

# Talking about whiteness...

Why do we find it so difficult?



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## In transition...

Welcome again to readers of our first issue, and to first-time readers as well. If you saw our first issue, you'll realize we've made some changes. We have committed ourselves to publishing as our first major activity. Rather than asking for contributions to the Center as we did in our first issue, we are simply asking you to subscribe to the newsletter (see our form, page 15).

As a subscriber, we hope to bring value to your life. Instead of simply reporting events at the Center, we plan to move toward a magazine-type format that explores white American culture in all its aspects.

Toward that end we have expanded our format from eight to sixteen pages. We have changed our typesetting software to take advantage of our printer's high resolution image-setting equipment. And we have begun to add features such as Letters to the Editor, an opinion column, an editorial cartoon, and feature articles.

We still plan to include material of interest to academicians. Look for more bibliographies in upcoming issues, for instance. But we do not want to be constrained by a strictly academic format. At some later date, as we expand our offerings, we plan to launch a journal focused on purely scholarly themes.

In the meantime, we believe in a world where there is room for racially-oriented magazines like *Ebony*, *Hispanic*, *A Magazine*, and *Emerge*, there is also room for at least one magazine exploring the cultural experience of white Americans.

This is still a difficult line to walk. We are not suggesting that white Americans have been neglected by the mainstream. Our issues are different from minority cultures. Nor are we saying that an untempered celebration of whiteness is needed. Whiteness has been celebrated in the past, and remains so today, by avowed white supremacists.

But we do feel the current climate—where discussing and acknowledging white culture is taboo among many white Americans—cuts us off from a part of ourselves we need to acknowledge.

Empowerment is not the issue for white Americans. We may be individually oppressed for other reasons, but not for our whiteness. It still remains an advantage in our society. We need to change that.

But there's a baby in the bath. We are who we are. For better and worse, white Americans have a culture, and it is part of the weird mixed-marriage we call America. We need to acknowledge it in all its aspects, both good and bad. It's a first step toward change.

## Whiteness: There's a lot to discuss

Why is it so difficult? There's no simple answer to the question we pose on our cover. Still, the question is important, if not a little puzzling. After all, we all have a race, don't we? Why should it be so hard for some of us to talk about our racial experiences?

In this issue we explore the process of discussing whiteness from many different points of view. Beginning with comments from our readership—which were overwhelmingly positive—we continue with an opinion piece contributed by one of our initial readers.

Next we venture into the field of political analysis as we examine what one "white" leader, President Clinton, recently had to say about white Americans, and black Americans as well.

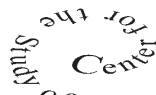
In a fascinating interview with diversity trainer and consultant Cessie Alfonso, we explore some of the ways in which white Americans discuss race, particularly their own, and the implications of naming and not naming oneself as white. Along with the interview, we include two related articles. One, the phone scenario, features a

training tool developed by Ms. Alfonso that she has used to great effect over the years. The other article reviews some comments by African American writers on how white people act, on the phone and in person. While not necessarily flattering, it may be something you need to know.

Do white Americans have preferences about what they are called? You bet. We explore some of the implications of various terms for white Americans and offer the results of a recent government survey on the matter.

Next, we include an example of racial writing by a white American, who explores a genre commonly used only by Americans of color—interpreting one's own experience through a racial lens.

Finally, on our back page we include a little test with no special purpose other than to point out some little known facts. And we list our appearances during the next few months where we present our newly developed workshop on discussing whiteness. Maybe we will see you there.



White American Culture, Inc.

**QUARTERLY  
NEWSLETTER**

**A multiracial organization**

**VOL. 2, NO. 1 WINTER 1996**

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# Letters to the Editor

Can I please get on your mailing list? I just saw a copy of your first publication and I am VERY interested in being involved. I am doing research on white employers of Latina domestic workers.

**Doreen Mattingly**  
Departments of Geography and Women's Studies  
San Diego State University

We were excited to receive your first edition and shared it with many of our friends who are committed to the work of anti-racism in this country. Like you, we heard many queries about the name of the Center ("Wouldn't it evoke images of the radical right," etc.). Frankly, we are quite encouraged that you have chosen to name the "unnamed." For far too long, issues of race and racism in this country have been defined largely as "the Black problem" because the sociopolitical and spiritual implications of whiteness have remained unnamed. We congratulate your courage.

We are hopeful that in the future there will be increased dialogue and collaboration between your organization and ours (Beyond the Barrier) as we explore how understanding of racial identity in this country shapes our relationship to ourselves, each other, and to

our concept of Creator. We are currently involved in organizational development projects with educational institutions, church groups, and immigration centers. Working as an interracial team, we do some of our most challenging work with Europeans newly immigrated to this country. It is truly powerful to work with them as they discover how American white culture influences everyday relationships in their new country.

We look forward to future editions. Congratulations and Godspeed.

**William D. Larkin III (Bill), Director**  
**Dr. Maureen Walker**  
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facilitate we often include activities at the University of Virginia's Women's Center, or with the Black Student Alliance, and we often get a reaction along the lines of "Why isn't there a Men's Center?" or "Why isn't there a white student alliance?" when every school building here, and every administrative office (virtually) is a Men's Center and a white student alliance.

But as I read the newsletter, I was thrilled to find and understand that your organization is about celebrating white culture on one hand, and working on its weak spots at the same time. I am one-hundred percent for that. To me, it's about introspection. You have to know yourself (which means being familiar with your culture, a sense surprisingly few people have), and be comfortable with where you are in relation

to the rest of the world before you can begin to understand and appreciate other cultures.

To me, your organization, whether it is a mission of your organization or not, may serve to facilitate such self-knowing and self-appreciating which must occur before those "selves" can address the issues which I work with students on—their own prejudices (not only racially-based, but in terms of gender, ability, age, size, sexual orientation, etc.).

In that sense, we are very much part of the same team. And I could use all the teammates I can find.

Thanks again, and all the best.

**Paul Curry**  
University of Virginia

## CLIPART CARTOON



Some white American men ponder their racial identity.

