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The Perception of Skin Color Differences
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When I was three or four years old, in the early 1960s, I learned one of my first songs in Sunday school—with its accompanying moral lesson:

Jesus loves the little children
All the children of the world
Red and yellow, black and white
They are precious in His sight
Jesus loves the little children of the world

I remember thinking that it was a nice song, and I understood the concept of black and white children, but was certain that I had never seen red or yellow children. I was told that red people were Indians and that yellow people were Orientals, such as Chinese or Japanese, but it did not make a lot of sense to me then—and still does not today. Many years later, I learned that it is indeed a biblical concept that Jesus regards all people as the same and does not care about the ways in which we, as humans, divide ourselves: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28, KJV). I was taught at an early age that it is inappropriate to judge other human beings based solely on skin color; however, the example that was set by my role models often offered conflicting information. As I grew and learned to process what I was told by others, contrasted by the world as I myself

perceived it, I have come to my own conclusion: *skin color has absolutely nothing to do with the intrinsic value of human beings—as individuals or as groups.*

Ashley H. Roberts observes that “skin colour is the most decisive and the most abused of all the physical characteristics of humankind. It determines social perceptions, value judgments and interpersonal relationships, and it can wreak havoc on an individual’s sense of dignity and self-esteem” (xi). Roberts, an expert in clinical pharmacology at University of Cape Town Medical School, reports that “human skin colour [. . .] is predominantly based on the pigment *melanin*” (3). Basically, the greater the concentration of melanin that is in the skin—the darker the skin. Caucasoid and Negroid peoples do not actually have different skin colors, but lighter or darker shades of the same basic color. The primary function of melanin in the skin is *photoprotection*, or protection of the tissues from ultraviolet radiation from the sun (59-63). Research has shown that fair-skinned people of Celtic heritage, such as the Irish, have the highest incidence of skin cancer, whereas dark-skinned people of Negroid or African heritage have the lowest (59). Indigenous populations of the Earth generally have progressively darker skin the closer they live to the equator—where UV levels are the highest, and photoprotection is most needed (187-89).

Since the beginning of recorded history, human societies have made assumptions about people with different skin colors (Robins 166). Even today, despite scientific evidence to the contrary, people of different skin color groups assign specific characteristics to people of other groups, which in reality have no correlation to skin pigmentation.

There was a time when European Caucasoid societies believed themselves to be higher on the evolutionary scale than were the “darker” races—with the Negroid race at the bottom of the scale, just above the apes. This scale, called the *Chain of Being*, a concept

that can be traced back to classical Greece, came to fruition in the eighteenth century through the work of Carl Linnaeus, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, and others (Jordan 99-105).

Even the languages of human societies reflect perceptions regarding *whiteness* and *blackness*. Robins states the following:

In the English language, whiteness has been associated with beauty, purity, goodness, innocence, and brightness. Blackness has symbolized death, deceit, filth, disgrace and a host of other adverse descriptions, the essence of which has been incorporated into the language in such words and phrases as blackguard, blackball, black flag, black list, black market and black sheep. [. . .] These connotations of black and white for evil and goodness respectively apply also to other languages [such as] Latin, Greek and Sanskrit. [. . .]

The colour associations of black and white have been readily assimilated into aesthetic judgments. A fair or white skin was equated with beauty even in Biblical times. The English word *fair*, from the Anglo-Saxon *faeger*, assumed the dual meaning of *beautiful* and *light-skinned*, and indeed fairness of complexion became synonymous with feminine beauty from about the thirteenth century. (166-67)

The concept of a correlation between light-colored skin and beauty is not restricted to European societies, but is extant in human societies all over the world. Robins offers examples from India, the West Indies, and Japan where light-colored skin is valued above darker skin. Robbins cites van der Berghe and Frost, who identified 51 human societies throughout the world, 86% of which were outside of Europe and North America. In 47 of

these, the sexual preference was for a lighter skin color. In 30 of these societies, this preference applied only to women (168).

Although much social progress has been made regarding the judgment of the value of human beings based on race or skin color, in past generations, people with darker skin were universally considered not only less attractive—but inferior in every conceivable way. In 1898, Rudyard Kipling wrote a poem called “The White Man’s Burden.” Patrick Brantlinger states that “few poems have been more frequently cited, criticized, and satirized than ‘The White Man’s Burden.’ It has served as a lightning rod for both the supporters and the opponents of imperialism, as well as of racism and white supremacy” (172).

