

White Guilt is actually White Narcissism

Or, my personal genesis story with racism.

When I was a little girl, I had a babysitter who would sometimes take us to her parents house. She took care of a few local kids, some of whom we knew, and one of them was a little black boy who I was friends with.

My babysitter's mother once told me that this boy said "scrub, scrub, scrub though I might, why will my skin never be white" when he was in the bath. I repeated this story to my babysitter, who got very angry with me.

She told me that her mother would never say such a thing, so obviously I was making the story up, and that I was a very bad little girl for doing so. I was so ashamed of myself that I never repeated this story. In fact, I don't think I've told anyone except my therapist about it to this day.

I wrote an essay a few days ago where I claim all white people are racist, all men are sexist, all straight people are homophobic, etc. Many of my friends disagreed with such assertions, and they were right to. Not all white people are racist — white children, if they are young enough, are not racist. I hadn't examined my belief in the innate racism of white people, of my belief in my own innate racism, until I wrote that story. But, when I think about it, that belief probably traces back to a moment like the one with my babysitter. I was a little white girl, mirroring people's own racism back to them in the innocent way only a child can, and when they saw their racism in me they refused to take responsibility for it. They blamed it on me, and I believed them. I guess I still believe them.

The indoctrination of white children to turn against their innate feelings has a long history with respect to racism. Nell Irvan Painter, a retired professor emeritus of American History from Princeton, talks about the effects on children (of both slave and master) who witness slavery. She describes the story of a white adult who had learned how to beat his slaves:

John Nelson was a Virginian who spoke in 1839 about his own coming of age and this system of triangles. He says, when he was a child, when his father beat their slaves, that he would cry and he would feel for the slave who was being inflicted with violence. He would feel almost as if he himself were being beaten, and he would cry. And he would say, "Stop, stop!" And his father, "You have to stop that. You have to learn to do this, yourself." And as John Nelson grew up, he did learn how to do it. And he said in 1839 that he got to the point where he not only didn't cry; he could inflict a beating himself and not even feel it.

Additionally complicating this was the fact that, due to the common practice of the household patriarch raping his female slaves, it is highly likely that white children often witnessed the beating of their own family members. In order to maintain the institution of slavery, children had to learn to act out *what they were told* and *ignore what they felt*, and so childrearing methods to numb children to their own emotions were developed.

As the culturally established ethics around slavery and race changed, the official message we taught children changed, but the *means* through which we taught them did not. Both John Nelson and I learned that there are unquestionable rules around race relations that must be obeyed, and these rules are to some degree disconnected from our larger system or logic or morality. Race is treated as an exception, and this perceived exceptionalism stops white people from making deep progress in their emotional attitudes.

Despite being raised in a highly liberal “progressive” environment, I learned some toxic things around race relations. One was that it was unacceptable for me to state, plainly, my observations or questions around race so I kept quiet on topics that confused me. I learned there were certain things I was “allowed” to say, and certain things I wasn’t “allowed” to say, and these rules seemed arbitrary. I also learned that white people would say things they weren’t “allowed” to say when they were around other white people, but to repeat such things in larger groups was unacceptable and would lead to denial, and attacks on my person. I also grew to feel that I was *inherently bad* because a) I was personally blamed for repeating racist things from my environment and I lacked the maturity to understand where these ideas were coming from and b) I was implicitly included in groups that were obviously exhibiting racist behavior, so I assumed I was like them.

As I matured, these feelings of inherent badness persisted, but my sophistication with respect to my own denial increased. I realized I was able to fend off these feelings of shame by acting in overtly “not racist” ways. If I complimented black people, for instance, or expressed outrage at racial injustices, my feelings of shame around my own presumed racism would be lessened.

And, I think that’s basically the current state of the liberal community. We have reached the point that many white people are loudly, and vocally expressing their support of progressive stances around race relations. Sometimes when this is highlighted people are assumed to be acting on “white guilt” but I think that is a misnomer. Guilt implies an understanding of the harm you have caused someone, and a desire to act in a way to mitigate its effects. I think a closer definition, and I mean no offense by this, would be “white narcissism.” Narcissistic behavior (at least as I understand it from reading the last psychiatrist) is basically defined as behaving in ways to create a positive story about oneself in order to maintain high self image. So, if someone volunteers at a homeless shelter so she can tell herself and others what a good person she is, she is acting out of narcissism. Which, to some degree is fine (she’s still volunteering, right?)

However, narcissism is usually a cover for a fundamentally poor self image. Someone who secretly believes she is a *bad* person will be more motivated to do things to convince herself she’s a good person. Additionally, when confronted with evidence that something she did makes her a bad person, she is likely to act out in rage or denial (see narcissistic rage). The big problem with white narcissism, is while it may motivate some positive behavior, it also serves as a massive defense system that preserves subconscious racist behaviors.

To summarize: many progressive white people, deep down, probably worry they are racist due to their upbringing. This is painful to them, especially given our complete societal ostracization of racists, and they don’t want to believe it. So, they act in many ways to counter this on a high level (expressing anti racist views, shaming other people perceived as racist, maybe protesting or something, etc.) and then convince themselves that they aren’t racist. However, if you call them out on behavior that points out that, in some ways, they’re acting racist they will refuse to absorb this information. They will deny it, say they were misinterpreted, get angry, maybe apologize without any deeper understanding of what they did, because it is painful for them to touch that place that secretly worries they might be racist.

What it is very difficult for people acting out of white narcissism to do is *empathize* with people who have experienced racism. If someone brings up an incident with racism in it, their number

one concern (as someone desperately trying to cover their own racism, even to themselves) will be *how can I show that I am not like this racist person.*

If you'll notice a bunch of white-looking people tweets in response to some dude putting up a racist picture of him with a black kid (From searching twitter for #HisNameIsCayden)

"I am sick over these racist, evil comments about an innocent child. Further proof that racism is alive and well in 2015."

"Racism wont be tolerated. Respect for the companies that took action. If a FB post takes a bad turn, you can delete!!!"

"It is sickening that racist comment are made in general let alone towards a three year old. Ugh"

You'll note that a lot of people are quick to indicate their own disgust and outrage as they try hard to project that *they* are like not like that. Cuz, you know, #notallwhitepeople or something. But I'd wager if you accused any of these people (who clearly have "not being racist" as part of their identity) of any behavior that was "oppressive" with respect to race, you'd trigger a massive immune response. And, this is a big problem, because we're entering a world where the bulk of discrimination will be subconscious, and the only way to get around this will be legitimately connecting with the experiences of people of color.

And, I *so* get this defended behavior. I don't want to be a racist! I know why they don't want to be a racist! I deeply, intuitively, understand the desire to project this "not-racist" person to the world. But, this desire with its current strength and intensity, is directly born out of white American emotional numbness around race. It is a weird, inverted, version of the emotional numbness created through slavery. It is still an objectification of people of color, but instead of using them for economic enhancement, we are using them for identity enhancement. We are still trivializing *their lived experience* and using them for *how they can benefit us.*

How do we get around this? I mean, I think people should still go to all their protests, and do their Facebook activism or whatever because maybe it will have a positive effect. However, we should also understand the roots of own emotionality around race. If we see that we are not innately bad, that we have absorbed racist ideology from a racist system against our will when we were too young to protest, it might stop us being so defended around our own racism. Additionally, I think white people should stop excessive shaming of racists. Once their behavior has been identified as problematic, we can stop there. Excessive shaming of other people sets us up to be highly defended ourselves, because we fear also being called out in such a way. It is much more important that you are able to *fix* your own problematic behavior than it is for you identify it in others.