I received your package in the mail today. I've already read over the newsletter, and found the perspectives there quite interesting. I must admit, my ideas and that of your organization are not very different. I suppose it was just the title of the organization that raised my eyebrows initially. In the multicultural education course which I

# Personal Shades

by Michelle Golden

Hello, my name is Michelle Golden. I'm a white graduate student at Emory University in Atlanta with a personal and academic interest in the power dynamics of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, etc. in contemporary change organizations. My interest in this area stems from my work as an activist.

I was pleased to hear about the Center for the Study of White American Culture and I read the organization's first newsletter with interest. I'm writing because it seems to me that the Center could move in one of two general directions, and I want to log my two cents on the subject.

When we talk about "white culture," we can either assume that it is roughly parallel to other American cultures to which we commonly refer — e.g. African-American, Native American — or we can grapple with what it means to have a culture that is defined as the norm in a multicultural society. This may seem a purely semantic distinction, but it is not. As I see it, the two options boil down to this: are we going to *consistently* grapple with the power dynamics of race, or are we going to try to sidestep the issue by pretending that "white" is just another of the many cultures in our society? The articles in the Center's newsletter seemed to vacillate between these two perspectives. I myself believe that if we do not *consistently* acknowledge racism and white privilege in discussion of white culture, we risk perpetuating these problems.

I began thinking about this issue while reading the newsletter's front page article. In this article, Jeff Hitchcock acknowledges the role that racism plays in shaping white culture.

However, he also argues that there is "another side to white American culture and being white" which involves people being able to "feel good" about being white.

The idea that we need to feel good about white culture in the same way that people of color need to feel good about their cultures is based on the assumption

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***"...we are simply not whole, not fully alive, in a society permeated by racism..."***

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that we can divorce this thing we call "white culture" from the power dynamics that shape and define it. I don't believe that we can do that. In fact, I believe that our attempts to remove a consistent analysis of power dynamics from discussions of white culture is itself a white cultural pattern that serves to perpetuate racial inequality.

I do understand the *impulse* to divorce white culture from analyses of power dynamics, especially in the context in which Jeff brings it up. He notes that "when white people discuss how it feels to be white, I hear feelings of shame, guilt and self-hatred." White guilt leads us to feel bad about being white. Thus, we seek to reverse this by finding ways to "feel good" about being white. Unfortunately, this can mean whitewashing (pun intended) the realities of our race privilege.

We need to redefine what it means to "feel good," so that we don't feel the

need to choose between guilt/shame on one hand and willful disregard of the power dynamics of race on the other. If we reshape our understanding of what it means to "feel good," we can feel good (really!) about our work as white allies in a system in which racism and white privilege affect all of us on a daily basis. In my experience, many of the steps involved in doing anti-racist work as a white person are painful, but the underlying process is one of joy — because we are simply not whole, not fully alive, in a society permeated by racism and white privilege.

I hope that the Center doesn't choose to undermine anti-racist work by perpetuating the idea that we need to find even small ways to celebrate white culture. White culture is based on, founded in, shaped by and permeated with race inequality. Without these power dynamics, whiteness as we know it would not exist.

This does not mean that those defined as white have no culture to celebrate. We each have a specific ethnic heritage and history to learn about and celebrate. Our inclusion in the category of "white," however, is built on our race privilege.

We need to talk about whiteness, to think about it, to name it, to study it — but we certainly don't need to celebrate it. What we need to do is interrupt it and make change. How we might make change is another discussion — one in which I hope the Center will be actively engaged.

***Personal Shades is a forum for readers and other interested persons to offer their analysis of contemporary issues in white American culture. "Shades" can mean shades of opinion, or it can refer to shades of complexion. By either meaning, we hope to present a diverse group of contributors. The Personal Shades feature will appear on a periodic basis. Opinions expressed in this feature reflect those of the author in each case, and not necessarily the Center.***



# Presidential address breaks Washington code of silence on discussing white people

Mention the phrase “white leadership” and you will invoke images of Klan activity in the minds of most white Americans. Yet white Americans invariably talk about black leadership, and sometimes try to lionize influential black Americans as “the leader” of black America. Why, many African Americans ask, are leaders who are white not called white leaders?

Neither the black nor white race really has a leader, per se. Indeed, no other racial group, Hispanic, Asian, American Indian, has a single leader either. But looking the other way, nearly every American leader has an identifiable race, as does nearly every American citizen.

Leaders tend to speak from their experience, and since some part of that experience is racial, leaders often are influenced by and respond to the needs and concerns of their racial groups. Leaders from racial minorities often advocate to improve the standing of their race in a society still largely controlled by white Americans. White leaders, on the other hand, avoid the question of race, and advocate for keeping the status quo.

Leaders are also role models. When leaders who are white make statements, it reflects to some degree on all white persons. How we are perceived by other racial groups is strongly influenced by the stances taken by our most visible leaders.

The positions that leaders take on racial issues have varied through history. Omi and Winant, in a recent influential book titled *Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York:Routledge, 1994, 2nd Edition), have commented on the current vogue of colorblindness among white leaders. Originally a creation of the right in the 1970s, the preference for colorblind rhetoric was absorbed by the Democrats in the Clinton 1992 presidential campaign. According to Omi and Winant, “Clinton very rarely brought up

race in a direct way — and then often made his point at the expense of racial minorities, as in the case of his rebuke of rap artist Sister Souljah for supposedly making racist remarks...In 1992, for the first time in almost half a century, the Democratic party platform made no specific pledge to address racial injustices and inequalities.”

So it was an interesting and thought-provoking moment, against the backdrop of the recent Million Man March last October, when President Clinton made a speech about race that “broke the rules.”