The premise of “The White Man’s Burden” is that it is the responsibility, duty and, in fact, the “will of God” that the “white” Anglo-Saxon race “civilize all the dark, supposedly backward races of the world” (Brantlinger 179). Apparently, this lofty obligation is to be accomplished by any means necessary—including colonizing foreign lands, subjugating and displacing indigenous peoples, and even forcing them into slavery. Brantlinger states the following:

The doctrine of “Manifest Destiny” arose at the time of the war with Mexico in 1846–1848, which led to the additions of Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, and California to the U.S., and in the 1890s it seemed logical to many Americans to keep right on expanding into the Pacific and beyond. “Manifest Destiny” was often also expressed in terms of race—it was the destiny of the white, Anglo-Saxon race to conquer and civilize the American West and perhaps the entire uncivilized world. (174)

The colonization of North and South America by European immigrants was accomplished at the expense of the people who already lived here—the Native Americans. They were erroneously labeled “Indians” over 500 years ago because Christopher Columbus thought he had landed in India. They were also called “redskins”; however, this is also inaccurate since their skin color is not actually red, but various shades of brown. The Native Americans, who had lived in the Western Hemisphere for thousands of years, were forced out of their ancestral lands by European immigrants who aggressively colonized the “New World” without regard for the indigenous people—and did so because they considered themselves superior. Wilma Mankiller offers the following:

According to the First Nations Development Institute, by the early twentieth century the United States had taken possession of more than two billion acres of Indian land by treaty or official government confiscation. Entire tribal nations were forcibly removed from their confiscated homelands, including my own people, the Cherokees, who were marched like cattle across several states from their Southeastern homelands to Indian Territory, now Oklahoma. The story of the Cherokee removal is similar to the story of many other tribal groups, not in detail, but in net effect. (xiv)

Another group that was treated quite poorly in the United States was the Asian immigrants—particularly the Chinese. For some reason, Asians were considered to be “yellow” people. To me, Asians do not look yellow at all, but appear to be paler and “whiter” than Caucasians.

The first significant numbers of Chinese immigrants arrived in the 1850s. Some of them were attracted by the California Gold Rush, but many more were refugees fleeing the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864), a Chinese civil war that claimed the lives of millions. At

first, the Chinese immigrants were welcomed because they represented a much-needed cheap labor force, particularly in the building of railroads that were extending eastward from the West Coast. However, as their numbers grew, and white workers found themselves competing with the Chinese for jobs, they began to be considered a threat (Davis 139).

The perception of the Chinese as being aggressive and dangerous was known as *the yellow peril*. The earliest known citation of the phrase in English appeared in a newspaper in 1900, but earlier versions appeared in other languages at least ten years earlier (Glover 49). The premise of the yellow peril was that “yellow people” were hostile and treacherous—something to be feared. Yuko Kawai quotes G. Y. Okihiro:

[T]he idea of the yellow peril does not derive solely from the alleged threat posed by the yellow race to the white race and their “holiest possessions”—civilization and Christianity—but from non-white people, as a collective group, and their contestation of white supremacy. (112)

Kawai further states:

The yellow peril referred to cultural threat as well as economic, political, and military threats to the white race. [. . .] White Americans perceived people of Asian descent or “Orientals” as inassimilable foreigners who would eventually overtake the nation and wreak social and economic havoc. [. . .] Overlapped with the image of East Asia’s large population size and the emergence of an Asian imperial power, the presence of “Oriental” faces in the United States evoked among white Americans an alarm that the yellow race might overtake the white nation by outnumbering and out-powering the white race. (112)

The light-skinned Europeans colonized North and South America, Australia, India, and elsewhere, by displacing and subjugating indigenous populations. They also captured native Africans and transported them to the Americas, where they were forced into slavery. This was possible because the Europeans had superior technology such as weaponry, ships, etc. Apparently, when it came to the Chinese and other Asians, the Europeans did not have this technological advantage and the conquerors were in fear of themselves being conquered.

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines *racism* as "a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race." The attitudes and beliefs I have described above such as "The White Man's Burden," "Manifest Destiny," and "The Yellow Peril," are excellent examples of racist ideology, since these philosophies make assumptions regarding common characteristics or the relative superiority or inferiority of entire groups of human beings based on race. Most modern enlightened thinkers now reject these beliefs and consider them to be in error.

I maintain that *any* presupposition of *any* characteristics common to a specific racial group to be equally in error. If any group, or any individual belonging to a group, who is not Caucasian assumes that *all* Caucasians share common beliefs, attitudes, or prejudices against non-Caucasians, such an assumption—is racism.

