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Whiteness and Multiculturalism  
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Final Paper

### **Dams in the Anti-Racist River**

On April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2005 hundreds of students, faculty, and community members gathered at the Free Speech Rock to attend the Erase the Hate rally. The rally was organized by a coalition of students, representing various groups on campus, in response to a multitude of racial and homophobic incidents that occurred on Ithaca College's campus the previous week. Although the purpose of the rally was to raise awareness of the issues on campus that minority students face and to allow students to express their concerns to the rest of the community, the reaction to the rally on campus by the majority of students was one of hesitancy, trivialization, and criticism.

In this paper, I hope to use the events that transpired on campus, the various responses the community has had to them, and my own experience of whiteness as a starting off point to examine what factors block many white people from becoming active anti-racists. In doing so, I will examine definitions of racism, notions of white identity, white privilege, the psychological effects of racism, and strategies of anti-racism. I intend to prove that many white people are unable to make steps towards active anti-racism due to an inability to empathetically understand the effects of racism on non-white groups combined with hesitancy to give up the privilege that comes with whiteness.

To begin this discussion, I must examine common definitions of racism as well as the definition which I intend to use throughout this paper. The dictionary definition of racism is that it is the "belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular

race.”<sup>1</sup> Although this definition does imply the hierarchical aspects of racism, it is lacking in its scope as it limits the definition of racism to the mistaken belief system that maintains the idea that race is biological and inherent in people. Joel Olsen describes the folly of this in the book *The Abolition of White Democracy*. According to Olsen, it “assumes that races are identities that mark people *before* they enter the public sphere rather than something constructed in the public realm itself.”<sup>2</sup> People who use this definition of racism can easily separate themselves from societal racism by maintaining that *they* do not believe there are biological differences between people of different racial groups that determine innate characteristics, such as the foolish notion that black people are ‘naturally’ less intelligent than white people. Perhaps a more worrisome aspect of this being the commonly accepted definition of racism is that it is a definition that is relatively out-dated in contemporary contexts. By normalizing a definition that is more archaic, the conditions are created for people to feel that racism is not a current reality.

Another definition of racism, which may actually be the most commonly accepted, is one that whittles it down to simple discrimination based upon race or perceived race. The reason I say perceived race is because the social construction of race itself is less dependent on how people identify themselves than it is on what other people see them as. As Allan G. Johnson puts it, “What matters is who other people *think* we are, which is to say, the social categories they put us in.”<sup>3</sup> Although this definition of racism does describe racial discrimination, and racial discrimination is an overt expression of racism, it does not work as a definition for racism because it puts the emphasis on individual acts and beliefs alone. A definition such as this holds racism to

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<sup>1</sup> Merriam-webster.com

<sup>2</sup> Olsen, p. 4

<sup>3</sup> Rothenberg, p. 104

be a problem that only exists within people's beliefs and opinions when racism is a much more pervasive problem that exists in society as a whole. In the case of Ithaca College, those people who trivialized the racist graffiti as just the actions of a few drunken kids out to get attention exemplified this definition. By focusing on the acts as isolated in nature, their impact in fostering a threatening atmosphere to the groups that were singled out is overlooked. The isolation of the acts also disconnects them from larger forces in society.

The most appropriate definition, I think, is provided by David Wellman, who defined racism as a "system of advantage based on race."<sup>4</sup> The use of the word 'system' implies that there are interacting and interdependent factors that establish the advantages and disadvantages of being a member of a racial group. In racialized American society, the advantaged group is white people while non-white people are disadvantaged.

With this definition, racism is not only identified as those aspects of society and culture that oppress racial groups, but also those that give advantage to privileged groups. These two aspects of racism could be split into two camps, active racism and passive racism. Active racism is intentional acts of racial bigotry and discrimination while passive racism is silent acceptance of the active racism of others and/or of the benefits created by societal racism.