Among the things that Clinton said, quoted verbatim:

*White Americans and black Americans often see the same world in drastically different ways.*

*White America must understand and acknowledge the roots of black pain.*

*Many whites think blacks are getting more than their fair share in terms of jobs and promotions. This is not true. This is not true.*

*Blacks must understand and acknowledge the roots of white fear in America ...violence for those white people too often has a black face.*

*It isn't racist for whites to say they don't understand why people put up with gangs on the corner or in the projects, or with drugs being sold in the schools or in the open. It's not racist for whites to assert that the culture of welfare dependency, out-of-wedlock pregnancy and absent fatherhood cannot be broken by social programs unless there is first more personal responsibility.*

*The great potential for this march today, beyond the black community, is that whites will come to see a larger truth—that blacks share their fears and embrace their convictions; openly assert that without changes in the black community and within individuals, real change for our society will not come.*

*This march could remind white people*

*that most black people share their old-fashioned American values.*

*And white people too often forget that they are not immune to the problems black Americans face—crime, drugs, domestic abuse, and teen pregnancy. They are too prevalent among whites as well, and some of those problems are growing faster in our white population than in our minority population.*

*It is therefore wrong for white Americans to do what they have done too often simply to move further away from the problems and support policies that will only make them worse.*

*Both sides seem to fear deep down inside that they'll never quite be able to see each other as more than enemy faces, all of whom carry at least a sliver of bigotry in their hearts.*

*To our white citizens, I say, I know most of you every day do your very best by your own lights—to live a life free of discrimination. Nevertheless, too many destructive ideas are gaining currency in our midst. The taped voice of one policeman should fill you with outrage. And so I say, we must clean the house of white America of racism. Americans who are in the white majority should be proud to stand up and be heard denouncing the sort of racist rhetoric we heard on that tape—so loudly and clearly denouncing it, that our black fellow citizens can hear us. White racism may be black people's burden, but it's a white people's problem. We must clean our house.*

Omi and Winant, whose book was written before Clinton's speech, suggested three themes needed to reintroduce discussion of race to the national agenda in a way that might further progress toward a racially egalitarian society. They suggested we acknowledge that: 1) Old fashion racism still exists; 2) The traditional victimology of racism is moribund; and 3) To oppose racism one must remain conscious of race.

It's almost like President Clinton read their book.

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## **Training white Americans**

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A n i n t e r v i e w w i t h

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# Cessie Alfonso

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**Eighteen years in the same business can teach you a few things. Cessie Alfonso, A.C.S.W., established her own human relations training firm in 1978. During those years she trained various groups on issues such as racism, sexism and homophobia. Currently involved with her diversity consulting practice, Ms. Alfonso (CA) keeps a hectic pace. This past November, the Center for Study (CFS) managed to take a few moments to listen to some of the insights developed by this diversity pioneer. In particular, we wanted to know, what insights could she offer us on white American culture? So, we asked. And this is what she said.**

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**CFS:** Thank you for finding some time to talk with us. What sort of training do you do?

**CA:** My primary training focus is developing skills in dealing with differences.

**CFS:** What sort of differences?

**CA:** Racial differences, cultural differences, workstyle differences, increasing awareness of the differences in what we call primary and secondary diversity that can create some problems in communication and ultimately problems in productivity in the workplace. We talk about it in the context of work.

**CFS:** How many people have you trained, and in what type of settings?

**CA:** Oh, thousands. I've done most of my training in a work context, corporations and institutions in the private sector.

**CFS:** As the Center for the Study of White American Culture, we focus on cultural issues and racial issues. Would you tell us how you identify yourself culturally or racially?

**CA:** Racially I identify myself as a black

woman and ethnically I identify as a Puerto Rican/Cuban woman. If you wanted to give me a "label" I am an Afro Puerto Rican Cuban woman.

**CFS:** We actually don't try to give labels ourselves but we're interested in how people perceive themselves.

**CA:** I am perceived as an African American woman.

**CFS:** So if you are in a training situation, the participants are likely to respond to you or perceive you as an African American woman?

**CA:** Correct. I have to inform people of my ethnic background because the assumption is made from my appearance that I am an African American woman. I do not look like a typical "Latina" person.

**CFS:** As a trainer who is experienced in dealing with cultural issues as well as racial issues, do you think there is such a thing as white American culture?

**CA:** Oh yes, I do. Definitely, as a trainer and as a woman of color on the planet. In America there is a distinct white American culture with its distinct values,

approaches, style and assumptions.

**CFS:** Could you describe those values, approaches and style?

**CA:** Well, in the white culture only a small group of people refer to themselves as white. The language is one which is defined as being standard English without accents. That's the white culture. There are the values of hard work and rugged individualism. There's this mythology in white culture that is perpetuated by that culture of rugged individualism. There are acceptable and appropriate styles of presentation in the white dominant culture, meaning the way you are supposed to be dressed. There is an emphasis educationally in white culture on the contribution of that culture to the development of this country in terms of defining itself as a culture that has made a significant contribution to the development of society. And the white culture only reluctantly acknowledges the contributions of other groups to the American culture. White culture also tends to be not as emotive as other cultural groups, meaning it responds to physical contact, public expression of emotions and behavior by not being very physical, as opposed to other groups who are very physical. I

think these are some clear distinct elements of white culture.

**CFS:** Do you think there is a greater cultural process that could be called American culture, and how does that fit with the notion of white American culture?

**CA:** Let me see if I understand the question correctly. Are you saying that there is a white culture and then a distinct American culture...

**CFS:** That white culture is a component of the larger...

**CA:** American culture. I think that like other groups, like the African American, and we're going to be using comparisons here, there is a distinct black culture with its rhythms, its folklore, its images, its style, yet in that subgroup they're also part of the American culture. And I say that the white culture is less distinct from the "American" culture, but I would say there is some distinction. Like for example in the white culture you don't, white people don't refer to themselves as white. That's white culture, not necessarily American culture.

**CFS:** Let's get back to your experience as a trainer. Do you have to use different approaches or techniques when you work with a group that has white Americans in it?

**CA:** Yes. In designing a training program you have two distinct groups, people of color and whites. You have to design the training not expecting that whites will talk comfortably about race, in particular. They're not comfortable talking about race, about being white and about what is their culture. They have much more difficulty identifying it. So you have to create an opportunity for them to do that, and be prepared

as a trainer and a facilitator to help them work through their awkwardness and resistance.

