Crosley-Corcoran made this point in her blog "Explaining White Privilege to a Broke White Person," in which she describes the difficult process of identifying with her white privilege because of her low-income upbringing. The same could be true for any white person who has a disability, doesn't speak English, is undocumented or LGBT—or any combination of the above. Intersectionality does not erase white privilege, but may affect a person's experience of privilege.

Acknowledging white privilege must be followed with anti-racist action. As scholar Fredrik deBoer argued in a January 2016 article for *The Washington Post*, "Disclaiming white privilege doesn't lower African Americans' inordinately high unemployment rate or increase educational opportunities for children of first-generation immigrants. The alternative is simpler, but harder: to define racism in terms of actions, and to resolve to act in a way that is contrary to racism."

## AFFIRMING A POSITIVE WHITE IDENTITY

Making whiteness visible, understanding the diversity and history of whiteness, and going beyond white privilege can help educators and students alike find positive answers to the question: *What does it mean to be white?* For Melissa Katz, who authored "Teaching While White" with Tansey and is also part of the Young Teachers Collective, the answer is central to her self-realization as a white woman and as a teacher committed to social justice.

"The positive sense of whiteness is knowing that you're working towards something bigger," she says. "By examining your whiteness and by working to dismantle [racist] institutions, you're working towards equity."

For Dow, exploring whiteness—and inviting others to do the same—was transformative. "I could impact the paradigm because I actually was an active component. I didn't have to do something outside," he says. "I could do something inside and that would change things. It kind of eliminated guilt for me. It made me feel incredibly empowered and really enriched my world."

---

## ANTI-RACIST UNDERSTANDINGS FOR EDUCATORS

Get fired up about racial injustice! Recognizing that “a threat to justice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” is the foundation of white allyship. Use these understandings to help you and your students face what can be highly emotional and, at times, uncomfortable work.

### DENYING THE EXISTENCE OF RACE DENIES STUDENTS’ FULL IDENTITIES.

By saying, “I don’t see race” to indicate we don’t hold racial biases about our students, we’re essentially saying to people of color, “I don’t see you.” Ignoring the role of race in our society upholds the dominant framework of whiteness and invalidates the racial identities and lived experiences of people of color.

### Speak out, but also look in.

It’s critical that white allies respond to racial prejudice, bias and stereotypes in our everyday lives. It takes practice and sometimes comes with risk. But pointing to other people’s white privilege, without (or instead of) looking at our own, is a distraction from true anti-racist action.

### Avoid white noise and white silence.

It’s important to listen when people of color talk about their experiences with oppression and not to dominate conversations about race. But opting out altogether can be just as harmful. “The racial status quo is not neutral; it is racist,” DiAngelo says. “Remaining silent when given the opportunity to discuss race supports the status quo.”

### Take responsibility for educating yourself about racism.

It makes sense to assume that someone who has experienced racism will have a better understanding of it than someone who has not. But when white educators expect students or colleagues of color to teach them about racism, it raises a

number of problems, not least of which is people of color doing white people's work for them.

## Be down, but stay white.

75 percent of white Americans say they come in contact with “a few” or “no” black people on a regular basis—a startling fact about race relations. Living an integrated life builds cross-cultural connection and fosters empathy. Over-familiarizing with people of color—“I hang out with people of color, so I’m not racist”—reduces race to a lifestyle choice and can offer an easy way out of difficult anti-racism work. Appreciating a diverse group of friends or colleagues does not take the place of confronting white privilege, addressing internalized white guilt or responding to the biases of other white people.

## Don't take it personally—it's not about you!

White people have come to expect a level of racial comfort. When that expectation is met with racial stress, DiAngelo explains the result can be White Fragility: “White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium.”

These understandings were drawn from the work of Robin DiAngelo (*What Does It Mean to Be White? Developing White Racial Literacy*), Heather Hackman (*Everyday White People Confront Racial and Social Injustice: 15 Stories*) and Jennifer Seibel Trainor (“My Ancestors Didn’t Own Slaves: Understanding White Talk about Race”).

Bookmark This Page Save

## SIGN IN TO SAVE THESE RESOURCES.

Login or create an account to save resources to your bookmark collection.

[LOGIN](#) [CREATE ACCOUNT](#)