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Lori D. Patton & Chayla Haynes

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Dear White People: Reimagining Whiteness In the Struggle for Racial Equity

By Lori D. Patton and Chayla Haynes 



Lori D. Patton is a Professor of Higher Education and Student Affairs at The Ohio State University, where she serves as Department Chair and maintains a research agenda on racial injustice in higher education, minoritized students' experiences on campus, and Black

women and girls in education.



Chayla Haynes is an Assistant Professor of Higher Education at Texas A&M University, where she teaches and conducts research on White faculty behaviors in collegiate classrooms, critical race pedagogy, and Black women in higher education.

In Short

- Derrick Bell called for a White leader able to free White people of racism; this article expands on Bell's idea.
- Whiteness will always resist the undoing of itself; thus, feelings of guilt, fear, or shame are resistance strategies that can be overcome.
- Whiteness is not invisible. It is something racially minoritized students, faculty, and staff see every day, but it's okay to be White.
- Whiteness is imperfection and requires a lifelong journey for those who claim a commitment to racial equity.
- White people have nothing to lose and everything to gain by reimagining their Whiteness.

Dear White people,

Can we have a conversation... an honest conversation about Whiteness—your Whiteness?

This *Change Magazine* issue on racial equity comes at a pivotal time in which higher education

institutions are grappling with rampant racism. As Black women scholars, we have felt the sting and dehumanization of racism. We represent generations of Black women who have always resisted Whiteness—White antagonism, White violence,

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and White mediocrity—historically and presently in this country and the academy.

This honest conversation about Whiteness—your Whiteness—is not only guided by personal experiences, but also stems from research agendas where we intentionally focus on the experiences of Black women and other minoritized groups, and challenge White domination in higher education. We are often called on as experts to consult with institutions in their efforts toward racial equity.

During the consultations, keynotes, and so on White people consistently ask the same question (or some version thereof), “What recommendations do you have for White people to address racial equity?” This question in and of itself is problematic—that is, asking Black women to tell you, a White person, how to address racial equity. Yet, we use this article as an opportunity to reimagine Whiteness, your Whiteness, as agentic in making racial equity a reality.

Bergerson (2003) asked, “Is there room for [W]hite scholars in fighting racism in education?” Absolutely. Not only is there room to fight racism, but also to dismantle it. Reimagining Whiteness requires seeing yourself as fully capable of responding to racial inequity and engaging other White people in this process as a non-negotiable imperative. Thus, White people addressing Whiteness toward racial equity requires a collective effort. As Leonardo (2004) asked, “If Whites do not assume responsibility for white supremacy then who can?” (p. 145).

It is not our role to tell you how to unlearn Whiteness. Still, we can offer a useful perspective on the topic as Black women who contend with its ugliness every day. What we would really love is to have what Derrick Bell (2000) called *A White Leader Able to Free Whites of Racism*. If such a leader existed, the burden would no longer rest so comfortably on our backs and so many other minoritized peoples who are expected to do this work.

This leader, as Bell noted would be someone possessing the audacity and courage to emphasize three points:

1. The racial problem in this country is not people of color but Whites (p. 532).
2. Racism may not be something that can be overcome and may be a permanent part of the American social structure (p. 539).
3. There is value in the struggle for what is apparently a hopeless cause (p. 541).

In this article we offer additional perspectives and principles on what White people can do to advance the practice of racial equity. Before reading further, it is necessary that White people accept our perspectives on Whiteness as a truth that stems from our interactions with you; that is, what we share is not a figment of our imagination. If you experience resistance, acknowledge it and keep reading. Each truth we offer below is grounded in our lived experience and research expertise to offer context and clarity on reimagining Whiteness.

WHITENESS WILL ALWAYS RESIST THE UNDOING OF ITSELF

If it were up to Black people, Whiteness would have been dismantled by now. Whiteness is the root cause of the systemic racism that ensures White people maintain racial group superiority in the United States, particularly in academic spaces. Whiteness represents the self-reinforcing beliefs and institutionalized practices that protect and reward White normalcy, White privilege, White innocence, and White advantage—and by extension, White people (Harris, 1993; Haynes & Bazner, 2019). Reimagining Whiteness requires you to acknowledge operating under a woefully inadequate paradigm that is not simply about racism against minoritized groups but the benefit of White people.

As Bell (1995) argued, the interests of Black people in achieving racial justice are only accommodated when those interests converge with the political and economic interests of White people. In a 2019 article, we applied Derrick Bell's interest convergence principle to illuminate how educational gains for racially minoritized students were pursued by White faculty only to the extent that it served their interests, White interests (Haynes & Patton, 2019). That case illustrated how White interests are served through academic norms that cultivate White supremacy, such as academic freedom, faculty rank/status, and reliance on student course evaluations.

Dear White people, can we keep it real with you? Reimagining Whiteness means resolving that you cannot have it both ways. You cannot claim a commitment to racial equity while simultaneously maintaining interests that serve White people and undermine Black liberation. Permanent racial justice, although elusive, requires you to overcome expectations of comfort and understand the pervasiveness and embodiment of Whiteness in your life.