**CFS:** How do people of color manage these issues?

**CA:** People of color and particularly African Americans, part of their culture is discussing issues of race in one form or another. You can not have people of color together in a room and not have them talk on at least some level about being whatever that color is in the American culture. You hardly ever hear white people do that. That is a distinct cultural difference. So, for example, I will tell whites one of the first things you will become aware of if you are in the minority with people of color is that you will hear people of color making jokes about race. I mean it's not even threatening. It's just a way of interacting. It's a way of being. People of color will talk about it, will kid around about it, where whites won't do that at all. Their conversations are not peppered around comments that reflect a consciousness and awareness of race.

**CFS:** So in the case of people of color talking about race, race is not necessarily seen as a bad thing or a negative thing.

**CA:** No, it is part of the cul-

ture. It is a way in which people of color interact. It's imbued and embedded in the fabric of the culture of people of color, particularly African Americans.

**CFS:** Would you say there are positive aspects to race?

**CA:** Within both groups? Sure, absolutely. There is nothing inherently negative about being white or black or being of one distinct group or another. It's the way it is represented or treated by one group or the other. To show there is nothing wrong with it, if you take the average African American, who is obviously not in the dominant group in the American culture, and ask them if they would change their color, most would say no.

**CFS:** And in this case, color also meaning culture.

**CA:** Correct. It means culture, absolutely, because you have people who are of African American culture who are very light, white-skinned. What you don't want to give up is the culture, and not even the color. I mean you don't want to give up that. That's a preference, a taste.

**CFS:** Let's talk about assimilation and how it's not necessarily the same, that as white Americans with the dominant culture we just act within it, whereas as a person of color you need to assimilate to that dominant culture.

**CA:** Correct, and that's what assimilation is. For people of color in this country, that's what they have to do. You have to assimilate. Whites do not have to assimilate to their own culture, I mean to the American culture. That's who they are.

**CFS:** Whites don't



Diversity consultant and trainer, Cessie Alfonso, A.C.S.W.

have to assimilate to the American culture?

**CA:** No, let's be clear. The process of assimilating to the American mainstream culture occurs around class. Poor whites must, in order to have social status, must assimilate to the mainstream middle class culture. That's what they must do. People of color must also assimilate depending on their class, because we're talking about, we have different layers here. We're talking about the American culture, we're talking about the American mainstream culture and then we're talking about class, and we have to be very careful about that, because if you are a poor white, you have different cultural styles and class also creates cultural norms and expectations and if you want to move to a different class you must assimilate, you must acculturate and assimilate to that mainstream culture. People of color who are poor also must assimilate to the middle class black culture and to the middle class white culture, so you have all these distinctions that you have to make.

**CFS:** On occasion I've heard the suggestion that white Americans, and let's say white Americans in particular coming out of a middle class background, need to

develop cultural skills when working with people of color, when working in a setting where the mainstream culture is not the culture that applies, or when trying to reach out and approach people of color. Do you think this is an accurate description from your experience? Is there what could be described as a deficit on the part of white Americans?

**CA:** I do, and I'll give you an example of what I mean by that. Let's use the example of a white person of middle class background who has clearly not had to deal with the assimilation issue because they're assimilated. When you ask the people of color what is it that makes this particular person culturally sensitive, it's that that person has developed part of the cultural norm that is common in the culture of color. What do I mean by that? What I mean is that a white person is very conscious about the subtle forms of racism and how they present themselves. If you are a person of color and you are with someone who is of white middle class background and they're walking or hanging out with you or whatever and they'll say 'Oh my God, that was a racist thing that that person did,' that tells you that that person has picked up some of the values and sensitivity and conscious-

ness that's imbued in the person of color's culture.

**CFS:** So to be able to talk about race or racism, to be comfortable discussing the topic, is a sign, an indicator or earmark of someone having assimilated to a culture of color.

**CA:** Correct.

**CFS:** As a trainer do you have any particular scenarios or exercises that you use to work with white Americans on issues of white American culture?

**CA:** Well, yes I do. One of the first things you need to do with whites is you have to raise their consciousness about how culture operates, and something that's very personal, I use the scenario of someone who's white, they're professional, they're interacting with someone on the phone...

**[Editor's note: Please refer to The Phone Scenario, page 9.]**

**CFS:** How do you interpret this scenario?

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Continued on page 10

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## On the phone: It's more than meets the eye.

Obviously when speaking on the phone, one can not see the race of the other party. People, white Americans at least, may try to guess the race of callers they have not met. But absent any other clues, we usually assume the caller is also white.

For nonwhite individuals, this can present a thorny problem, not of their making. An African American woman described traveling to an upstate New York location. She and her husband had arranged by phone to meet a member of a local church to attend their services. The local woman arrived at the appointed time, and spent 30 minutes looking around the nearly vacant site. Finally when she realized the African American couple was the one she had come for, she explained, "Oh, I didn't realize you were black." Consider also the following descriptions from three African Americans:

"A lot of times when [whites] talk to you on the phone, they don't realize they're dealing with a black. So when you go to talk to them, they really want

to question your right to the job. They question your mental capability. This is always amazing to me. They tend to overexplain very simple things. They want to tell you how to run the investigation. Some people show the initial shock on their faces. You ring the doorbell, you show your badge, and their eyes get big. [Anita Herbert, IRS investigator, in *Race* by Studs Terkel]

"[W]hen blacks deliver themselves into integrated situations, they encounter a nasty little reflex in whites, a mindless, atavistic reflex that responds to the color black with alarm. Attributions may follow this alarm if the white cares to indulge them, and if they do, they will most likely be negative—one such attribution is intellectual ineptness. I think this reflex and the attributions that may follow it embarrass most whites today, therefore, it is usually quickly repressed. Nevertheless, on an equally atavistic level, the black will be aware of the reflex his color triggers and will feel a stab of horror at seeing himself reflected in this way. [*The Content of Our*

*Character* by Shelby Steel]

"I was nervous [about going to a country inn]. Like many African-Americans, I've dealt with the 'phone thing'—moments in which white business people couldn't hide their shock when the potential client-employee-guest they'd welcomed over the phone turned out to be black. This time I felt too miserable to handle it. So I wasn't prepared to be immediately fussed over by Carol Konkel, who co-owns the [Brookside country] inn [in Millwood, Va.] with her husband, Gary. [Donna Britt, columnist, in a May 1, 1995 column]

Colorblindness, it seems, is a little more difficult for white Americans to achieve when they do not have time to prepare themselves. Those who are sincere in welcoming people of other races, and who intend to cause no discomfort or harm, might consider that the custom of assuming that another caller is white, and that naming one's race is not important, is only functional in an all-white world.