Sometimes, racism is blatant and aggressive, but sometimes it is more subtle. In his book, *Working from Within*, Luis Urrieta demonstrates bitterness and resentment toward white people in the diction and tone of his writing. By using terms such as *whitestream* and *white supremacy*, Urrieta projects a sentiment that white society is a racist entity—an obstacle or enemy to be overcome. In particular, *white supremacy* has connotations of

white hatred of other races as expressed by groups such as the *Klu Klux Klan* or the *Aryan Nations*. Urrieta defines *white supremacy* as:

... the official and unofficial practices (including racism), principles, morals, norms, values, history, and overall culture that privileges whites in U.S. society. White supremacy of this sort is normalized and often appears as fair and objective practice even to people of color. The white supremacy I refer to in this book is not about individual acts of hate, although these too are byproducts of the white supremacist system. (182)

Urrieta qualifies his actual intended meaning of the term *white supremacy*, but he only does so in the “notes” section at the very back of his book, and a broader definition of the term could very easily be understood by reading the text.

In contrast to Urrieta’s book, Glen Martinez, in his book *Mexican Americans and Language*, presents an objective, scholarly, and informative study of the linguistic phenomena of bilingualism in Mexican-American culture. I found Martinez’s explanation of *code switching* (94-108) to be of particular interest. Unlike Urrieta, Martinez presents well-researched impartial information without the underlying socio-political agenda that permeates Urrieta’s book.

One of the ways that subtle racism is manifested is by making assumptions that aspects of culture are unique to one’s own racial group when in fact they are common to human society in general. In all human societies, people are born, grow up, get married, and have children of their own. They all must work for a living, pay taxes, and eventually die. In Geneva Smitherman’s book *Word from the Mother*, she provides a glossary of words and phrases that she considers to be unique to the African-American subculture. Many of these are actually in common use by speakers of the English language who are not African-

American. Some examples include the word *baby* as a term of affection (22), *old school* meaning “style, behavior, expression, perspective, etc. from an earlier time” (38), and *show his/her ass* meaning “acting outrageously, inappropriately, in a negative way, in public or in front of outsiders” (43). I have heard these phrases, and many others that Smitherman cites, used universally outside of the African-American community.

Beverly J. Moss writes about the literacy practices of the African-American church. Moss states that “the African-American preacher's sermon must contain the word of God, which means the sermons are tied to the Bible by incorporating Scriptures within the sermon” and that they “feature Bible stories woven into the text as a major part of it” (26). This description could easily apply to any Christian church, and is in no way unique to any racial subculture.

Another form of subtle racism involves making the assumption that race is the only relevant factor that defines an individual's identity. A person could be Hispanic, born in California, and have a doctorate degree. Another person could be white, Christian, and disabled. We are all members of several subgroups of human society. E. Patrick Johnson examines in detail the experience of being both African-American and gay. Johnson states:

As “outsiders within,” black gay men incorporate their experiences as blacks in a racist society and gays in a homophobic society in order to create a “dark purple” (“blurple” in black vernacular) lexicon, as opposed to a “lavender” one, that speaks specifically to their subject positions. (253)

I freely acknowledge that light-skinned Europeans have historically perpetrated horrendous atrocities upon darker-skinned populations throughout the world. The worst of these events occurred many years ago, but the effects are still felt today. Much progress

has been made to right these wrongs, but much still needs to be done. Winthrop D. Jordan makes the following statement:

I use the term *racism* with some reluctance, since it is very easy, and dangerous, to read present conditions into the past. Racial attitudes in this country are very different now from what they were three hundred years ago, and it is very important that we deal with our past, insofar as possible, on its own terms. (vii)

Although I acknowledge that terrible things have been done by white people, I did not personally do any of those things. I do not hate anyone or consider myself superior to anyone because of skin color. I believe that holding me responsible or accountable in any way for crimes that I did not commit, simply because I am white—is racism.

Despite contemporary scientific evidence to the contrary, people of all races continue to make assumptions regarding fundamental differences of other groups of people based on skin color. Historically, European Caucasians considered themselves inherently superior to darker-skinned people, and used this belief as an excuse to mistreat them. Today, the descendants of these oppressed groups continue to resent, and even hate, white people who personally did not commit these atrocities. There is nothing that can be done about the past, whether it was 300 years ago, or 10 years ago. Nothing positive will ever come of carrying hate and bitterness from generation to generation. It is time to forgive and to heal.

I share the sentiments of Dr. Martin Luther King:

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. [. . .] I have a dream that my four little children

will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. [. . .] I have a dream that [. . .] one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

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