



# part two

## WHITENESS AS THE NORM: FIVE LOCI OF INSIGHTS ON THE BINARY OF LIGHT/DARK AND BLACK/WHITE

### chapter one

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#### WHITENESS AS THE NORM: REFLECTIONS ON HOW THIS IS EVIDENCED AND EXPERIENCED IN AMERICA

*John Dorhauer*

As a white hetero male, this is the hardest thing for me to see. In essence, I move with great ease through a world that is set up to advantage me—and I just don't see the world that way.

As far as getting the impact of privilege, this is, for me, where it has to start.

When I look at the TV or go to the movies as a white man and see news anchors and lead actors who are white, I rarely note the fact that those who look like me are the given.

When I go down the street and look for a barber, it never occurs to me that I know I won't have any trouble finding a white guy there who knows how to cut the hair of another white man.

When I shop at my grocery store, I never stop to think that another white man owns it and will stock the shelves with food he knows I like to eat.

I don't even bother to ask, so it may not occur to me that 96% of news media outlets are owned by white men, and therefore they are going to choose news stories that they know I will care about, told from a perspective that doesn't threaten my worldview.

When I apply for a job in the church, I assume my education and skills are the reasons I am considered for the job—and never does it cross my mind that being white had anything to do with being hired in a denomination that is still well over 90% white.

When I run down the street in the evening, I routinely cross in the middle when traffic is light, never worrying about whether a police officer would stop me; or, if he did, that he would be anything but polite about reminding me that I shouldn't do that. I almost never have to worry about whether or not one of the police that stops me will be white, or if not, will treat me badly because I am white.

When I walk into a church, I never have to ask: "Why doesn't Jesus look like me?" And I don't even consider the fact that Jesus being white is not reflective of his true racial identity as a Middle Eastern Jew. I grew up believing that he could, that he should, be white.

I am unaffected by incarceration rates that see one in three black men arrested before their 30th birthday. It is not I or my children who are impacted by that in a system where most police, attorneys, and judges are going to be white.

Whiteness is part of the air I breathe.



### Reflection Questions and Discussion Topics

*Over the next week, try and take notice of whiteness around you. Where and when do you see whiteness? If you are white, try to say to yourself, even in some of the more routine aspects of your life, ‘this happened to me because I am white.’ Be open to discussing insights about what you noticed or experienced as you go through this exercise. For example, when in worship ask yourself “Is that a Hymn we only sing in white churches?”; when in grocery stores ask yourself “are these food products here because they meet the needs of white people?”; when walking down the street watch how people react to you and ask yourself “would that have gone differently if I were not white?” Play with this, and look for opportunities to recognize how whiteness establishes itself every day in very routine ways as the norm.*

**Stephen G. Ray, Jr.**

To be normal is to be unquestionably human. That is to say, the very idea of “the norm,” when applied to human beings, has attached to it more than simply presumptions about, dare I say, normalcy. The idea has attached to it the simple assumption that this is another human being with whom we are interacting.

This becomes clear when we notice how the idea of aberration functions to moderate the claims for a robust expression and acceptance of one’s, or another’s, humanity. The very idea of aberration calls to mind corollary notions like policing or expunging.

The aberrant is rarely treated as simply different; it is treated as that which is out of place, with such displacement creating disorder. Whiteness as norm is a useful way to describe the ways that our material world is shaped, so that the mental maps along which we place the variety of human beings who constitute our world place whiteness at the unquestioned center, with other hues at varying distances from it.

Usually, when the idea of whiteness as the norm is raised in social and cultural settings, we have in mind practices and cultural predispositions. For instance, in our racialized church settings, liturgical practices which are deemed white (e.g. hymnody rooted in the classical or folk traditions of Europe) become the basis from which practices rooted in other polyphonies are invited into a space in the worship experience. As generous as the invitation may seem, it is important to note who claims the role of host and who visitor. This dynamic of host/guest is important for this curriculum because it focuses our attention on which bodies and cultural practices “belong,” and which are being granted space.

In an ecclesial environment, we get caught up in ideas of hospitality and welcome, which moderate the exclusionary effects of this dynamic. This, however, is not the case in the broader social and residential geographies that we all inhabit. In those spaces, the everyday of our lives, presumptively belonging or not deeply affects the expression and experience of our humanity. It can quite literally mean the difference between life and death. The instances of Black persons killed by either police or vigilantes



because some “good neighbor” thought them out of place are legion. It is just here that we are reminded of not only the lethal consequences of whiteness as the norm, but also the capacity of this presumption to actually create physical spaces that are dangerous to persons who are not white. It is precisely the systems and forces that create this danger whose functioning circumscribes the full exercise of the humanity of brown persons.