## The Phone Scenario

You are a white professional working for a medium-sized business organization. Over the past six weeks you have spoken four or five times with a business contact on the telephone. You are each from different organizations and you have never met this individual in person. However, your discussions have been congenial and professional. Over the course of your conversations you have made progress on the project that has been the topic of your discussions.

One morning during a conversation with this caller, you find discussions have come to a point where a meeting is needed to continue work on the project. An important deadline is coming up soon. The two of you agree to meet for lunch that day at a local restaurant. Because of your respective schedules, you agree to meet at the restaurant itself. You know nothing about the other person's appearance, so you each spend a little time describing yourself to the other person on the phone in order that you might recognize one another when you arrive.

Your colleague says, "I am an African American woman, about 5'-8", average build and I wear my hair natural. I'm wearing a gray suit."

### QUESTIONS

#### **If you are white, please answer the following questions:**

How would you describe yourself to your colleague?

Would you normally say that you are white when describing yourself in this circumstance?

Is the question of whether to describe your race something you would normally think about?

If you do describe yourself as white, what impression do you think this will give your colleague?

What reasons do you think your colleague might have for identifying herself as African American?

Does the race of your colleague make any difference in how you would describe yourself?

If you do not identify your race, do you think this, of itself, might provide your colleague with some insight regarding your racial identity?

What feelings, issues and concerns would this situation invoke in you?

#### **If you are a person of color, please answer the following questions taking the role of the person who described herself first:**

Would you normally identify your race when describing yourself in this circumstance?

Is the question of whether to describe your race something you would normally think about?

If you do not describe your race, what impression do you think this will give your colleague?

Does the race of your colleague make any difference in how you would describe yourself?

If your colleague does not describe his or her race, what reasons do you think he or she might have for not doing so?

If your colleague does not identify her or his race, do you think this, of itself, might provide you with some insight regarding your colleague's racial identity?

What feelings, issues and concerns would this situation invoke in you?

**Developed by Cessie Alfonso over ten years ago, the phone scenario is useful for training white Americans. Trainers may use the scenario by permission, provided they cite the source: Alfonso Associates, Inc., Jersey City, NJ.**

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**CA:** The woman of color is very aware that the other woman on the phone is white because she will not say her race. And this is cultural. This is a clear example of how culture shapes how people present themselves, what they emphasize, what they value, what the culture says is important and what the culture says you do or you don't do.

**CFS:** When you use this scenario in a training setting what sort of reaction do you find on the part of participants?

**CA:** Well white participants chuckle because it's so true, and they realize that they do not refer to themselves as white. It would not occur to them to describe themselves this way. And it's a descriptive term. It would facilitate meeting. It doesn't even have to do with issues of race and racism. It would just make things easier for you as a person to describe your race and they don't do that. Now the fact that the white culture does not support or encourage whites describing themselves as white is troubling to people of color because that behavior is experienced by people of color as a way of maintaining dominance and as a way of not acknowledging people of color. Therefore it is experienced as racism.

**CFS:** In the training setting when you present this scenario, do these issues come out? Do they become a topic of discussion?

**CA:** Yes. It's a very powerful way of facilitating a discussion of how white culture operates. I use also the example to make the point that the white culture, not referring to yourself as white, not describing yourself as white, is like a fish in water, and you go to a fish and say 'You're wet.' and the fish says 'What are you talking about? What do you mean water? How can I be wet? I don't even know what water is.' And so what happens is that a white person will not describe themselves as white. The person of color may experience that lack of self description or acknowledgment of race as racist, meaning as racism and how racism is imbued and expressed in

the white culture. The white person will not be aware of it. I mean this is what we call blindspots, a white person will not be aware of it at all and will not understand how the person of color could even consider that they would be racist or perpetuate racist behavior by the dominant culture. Let me stress that the reason that this is very important and is experienced as racism is because when the white person acknowledges their own race they are acknowledging the race of the other person, and that acknowledgment, that recognition in a way that's appropriate, diminishes racism. So it is the act of self-acknowledgment that validates the other person. When you don't

ble ways of describing oneself. It's crazy-making to say I'm wearing black but not to say I'm a black woman, particularly when over the phone there is no distinction between you and the person you're talking to in terms of language. I mean if you were Hispanic with an accent that's a whole other way of describing yourself, but if you sound like everybody else, it would help me a lot to have as many descriptive terms to describe yourself so I could find you easier.

**CFS:** From the stand point of finding descriptive terms, maybe 42nd street might not be the best example. If there are a large number of people and most of those people are white then the descriptive value is lost.

**CA:** You mean if you're both white and you're going to meet on 42nd street?

**CFS:** No, if you're in a crowd that is 90-95 percent white and you describe yourself as white to another white person, getting back to the point of white persons identifying themselves as white, the descriptive value is not that high from one white person talking to another white person.

*“When the white person acknowledges their own race, they are acknowledging the race of the other person, and that acknowledgment...diminishes racism.”*

do that, that is experienced as a denial of the other person and the denial of the other person is therefore interpreted as an expression of racism by the dominant group.

**CFS:** So to say that we both have a race, even though that race is different, is seen as being an inclusive gesture.

**CA:** Absolutely

**CFS:** Whereas to act or say, as is commonly done, that I have no race but you do, that I'm normal, I'm mainstream but you're black, is seen as excluding you.

**CA:** Absolutely.

**CFS:** Why shouldn't we all not just name our race? That puts us all on an equal plane.

**CA:** It is an appropriate descriptive term. It would facilitate things. There are 50,000 people on 42nd street [in New York city]. It would help. It has nothing to do with race. It's one of the most visi-

**CA:** Well, that's what white people do. But I think in general if I'm in, if you're in a world that's multicultural and multiethnic you should not assume. Don't assume, that's what gets you into trouble. You could be the 99th person in that group.