Perhaps the greatest advantage to being at the top of a societal hierarchy is that the culture of the advantaged group defines the norms for the rest of the society. In a racial context, this would mean that the formal structures and institutions of society have been borne out of white culture, although it is hard to say there is any one single white culture. Johnson explains that privilege "allows people to define reality and to have

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<sup>4</sup> Tatum p.7

prevailing definitions of reality fit their experience.”<sup>5</sup> If the normative structure of society flows from whiteness then it would seem logical that possessing whiteness would make it easier to navigate society.

The idea that being white is an advantage from the start can be uncomfortable for many white people as it has the implication that their position in life is undeserved or unearned. This may explain why the definition of racism as mere prejudice is so prevalent. Beverly Daniel Tatum explains that “it is more comfortable simply to think of racism as a particular form of prejudice. Notions of power or privilege do not have to be addressed when our understanding of racism is constructed in that way.”<sup>6</sup> In many ways it is a privilege to either be unaware of—or not care—that the privilege and power of whiteness exists. This is true because one can benefit from white privilege without having to actively acknowledge it, and it is reinforced by the myth that it doesn’t exist in the first place.

For many white people, the understanding that they benefit from whiteness is hard to come to because they are not connected to the idea that they are a member of a racial group, let alone one that they benefit from. This lack of understanding is rooted in various aspects of whiteness. The idea that racial groups are created in opposition to whiteness, in that they are not white, is one reason that white people seem to have invisibility as a racial group. In the introduction to the collection of essays called *White Privilege*, Paula Rothenberg states “it is because it is always whiteness that is centered and assumed. Difference is understood in relation to it. From this assumed but unnoticed perspective, white people are not ‘different’ from, say, Native Americans. It is always

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<sup>5</sup> Rothenberg p.103

<sup>6</sup> Tatum p.9

the Native American (or other person of color) who is different. According to this unexamined point of view, to be white, as many authors have pointed out, is simply to be human.”<sup>7</sup> By seeing one self as normal and simply human, one does not acknowledge that they are part of a racial group, even if they see other people as part of racial groups. But that is the privilege of being on top of the racial hierarchy. It is also a privilege that perpetuates itself.

According to Richard Dyer, “there is no more powerful position than that of being ‘just’ human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. Raced people can’t do that—they can only speak for their race. But non-raced people can, for they do not represent the interests of a race.”<sup>8</sup> This phenomenon is played out on Ithaca College campus as well as other academic settings when students of color are turned to and expected to speak not just for themselves, but also as representatives of their racial groups. White students never have this type of pressure put on them.

I know that I have never had any kind of expectation to speak for the totality of whiteness instead of my own individual experience of it. I can say, and I am not proud of this, that I have listened to students of color in the past in a hope of hearing what the black experience is, what the Hispanic experience is, or in general, what the minority experience is. It seems to me that these phenomena occurred not only because I am of a “non-raced” racial group, but also because I’ve never experienced whiteness as a racial group.

One root cause of this is likely the dominant ideology of colorblindness. It is an ideology that finds it’s most ardent supporters amongst white Americans, even though it

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<sup>7</sup> Rothenberg p.2

<sup>8</sup> Rothenberg p.10

“characterizes itself as a benefit to the racially oppressed.”<sup>9</sup> Jeff Hitchcock defines the philosophy of colorblindness as such:

Defined simply, colorblindness says that our racial and ethnic group membership are irrelevant to our treatment. Consequently, we should not take ethnicity into account when forming impressions and making decisions. To do so is illegitimate. Recognizing race and ethnicity leads to discrimination, either against minorities or against the dominant group. From this stance, colorblindness opposes racism wherever it can see it, and in doing so, stands against racial categorization, upholds individuality, emphasizes our common humanity and works toward achieving “one people” status.<sup>10</sup>

It is easy to see that colorblindness only opposes a narrow view of racism, which is the definition of racism as prejudice, since its definition does not carry a single mention of systematic aspects of racial hierarchy. By doing this, colorblindness denies that race does have an impact on people’s lives beyond individual instances of discrimination. When I say here that race does have an impact on people’s life, I mean that living in a racist society, and the advantages and disadvantages that places on different racial groups, has an impact. Colorblindness seems to say that race does not matter until a bigoted racist makes it matter, but this view only acts like race is not a social construction that has an impact on life, and in doing so silences discussion of race and racism, which allows current conditions such as widespread white privilege to continue.