*Because to be normal is to unquestionably be human, whiteness as the norm brings all other human lives into question.*

Whiteness as the norm is necessarily the circumscription of otherwise life-worlds and the diminishing of the lives of their brown inhabitants. Because to be normal is to unquestionably be human, whiteness as the norm brings all other human lives into question.

***John Paddock***

I love the title of Debby Irving’s book, *Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race*. This is, in effect, what happened to me, as I described in my spiritual autobiography in Part One. For us white folk to discover that we have race and that we are

part of the story of race is to become conscious in a whole new way.

Professor Peggy McIntosh suggests that we whites are so much the norm in America that that we can easily go through our days oblivious to our race, but also to the privileges that are bestowed upon us. She says that we carry an “invisible knapsack” of privilege. Although the knapsack may be invisible to white eyes, the privileges it contains have real consequences.

It has been demonstrated many times that whites find it easier to get credit, education, jobs, and healthcare. If I enter a department store, I am free to roam about with no interactions with staff other than occasional offers to help find whatever I may be looking for. It’s quite a different experience for my black children. They are likely to be followed throughout the establishment and to be treated with less hospitality.

We whites can expect to be able to live anywhere that we can afford, be treated with more dignity by law enforcement, be called upon in class more often. In an incredible demonstration of privilege, we can put on a flesh-colored band-aid that’s highly likely to come close to matching our skin color. People in positions of authority and power in government, industry, education, technology, sports, entertainment—almost every field of endeavor—are far more likely to be white than to be people of color.

W.E.B. Dubois wrote about the color line in his



classic 1903 work, *The Souls of Black Folk*. On the black side of the line lives disadvantage, and on the white side is advantage. Although more than 100 years have passed since Dubois published his work, and 60 years since the beginning of the Civil Rights movement, the color line is still firmly entrenched. Implicit Bias studies demonstrate that whiteness is so much the norm in mainstream media and culture that even black folk often demonstrate preferences for whites.

We are seeing more barriers to voting being erected for non-whites and re-segregation of our schools in many parts of the land. And as Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and far too many other people of color have discovered, the consequences for being outside our culturally defined norm can be lethal.

### ***Da Vita D. McCallister***

I had two favorite television shows as a child: the *Dukes of Hazzard* and *Happy Days*. I loved them equally and with full devotion. I watched General Lee flying through the air in Hazzard County and considered Uncle Jesse my protector and friend. As I sat in my basement mesmerized by those images, the reflection I saw was Whiteness as Norm. It didn't occur to me that I would not be welcomed in Hazard County. The image of the Confederate Flag atop the General Lee did not signal that I was unwelcome. Even the name "General Lee" did not resonate as trouble. The Whiteness I viewed on television was ubiquitous. My home, my church, and

my community were filled with People of Color, yet white standards, white culture, and whiteness as the norm permeated even those spaces.

The harsh reality that whiteness was not only normative, but privileged above all other characteristics, occurred as I watched *Happy Days*. I had always assumed that there was a place for me in the Cunningham family. They had taken in the Fonz: he was a rebel, much older than their children, and a womanizer, yet they saw the humanity in his loyalty and deep sense of fairness. He was welcomed in their home and considered a member of the extended family.

I watched in horror as the gang traveled to eat and entered a separate diner for a meal. A man of color went to the counter and was refused service. It was the first time I had ever seen a Person of Color on *Happy Days*, and I was hurt by his treatment. The core members of the cast came to his defense, but the impression had been cast in my mind; my humanity as a Person of Color was debatable. There were individuals who would be able to see me as a person, and others who would stop at my complexion. The Cunninghams' home was not a place of safety, and neither was Arnold's, because my very presence would have to be defended. This is *Whiteness as Normative*.



Every trip to the movie theater, to the mall, and to the grocery store reminded me that whiteness was the norm and my presence could, and often would, be viewed as problematic. I remember my mother giving me the same speech each time I entered a store by her side: “Keep your hands in sight and DON’T touch anything.” I didn’t recognize at the time that she was teaching me how to perform in *White Spaces*. I thought this was simply the polite way to behave in society until I noticed other children had either not been given this speech or were not required to adhere to it. Those children were White.