**CFS:** So for whites who may want to move into this world, or find this world beginning to encompass them, then in fact describing themselves racially does become more utilitarian.

**CA:** Absolutely.

**CFS:** Now you've been involved with diversity for a long time. Do you have any idea about what direction diversity will take? Many companies have done sensitivity training. Do you have any idea where that line of work is going or should be going?

**CA:** Well I think one of the ways it's going

**Continued on page 14**

# What do you call a white American? It's not always easy to know.

Ask a white American what term they prefer to use for their own race and they are likely to reply, "It doesn't matter to me." Doubtless many terms have been used to describe white Americans during the half-millennium they have resided in North America. Among contemporary terms in use by white Americans are "white," "Caucasian," "Anglo," "Euro American," and "European American."

Some Americans decidedly have a preference. At a recent Christmas party in a multicultural crowd, a white American, when called white, insisted in a spirited but serious way that she was "Caucasian." At a nursing home a few months ago, a black nurse spoke to a white American. She told him of her daughter, married, the nurse said, to a "white man." Then, as if making a distinction important to her or her son-in-law, she quickly added, "Caucasian." A woman in California is heard to have said with a glare on her face, "Don't call me white," preferring instead to be called Irish.

Perhaps you've never thought about it yourself, but there are differences between each term. "White," for instance, first came into use between 1650 and 1690, more than a generation after the first English colonists arrived in North America. Its emergence corresponded to development of a formal state policy that said Africans must endure perpetual slavery.

"White" persons often indentured themselves (a form of servitude by contract under which laborers were bought and sold). Indentured servants frequently shared the same harsh working conditions as slaves. But when the contract eventually expired, the laborer was freed.

"Caucasian," or "Caucasoid," comes from a failed scientific theory from the eighteenth century that clas-

sified mankind by first four, then five racial groups. "Caucasians" are named for the people living around the Caucasus mountains whom, the theory's main proponent believed, were the most beautiful of the race he was naming. Some "Caucasians" like to point out that "Caucasian" people range in skin color from pale Scandinavian to dark-skinned Tamil in Sri Lanka.

"Anglo" originally identified all non-Mexican-Americans. This usage is still common. It includes reference to African Americans as "Anglo." The term has become more widely used, taking on common meaning regarding non-Cuban-Americans in South Florida, as well as appearing at points in the scientific literature.

In derivation, the term "Anglo" comes from "Anglo-Saxon," a term referring to a small number of ethnic groups originally from the British Isles. Its current meaning has expanded to cover an entire race or two. Occasionally, a person of Anglo-Saxon heritage finds it perturbing to have his or her ethnicity co-opted to name a racial group. Other white Americans use the term "Anglo" as a less intrusive way to discuss issues of whiteness.

"Euro-American," and its close relation, "European American" have gained some recognition and usage recently. Some anti-racism trainers believe it should be the preferred name for white people. "European American" places emphasis on geographic origin, rather than skin color, as the key signifier of race.

Some people identifying as "European Americans" defend their racial identity against a perceived threat from multiculturalism. One man wrote to a regional newspaper, complaining that "the large majority of European Americans felt betrayed by the [O.J.] jury," and decrying a trend toward "bending over backward" to

place blacks on juries. Another European American, in the same paper, objected to "multicultural pap" being fed to school children in their history texts. She stated her opinion that "Euro Americans" were the ones who made things happen.

Who prefers which term? Believe it or not, there's an answer to this question. Last October the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of

Preferred racial identifier	Percent
White	61.66
Caucasian	16.53
No preference	16.53
European American	2.35
Some other term	1.97
Anglo	.96

**Results of a U.S. Dept. of Labor survey of racial identifiers preferred by white Americans.**

Labor Statistics, reported a survey of 60,000 households regarding their preferred name for racial categories such as those used in the U.S. Census.

White Americans prefer the term "white" by a clear majority, followed by an equal number of persons preferring either "Caucasian" or having no preference. "European American" and "Anglo" are distant thirds.

For the most part, white Americans are willing to answer Census questions about race, though the process of racial categorization per se bothers some of them. But regarding how we feel about racial identifiers for white Americans, we spend little time discussing these things.

That's a shame, since each term has its own history and distinguishing characteristics. Each tells an interesting story about who we are. It's worth some thought, and a little discussion.

# Commuting: *A momentary racial encounter in everyday life.*

by Jeff Hitchcock

**O**n my way home I drive a busy highway. The road slices through the outskirts of a fair-sized city, where commuters slow their pace, encountering traffic signals every three or four city blocks. The press of hurried vehicles to accelerate, and harried drivers to move along, remains a force in the pack of cars, light trucks and tractor-trailers driving this stretch.

Some drivers, haggard and worn, are quick to blow their horn. Others, less worn and less assertive, remain courteous. Most drivers simply want to traverse the corridor of lights, emerging to the longer, unencumbered stretch of road beyond.

I am one of the few people who turn off the highway. There I follow a street through the heart of the city and out the other side to the adjoining suburban community where I live. It's the quickest way for me; I travel it nearly every day.

And one day, a day with clear and pleasant weather, I had a series of encounters I found complex. It was simply one of those commuter's episodes we often find ourselves in. I was soon to meet an elderly lady, an eight-year old girl, and a 30-year old, male commuter dressed in business attire.

As I turned off the busy highway, I met the grandmother first. Our eyes made contact for the most fleeting of moments. Even now, in reflection, I wonder if her stare wasn't just a little

ahead of mine, that when I looked at her eyes, they had already looked toward mine and drawn away.

She was in the crosswalk, moving slowly toward the lane where I was turning my vehicle, accompanying the eight-year old girl and holding her by the hand. I call the woman "grandmother," though I don't know if it was true. She might have been an aunt, a great grandmother, a great aunt, a neighbor, or even a nanny to the young child. I had no way of knowing. She was a black woman; I would guess her age to be seventy, though I am not a keen judge of such things. And the eight-year old girl? She was black as well, though again I could only guess her age. They had entered the crosswalk and were taking a couple of steps across the street.