The reason that colorblindness is able to erase notions of race having a societal impact is because it puts an overemphasis on individual identity at the expense of group identity. Although we are all individuals, we are not only individuals. Every person belongs to different and specific social groups whether it is race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual identity, religion, or so on. Colorblindness seeks to move all emphasis away from

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<sup>9</sup> Hitchcock p.54

<sup>10</sup> Hitchcock p.55

group identities in order to place it solely on individual identities. Hitchcock points this out as a flawed tenet of the philosophy because “our social group status does not define us exclusively. Nor does our common humanity. Nor does our individualism. Each of these contributes to our experience and our nature. To single out one and hold it above all others is arbitrary and misguided.”<sup>11</sup>

If colorblindness is followed to its logical conclusion of only individuality mattering and if colorblindness is the dominant racial philosophy of white Americans, then it is easy to see how many white Americans do not have a sense of racial group identity, let alone an idea of how group identity and consciousness can impact individuals. Harlon Dalton addresses some of the consequences of a lack of white understanding of white group identity in his essay “Failing to See.”

Whatever the reason, the inability or unwillingness of many White people to think of themselves in racial terms has decidedly negative consequences. For one thing, it produces huge blind spots. It leaves them baffled by the amount of energy many Blacks pour into questions of racial identity. It makes it difficult for them to understand why many (but by no means all) Blacks have a sense of group consciousness that influences the choices they make as individuals. It blinds Whites to the fact that their lives are shaped by race just as much as are the lives of people of color.<sup>12</sup>

The disconnect that comes from not understanding the significance of racial group identity in America while benefiting still from it, works well to partially explain the lack of knowledge many white people have about their own white privilege.

In order to understand exactly how just being white in America starts someone off with an advantage, it is necessary to critically examine how white people are treated differently from non-white people, both by the general populace and by mainstream

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<sup>11</sup> Hitchcock p.63

<sup>12</sup> Rothenberg p.17

cultural inclinations. Using Peggy McIntosh's list from her essay "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," a narrowed down and embellished list would include the following examples of how whites are privileged on Ithaca College's campus. As a white person on this campus:

- "I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time."
- "I can swear, or dress in secondhand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race."
- I can speak in public to a powerful group without putting my race on trial.
- "I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world's majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion."
- "I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to 'the person in charge,' I will be facing a person of my race."
- "If a traffic cop pulls me over or if I the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race."
- "I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out-of-place, out-numbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared."
- I can be at an affirmative action school without having other students or faculty suspect that I got there because of my race.
- "I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me."
- "If my day, week, or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones."
- "I can choose blemish cover or bandages in 'flesh' color and have them more or less match my skin."<sup>13</sup>
- I can walk around campus without feeling endangered by the anonymous faces of the student body, one of whom threatened me and everyone of my race anonymously.

It is interesting that if I had not had a previously written list that examined white privilege in America, I seriously doubt I would have been able to come up with such a comprehensive list of the ways that white privilege is present on Ithaca College's

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<sup>13</sup> Rothenberg pp. 110-111

campus. Even with the list as a prompt, I have no doubt that there are still many ways, both subtle and obvious, that I can't identify.<sup>14</sup>

After identifying and acknowledging that white privilege exists, what comes next? There are a variety of modes and directions that a white person could pursue following their new understanding of the reality within which they live. Tatum suggests there is a psychological process whites need to undergo in order to move from assumed superiority, (whether through actual belief in the superiority of whites or through the unexamined identification as 'only human,' which brings with it a subtle connotation of superiority), to the development of a positive white identity based in the reality of a racist society. The basic movement is for each person to "become aware of his or her Whiteness, accept it as personally and socially significant, and learn to feel good about it, not in the sense of a Klan member's 'White pride,' but in the context of a commitment to a just society."<sup>15</sup>

This progression of racial understanding is contingent upon a choice that is made by the white individual. The fact that this choice even exists is a testament to the privilege that is afforded to whites in this society, but this choice is a reality nonetheless. Upon realization of the racialized nature of society, a white person can choose to confront it and enter into the process of moving perhaps from an active racist to a passive racist to an active anti-racist or they can choose a form of willful ignorance. Sometimes this isn't even a very conscious choice, at least not initially. However, what the choice ultimately comes down to is the decision to reject white privilege or not.