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Whiteness as the norm was also evident in my education. I remember when sex education was introduced in my middle school. As students, we were excited to learn the details of the “Birds and the Bees.” But the pictures were not at all what we expected: instead of images of men and women in the nude, we saw medical photos of our internal sexual organs. The thrill of being admitted into adult spaces was lessened by this clinical approach.

Shortly after the sex education class concluded, my classmates and I were introduced to *National Geographic*. Our classroom was filled with those magazines whose borders were bright yellow. Inside were photos of naked bodies on display: women’s breasts in full view and scantily dressed men with little more than loin cloth as their shield from our peering eyes. I wondered aloud, “Why are we allowed to view these bodies and not allowed to view the others?” These were Brown bodies, and they were available for our voyeuristic gaze.

This is *Whiteness as Norm*. It is more than representing the majority in film, print, television, and media the majority of the time; it is privileging those images—protecting and exalting them above all others.

### **Traci Blackmon**

This section has been particularly difficult for me to write, namely because my understanding of white normalcy is a one-sided analysis of what it feels like to be impacted by whiteness, as opposed to being infected with whiteness. How can I write about the impact of whiteness in a way that might illuminate an often unconscious reality for people who are perceived as white? I have decided to follow the format of Lori Lakin Hutcherson, Editor-in-Chief of *Good Black News*, and share a few life experiences made memorable by the normalcy of whiteness in American culture.

As a young girl, I was a huge fan of Disney movies. However, I noticed that there were no Disney

princesses that looked like me. The same was true of comic book and cartoon characters, and the popular dolls in high demand for Christmas. None of these childhood indulgences offered an opportunity for me to see myself reflected in the superpowers of my youth. **If you grew up with an expectation that images on TV, in books, and at movie theaters would share your racial identity, you have white privilege.**

In high school, I was a soloist in the touring choir. I was the only black in the choir. During a concert at an exclusive country club in the South, all of the service staff came out of the kitchen to hear me sing. They were all black. The audience was all white. I was glad I did not disappoint them. **If you have NEVER felt the burden of “representing your race,” you have white privilege.**

*If you have NEVER felt the burden of “representing your race,” you have white privilege.*

My junior year of high school, the area recruitment representative for Harvard visited my school. I attended an elite college prep school in Birmingham, Alabama with a reputation for a high percentage of Ivy League acceptances in every graduating class, so Ivy League recruiters were frequent

visitors. The recruiter spoke with our entire class about the necessity for our high school transcript to reflect excellent academic grades and extensive extracurricular activities. I had both. Later, the recruiter approached me to say the previously stated requirements did not apply to me. I only needed a “C” average to be accepted, he said. I did not apply. **If you have NEVER been presumed as intellectually inferior or incapable solely because of the color of your skin, you have white privilege.**

All of my American History classes were centered around the narrative of white people in America. Black History, when offered, was always an elective. **If you can presume that history courses offered in your school will provide a narrative about people who look like you, you have white privilege.**

**If this country has NEVER debated the monetary value of all the people who look like you, you have white privilege.**

**If there have NEVER been laws passed to prevent your full participation in democracy, you have white privilege.**

Today at the airport, I was standing in the Global World Traveller line of United Airlines when a white man walked up and proceeded to stand in front of me in line. He informed me he was a premier customer and I was in the wrong line. I was not in the wrong line.

**If you have NEVER been categorized based solely on the color of your skin, you have white privilege.**



The unearned, unrequested, and unwarranted benefits of perceived white skin in America are only one manifestation of the way whiteness has been normalized in our culture. From literature to music to art, whiteness needs no qualifier. Whiteness is assumed unless we are told otherwise. There is no area of my life that is not impacted by the perception that whiteness is normal.

Nowhere is this injustice more pronounced to me than in the preamble to the founding document of this country: *“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”*

### Reflection Questions and Discussion Topics

1. *Take some time in your personal reflection and in your group conversation to think of some ways that your “norm” defines some others as “abnormal”—making life easier for you and more challenging for people of color.*
2. *Over the next week, try and take notice of whiteness around you. Where and when do you see whiteness? If you are white, try to say to yourself, even in some of the more routine aspects of your life, “This happened to me because I am white.” Be open to discussing insights about what you noticed or experienced as you go through this exercise. For example, when in worship ask yourself “Is that a hymn we only sing in white churches?”; when in grocery stores ask yourself “Are these food products here because they meet the needs of white people?”; when walking down the street watch how people react to you and ask yourself “Would that have gone differently if I were not white?” Play with this, and look for opportunities to recognize how whiteness establishes itself every day in very routine ways as the norm.*