WHITENESS IS NOT INVISIBLE: WE SEE YOU

Ahmed (2004) noted that a dominant discourse regarding Whiteness is that it is invisible. It is “the unseen, or the unmarked, as a non-colour, the absent presence or hidden referent, against which all other colours are measured as forms of deviance” (para. 1). Whiteness, we contend, is *hypervisible* in higher education. Although demographic shifts

are occurring in the United States, “the academy is an overwhelmingly White terrain in terms of physical representation of White students and symbolically in terms of curriculum, campus policies, and campus spaces” (Patton, 2016, p. 320). Whiteness resides in the overwhelmingly White faculty across postsecondary settings (79% according to National Center for Education Statistics data). It resides in institutional and programmatic rankings that promote competition over collaboration.

Racially minoritized people see Whiteness all the time and in everything—in *you*. Indeed, it is a prevailing entity. Although you have been socialized to deny Whiteness, you too know it exists. Denying its existence offers comfort and a sense of innocence, hence feelings of White guilt that emerge when Whiteness is named. When you refuse to acknowledge Whiteness or shy away from it because of the discomfort, you engage in “racism without racists” (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, p. 1) and “domination without agents” (Leonardo, 2004, p. 138).

Dear White people, get past your feelings. It's okay to be White. White people can make valuable contributions to shift the course of racial equity. You have untapped and unrealized potential. Tapping into such potential will not be easy. It actually requires reimagining Whiteness to make what can already be seen visible in a different way (Ahmed, 2004). Bell's White leader would ask fellow White people, “Do [W]hites ... have enough love and respect for one another to remain a stable society without using blacks as a societal glue?” (Bell, 2000, p. 538).

Dear White people, we want you to grapple with this question and to do so in community with other White people. Your own liberation depends on asking this question. Dismantling racial inequities depends on how you answer.

WHITENESS IS IMPERFECTION. WHAT YOU CAN DO

Within higher education settings, you may recognize overt acts of racism that make campuses unsafe and unwelcoming. Perhaps students in a residence hall don blackface or you see a Confederate flag hanging from a house on fraternity row. It could also be blatant use of the n-word. Do you recognize these racist acts, and as a result, attempt to avoid and distance yourself from “those bad White people”?

Dear White people, well-meaning White people like you are not immune to being racist, even as you denounce such overt acts. You are particularly susceptible to mistakes but take our advice here: “[e]ven the wokest White people describe themselves as recovering racists, because White supremacy is a hellavu drug that requires constantly working your steps” (Haynes Davison & Patton Davis, 2018). When you make a mistake, apologize, mean it, and change your behavior.

Changing your actions could include diversity trainings. However, no matter how well designed, such trainings will not make you “less racist.” Instead, they can bring you toward greater realization. You can start there, but reimagining Whiteness concedes no end. This is life-long work, but no matter how hard you work, you do not get a pass to engage in cultural appropriation, speak for minoritized communities, and do not ever, ever use the n-word. Just do not.

Dear White people, there are some things that you can do on your own before calling on Black faculty like us or people you would consider race experts. We have pulled together some recommendations, prerequisites if you will, to get you started in the self-work of interrogating and relinquishing Whiteness (Joseph, Haynes, & Cobb, 2016):

1. Read *White By Law* (Ian Haney Lopez), *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (Ibram X. Kendi), *White Fragility* (Robin DiAngelo), *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America’s Universities* (Craig Steven Wilder), *Dying of Whiteness* (Jonathan Metzl), and *Good White People: The Problem with Middle-Class White Anti-Racism* (Shannon Sullivan)
2. Follow anti-racist Twitter pages: @nowhitensense or @theconsciouskid
3. Watch Ava DuVernay’s *13th* and *When They See Us* on Netflix
4. Visit the Whiteness project (<http://whiteness-project.org/>)
5. Start purposeful conversations about Whiteness (White privilege and White normalcy) at work, church, and in your communities with other White parents at your kid’s school, and at home with your spouse, your children, your siblings, and parents/grandparents.

6. Listen to a podcast for White people on anti-racism and Whiteness: <https://www.sceneonradio.org/seeing-white/>
7. Identify resources on your campus and in the community. For example, explore the White Racial Literacy Project (<https://wrlpiupui.weebly.com/>) at Indiana University–Purdue University, Indianapolis (established by Lori Patton).

These are the types of messages we would like White colleagues to deliver to other White people. We want leaders to speak up rather than shy away from inevitable racism. We want White people to say the things we shared because other White people will listen to you before they listen to us. We have stated what many of our minoritized colleagues in higher education think, things that we often wish our White colleagues said to one another in an effort to disrupt Whiteness and join us in dismantling racial inequities.

Dear White People, you can do this and much more. Here are the complex questions, among others, to which you must respond (Patton & Bondi, 2015). Can you engage Whiteness in a way that is critically conscious and always ready to decenter itself? Can you resist dominant standards of Whiteness that insist on White leadership and White ways of knowing in favor of a reimagined White identity that listens to and partners with minoritized communities? Can you grapple with the disappointment and mistakes that accompany racial justice work? Can you apologize when you are wrong or make a mistake without making an entire situation about you? Can you move beyond tears, fear, and paralysis when you get called out on your Whiteness? Can you commit demonstrably useful acts for racial justice without expecting a pat on the back? Can you resolve to do this work because it does not nearly require the level of risk and harm minoritized people encounter? Q6

These are just a few guiding questions if your commitment to racial equity is genuine. Simply put, you have nothing to lose for reimagining your Whiteness for the cause of racial equity in higher education and beyond. Q7

ORCID

Lori D. Patton  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7257-6338>

Chayla Haynes  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4256-8628>

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