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<sup>14</sup> It should be said that my own lack of ability of uncover further forms of white privilege is by no means an exact science.

<sup>15</sup> Tatum p. 94

The film “The Color of Fear,” featuring a small group of adult males from various different ethnic, socioeconomic, and racial backgrounds discussing their experiences with racism, provides a concrete example of the difficulty some white people have with their relationship to racism. In the film there is intense discussion about the pain and anger that is created by racism. At one point, the white male who entered the group expressing a colorblind ideology is eventually emotionally connected with the deep pain that racism has caused not only people of color, but also himself. In doing so, he remarks that that feeling, even just momentarily, the hurt that racism causes, scares him because it shakes his understanding of the world as a good and just place. In many ways it seems like this altering of his fundamental conception of the world he lives in is much harder to comprehend than the fact that he as a white male was unknowingly and passively causing pain to other people.

Tatum discusses how the creation of group identity and the acknowledgement of its significance challenge what are fundamental notions of the world for many white people. Ultimately, she sees the idea of group identity as a challenge to the popular and pervasive ideology of rugged individualism and the American myth of meritocracy. Furthermore, “understanding racism as a system of advantage that structurally benefits Whites and disadvantages people of color on the basis of group membership threatens not only beliefs about society but also beliefs about one’s own life accomplishments.”<sup>16</sup>

Though they certainly can, the fears that are induced by the shaking of fundamental notions do not *necessarily* paralyze someone from taking steps to move towards a positive white identity. They are also not the only fears. Many people fear the concept of giving up white privilege based purely on the idea that they do not know and

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<sup>16</sup> Tatum p. 103

cannot conceive what a world would be like without the advantages they enjoy. This fear of the unknown is often related to not knowing what advantages they enjoy and thus not knowing what they would be giving up or how it would change their lives.

Another fear associated with giving up white privilege is how white society will treat you once you denounce it. Just as the often unseen flipside to disadvantages for people of color is advantages for white people, denouncing advantage brings the fear of entering into disadvantage. Tatum describes some of the specific things that people fear in becoming actively anti-racist: “Isolation from friends and family, ostracism for speaking of things that generate discomfort, rejection by those who may be offended by what we have to say, the loss of privilege or status for speaking in support of those who have been marginalized by society, physical harm caused by the irrational wrath of those who disagree with your stance.”<sup>17</sup> Another overriding fear in general is the fear of speaking about something which one is ignorant of, and would hence be opened up as vulnerable.

In his speeches, Harvey Milk, the former San Francisco mayor and first openly gay public official elected in a major US city, would often call for gay men and women to come out because “the conspiracy of silence” was one of the greatest threats and disadvantages they faced. The reasoning was that silence maintained the status quo while also marginalizing gays and lesbians. This is similar to racism in that silence there also maintains the status quo. With racism, a culture of silence in white communities not only masks the fact that structural racism as well as white privilege exists, but it also robs white individuals, who wish to remedy those conditions, of the tools to effectively address them. This culture of silence about racism not only inhibits whites from actively

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<sup>17</sup> Rothenberg p.128

speaking out against racism, but often from even engaging in dialogue concerning it. The fear to speak that has been created by the culture of silence must be overcome if positive anti-racist movement is to take place amongst whites. As Tatum says, “in order for there to be meaningful dialogue, fear, whether of anger or isolation, must eventually give way to risk and trust. A leap of faith must be made. It is not easy, and it requires being willing to push past one’s fear.”<sup>18</sup> It is meaningful dialogue that is required for American society to move towards a structure where one racial group is not privileged over all others.

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<sup>18</sup> Rothenberg p.131

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