When I sighted them, I slowed my car, intending to stop if they walked directly across. But it was not clear to me if they planned to cross in front of me, or wait for traffic to pass. If I stopped to wait for them, only to find them waiting for me, then I would tie up traffic behind me. And I wanted them to notice me, to realize I and others might be delayed.

So I looked at the grandmother's eyes, the ones I don't quite remember catching. If our eyes did meet, it was only for the slightest of moments. I clearly remember my surprise as, reflexively, she cast her eyes down, drew in her shoulders, hunched her arms before her, slumped her posture and gave almost the impression of a turtle drawing within its shell.

Now withdrawn, the grandmother clutched the arm of the little girl firmly, and seemed immobile, concentrating only on holding the young girl to her. There she stood, three or four steps away from coming into my lane. The traffic in her lane was safely

stopped a few feet behind the pedestrian crosswalk where she and her charge now stood. It seemed to me that she might be waiting there a long time before I caught her eye again.

In an all white encounter, I would expect the grandmother to glance at me, to catch my eye and see if I recognized her presence. I might expect her to look to see if I would pass by in a rude or inconsiderate way. When her glance caught my eye, I would wave or make some motion to say "Please cross, but don't delay." Then I would wait for the grandmother to complete her trip with her charge, suffering whatever indignities of horn-honking from impatient commuters delayed behind me.

But the actual grandmother's withdrawal was something new to me, a behavior I had never quite encountered. I must have stared for a while, not really thinking. I remember the young girl, puzzled as to why they had stopped walking, turned to look into her grandmother's face. I'm not sure what response she got. From my position, I couldn't see any. Then, the young girl turned and looked me in the eye.

Finally, contact. I felt assured that someone was alert. I had pretty much

*"Did he see a rude and inconsiderate white man ignore this frail black woman, stopping only to avoid striking her with his car...?"*

concluded that the grandmother was not going to cross, but I didn't know how the girl would react. The fact that she made eye contact made me feel she had the presence of mind to stay with her grandmother. So I decided to drive



on.

What happened next surprised me. As I pressed the accelerator, the young girl turned to her grandmother and tried to bring her grandmother's attention back to crossing the street. There was obviously a relationship between the young girl and the elderly woman, for when the young girl turned to her grandmother to divert her grandmother's attention back to me, it was done with the innocent enthusiasm of a child in the company of someone familiar. That's the last clear image I have of them.

Immediately as I drove away I wondered how the grandmother reacted. Did the young girl awaken her? Did the grandmother startle to see me drive by? What about the cars behind me? I checked my rearview mirror once the street ahead was clear, about half a block from the intersection. There had only been one car behind me, a green sports car, maybe an MG. The driver had stopped. I didn't see the grandmother and young girl cross, but I am sure they did because the driver waited the time it would take for them to pass and then drove up behind me at the next light.

The driver was the young black professional, male commuter. He settled close behind my car at the light and stared at me in my rearview mirror. He seemed angry, and he stared without blinking. He made no other gesture, or indication whatsoever. You meet all types on the road. Usually it's hardly worth figuring out why someone does not like you. But it seemed most plausible to me that he was reacting to the immediate situation I have just described.

Much as I would like to say a stare like that doesn't bother me, it does.

I suppose had I been gentle, had I been patient, the grandmother would have come out of her shell. I imagine she did glance at the car behind me, peeking from her stance. She must have felt relief and welcome to see a brown face this time, not white. Maybe the urging of her young companion picked her up, maybe she made eye contact with the driver who let her pass—the driver who was making eye con-

tact with me.

What had he seen, I wondered? Did he see a rude and inconsiderate white man ignore this frail black woman, stopping only to avoid striking her with his car, and then speeding off?

What would he think if he knew I was going home to a wife whose skin was darker than his? Would it make a difference, and in which way? Would I be the enemy a sister was sleeping with? Or an ally, mistakenly held at first to be something else. Or would I just seem confused, but harmless, stereotypically white in a non-threatening way.

Suppose I had waited the several moments needed to attain the grandmother's attention and convince her it was safe to cross before my vehicle. What then would this driver's reaction have been? Would he have been patient and understanding, viewing with approval my waiting for the grandmother to cross. Would my actions be seen as a testament to our common humanity, as we, the strong, allowed the frail to pass?

Or would he see only my car blocking his, holding up his commute, not by his choice, but by mine? Would he even look beyond my car to the crosswalk and the pedestrians beyond? Would he feel any concern for their well-being, or would he simply focus on me, an obstruction and source of delay, while he waited on a busy, bustling highway?

Who's to say? I know I tried, so I wasn't too perturbed by the driver's stare. He held it for a long time, but dropped it after a point, becoming less focused, though clearly not in a good mood. That's the last I recall of him. We must have taken different paths shortly thereafter.

But the grandmother, I had to ask, why did she do that? I think I know. I have seen it in the face and stance of old women on occasion, white women and women of color alike. It was caution born of trepidation. Many adult men like myself have learned how to carry ourselves to not appear menacing, so I don't often see a response like this.

Where had it come from? I'm still wondering. It seemed a habitual response I saw. Her movements were smooth, as if she had done them before.

Somehow I realized that her response, her apparent resignation, her firm grip on the young girl, was a ploy full of meaning. It spoke of a history of encounters with unfriendly power coming from whiteness, some fatal to her loved ones and their dreams.

It seemed to me to harken back to older days, as if her gestures and her attitude were formed in an age when white maleness required a full and apparent display of subservience from women of color. She conveyed an impression of having no willful intention of her own, completely and expertly. I have to think she was both master of this technique and mastered by it.

And just as she was caught up in the midst of her archaic habit, so too was I caught up in events by my appearance. I found myself playing an unfamiliar role as a portrayal, a symbol of a collection of people who lived long ago, but still within range of this grandmother's lifetime. For many people must have contributed to shaping this woman's reaction.

Those people to whom she reacted long ago did not affect her through her natural sense of humility. Humble motions still allow human contact. It must have been by dint of pain received if she showed herself to be a willful person around her teachers. In my presence, in this modern day, it seemed she responded to me as if I had been one of those distant instructors. And the only reason I stood as representative for this ancient assembly of tutors, this source of pain to her, was because they looked like me.

Jeff Hitchcock holds a Masters degree in social psychology and is Director of the Center for the Study of White American Culture. He has been happily married to an African American woman for more than a decade, and in his spare time writes about his racial experience as a white American male in the contemporary United States.

**Continued from page 10**

is in the direction that your newsletter reflects and that is increasing awareness of white people of how they deal with racism and make them aware of their own culture. We have to acknowledge that dealing with differences has been an evolutionary process. Managing diversity is something that has been going on since the first people of color landed here, African Americans, and native people were here and were confronted by whites. That evolutionary process has been one in which managing diversity was concentration camps, slavery, Jim Crow, desegregation, the attempt to integrate, Affirmative Action. All these social movements and legal interventions have been a way of managing diversity and racial differences in America. What we've evolved to in the next stage is one where we become aware of the fact that we have had to modify an approach to dealing with diversity that began in the 1960s, which said we're all the same, we're not different. That approach had limited utility and limited effectiveness for both groups. And so we've moved from that position to one

where it's okay to acknowledge racial and cultural differences and that's where we are today. In acknowledging those differences it means whites must also acknowledge their uniqueness, and that not all whites who acknowledge their uniqueness in terms of their culture and in terms of their race are racist.

**CFS:** Under this scenario of us all acknowledging our differences do you think that can lead to a fragmented society, a balkanization?

**CA:** Well that's the fear, yes. Anything that's not managed effectively can lead to that. I guess I'm coming from the position of the scenario on the phone. That's effective. I didn't see it as bad. Acknowledging those differences doesn't mean that you have a blind allegiance to it at the expense of the common good. That's what we're talking about. I'm talking about acknowledging and appreciating those differences.

**CFS:** And still within having a sense of the common good.

**CA:** Correct. And that's what is important. That acknowledgement is done to manage diversity, manage differences and I think that that's very essential.

**CFS:** So it's not that the differences are new or all of a sudden have just popped up. It's a change in how those differences are managed.

**CA:** Correct.

**CFS:** Thank you.

If you would like to receive a copy of the phone scenario, to discuss its use in training, or to discuss issues of diversity training and consultation for organizations in general, you can contact Ms. Alfonso at (201) 798-5156, or write Alfonso Associates, 123 Franklin Street, Jersey City, NJ 07307.

## Answers to test on back page

1) **D.** On September 30, 1962, white Americans rioted on and around the campus of the University of Mississippi following the prolonged attempt by black American James Meredith to enroll in the university. The riot forced President Kennedy to send in 10,000 soldiers and 400 U.S. marshals to regain order. Rioters smashed windows, wrecked cars and assaulted the federal troops, the latter action being led by former U.S. Army general Edwin A. Walker who was later arrested and charged with inciting insurrection. Two people, including a French reporter, were killed and more than one hundred wounded. The next day, under federal escort, James Meredith completed his registration.

2) **A.** The quotation was cited by Lerone Bennett, Jr. in his article about the Reconstruction period of American history following the Civil War (See "The Second Time Around: Will History Repeat Itself and Rob Blacks of the Gains of the 1960s," *Ebony*, Sept. 1995, Vol. 50, No. 11, p.86(4)). Contrary to the beliefs of many white Americans, our history contains moments of racial

enlightenment. But, as Bennett points out, these moments have been suppressed by the powerful forces of white supremacy. For a while it was not a foregone conclusion that white supremacy would prevail. It was only through the concentrated efforts of white supremacists, and the failure of white Americans favoring racial equality, that the nation sank into the abyss of Jim Crow oppression. It took a lifetime, from 1890 to 1960, for a more favorable mood to emerge. Even today the country still has not reached some of the high points of enlightenment achieved in that earlier era.

3) **A.** There is really no absolutely correct answer to this question. Racial and cultural categories differ over time and place, and do not have an absolute life of their own. Even the same racial or cultural group may have different terms associated with it (e.g. Latino/a, Hispanic, Spanish). However, the omission of European Americans, by whatever name, is a glaring one often made by publishers and conference sponsors. As many students of racism and whiteness have pointed out, the assumption that

whiteness is normal, the standard, or the background against which only other races are "different" is, in essence, racist. We are all different and we all have a culture. To deny the presence of European American culture and to not subject it to the same discussion and scrutiny as other racial and cultural groups only preserves the status quo.

To the credit of some publishers and conference sponsors, they do indeed list European Americans along with other racial and cultural groups. This seems to be a recent trend that should become more widespread as awareness of the cultural aspects of white Americans receive more study. Another trend is to include a category of Middle-Eastern Americans. While less commonly used than even the category of European American, the category of Middle-Eastern American represents a departure from the usual grouping of five racial groups in common use for the past two decades.

**SCORE:** None correct-you probably have lots of company; 1 correct-average; 2 correct-knowledgeable; 3 correct-expert.

# What does it mean to be white?

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# Test Yourself

1. The first major race riot of the 1960s took place in what city?

- A. Los Angeles (Watts)
- B. Detroit
- C. Newark, N.J.
- D. Oxford, Miss.

2. The following quotation reflected the spirit and sentiment of the country toward race relations during which period of American history?

*"All distinctions founded on race or color have been forever abolished in the United States."*

- A. 1867 - 1875
- B. 1900 - 1910
- C. 1930 - 1940
- D. 1955 - 1965

3. At multicultural conferences, and in lists of publishers' offerings on multicultural topics, the categories of African American, Latino, Native American and Asian American are frequently used. Which category is missing?

- A. European American
- B. Hispanic American
- C. White American
- D. Nothing is missing



**Answers on page 14**



Look for our workshops at the following events this winter:

**Saturday, February 24**  
**The 13th Annual Teachers College**  
**Winter Roundtable of Cross-Cultural**  
**Psychology and Education**  
**Columbia University**  
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**Monday, March 4**  
**Multicultural Awareness Week**  
**William Paterson College**  
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