

Is Your World Too White? A Primer for Whites Trying to Deal with a Racist Society

By Karen Ashmore

Over fifteen years ago I started a chapter of the National Organization for Women. Since NOW and the women's movement in general are often associated with white middle class women, we named the group Rainbow NOW to emphasize the fact that it was for women of all colors. African American, Caucasian, Chicano and Native American women participated in the group. After several racially divided votes, we held anti-racism workshops every Saturday to try to grapple with the root causes of racism within the organization.

After twelve long months of dealing with the issue, the group members finally began to understand each other and work as a cohesive unit. It was a long, hard painful process and some white women weren't too happy about sharing the power or working on their racism. Some white women left the group but the ones who were committed on working on the issues of racism stuck with it and the group turned out much stronger and much better.

The following points were a result of our Saturday discussions. How white is your world? What can you do to make it more colorful?

1. Be honest about racism. Racism is race prejudice plus the power of the institutional system to uphold that prejudice. In this country the institutional system supports the dominance of white people. If you doubt this, answer the following questions: How many black Presidents have we had? Latino Senators? American Indian CEOs of Fortune 500 companies?

Racism is a systematic form of oppression by the dominant culture in power in which people are oppressed economically, socially and politically solely based on skin color. Since people of color do not have the institutions to empower their prejudices, they cannot be racist. In other words, people of color can be prejudiced but they cannot be racist without the institutional support.

There are varying degrees of racism just as there are degrees of sexism ranging from rape to tasteless jokes. Racism can range from overt violence such as lynching to more indirect examples such as insensitive remarks. Most people exhibit more subtle forms of racism but it is important to acknowledge conscious or unconscious participation in a racist society.

Types of prejudice: based on skin color, gender, sexual orientation
Institutional power + prejudice = racism, sexism, heterosexism
Race prejudice + institutional power = racism

2. Acknowledge white privilege. More frequently than not, white people take advantage of privileges generated by a racist society. White people are often unwilling to grant that they are over-privileged, even though most are willing to concede the flip side of the coin, that people of color are disadvantaged. Most white people are in denial about the advantages that white people gain from the disadvantages of people of color. In an article on white privilege, Peggy McIntosh describes white privilege as an "invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day. White privilege is like an invisible knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, code books, visas, tools and blank checks."

White people are given no training in seeing themselves as the oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person. Whites are taught that racism is violence or meanness such as the Ku Klux Klan but are not taught that racism can be manifested in systems that allow dominance by whites. Author Beverly Daniel Tatum defines racism as "a system of advantage based on race". It is up to aware white people to open their eyes and show them the consequences of being a participant in a dysfunctional racist culture.

The following are examples of white privilege I can rely on but my African American friends cannot count on most of the time:

- I can be sure of being able to rent or get a mortgage for a house in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.
- I can be sure that I will be welcome in that new neighborhood.
- I can go shopping and not be followed or harassed.
- I can go shopping and get waited on promptly.
- I can go to a bar and get service.
- I can turn on the TV or read the newspaper and see people who look like me depicted as leaders and influencers.
- When I am told about our national heritage, I can be sure that I will be told that people of my race made it what it is.
- If a traffic cop pulls me over, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.
- If I ask to speak to the person in charge, I can be pretty sure I will be talking to a person of my race.
- If I have to go to court, I can be sure my race won't be held against me.

These are just a few examples of privilege that white people take advantage of every day. Most people have seen the comparison done by a national TV newsmagazine, sending a white male and black male with equal credentials to buy a car, look for a job and hunt for an apartment. Time after time the black man came back empty handed or cheated while the white male got the job, the apartment and the best car deal.

Perhaps former Texas Governor Ann Richards described best the privilege of being male, white and wealthy when she quipped, "George Bush thinks he hit a triple when actually he was born on third base."

3. Start to heal. Racism is a disease like alcoholism. You never recover from alcoholism and heal until you first admit you have a problem. The same thing goes for racism. You are never going to heal until you first admit there is a problem. This step is mandatory in order to continue to learn and grow. Acknowledge your privilege and participation in a racist society, begin healing and continue down the path of growth and awareness.

4. Be comfortable with accusations against white people in general without taking it personally. Whites have persecuted and oppressed people of color for hundreds of years. People of color can verbalize this oppression without you taking it personally. Release your guilt for past transgressions of other whites. Be comfortable with yourself because you know you are working for change.

5. Learn about another culture. People of color are often bicultural and bilingual. They know their own culture and own tongue yet also have to know the white culture and English tongue in order to survive economically. For example, many African Americans know Black English (Ebonics) and the "King's English" and many Latinas know Spanish and English.

The least you can do as a white person is get to know another culture. Go to an African American gospel extravaganza, a Native American pow wow, or a Mexican fiesta. If you are the only white person there, you will not be attacked. In fact most people of color will welcome you for taking the time to acquaint yourself with their culture.

The following are some suggested activities: Participate in Latino festivals. Cinco de Mayo (May 5) and Dies y seis de Septiembre (September 16) are important Mexican liberation festivals. Juneteenth (June 19) is the day African Americans in Texas found out they were freed from slavery, one year and six months after the fact. This date is marked by numerous celebrations in the African American community all over the country.

Kwanzaa is an African American cultural celebration from Dec. 26 to Jan. 1. Each day represents a different principle (unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith).

In the arts area, research cultural performance groups in your area. Chicano theater groups, African dance troupes and Japanese taiko drumming groups are common in many parts of the country. If you live near a reservation, find out when pow wows and ceremonies are held. Many sacred ceremonies are not open to non-tribal members but most reservations will open activities to the public at least once a year.

6. Keep up with media aimed at people of color. Research local newspapers aimed at people of color. Many communities have newspapers targeting African American, Latino, Asian, and Native American communities. Most major metropolitan areas now have Spanish language radio and TV stations. Most public radio stations and alternative radio stations have special programs hosted by diverse hosts and dealing with a variety of cultural issues. Call your local radio and TV stations and find out when these programs are aired. With the internet, it is simple to do a quick search of websites devoted to different cultures.

7. Question yourself. Why are you threatened by change? What threatens you about a Latino or a Haitian American representing you in the legislature or City Council? Whites have represented people of color for hundreds of years. People of color are often bi-cultural and thus more able to represent diverse populations.

8. Try to learn from your mistakes. When a person of color challenges you or corrects you about a racist or insensitive statement, that does not mean she does not like you. She cares enough about you to inform you of your misconceptions so that you can grow and be a more whole person. If she felt you were a hopeless case, she wouldn't have even bothered.

9. Acknowledge the skills and experience of people of color. Many times a person of color comes to an organization with more leadership skills than Anglos. People of color have been organizing and fighting for civil rights actively as a group for many, many years. African Americans and other oppressed groups have to be emotionally and spiritually strong to endure the inequities, discrimination, lynchings and hatred for generations and still persevere as a race. Acknowledge these leadership skills and strengths as well as your own limitations. Try to learn from your sisters and brothers.

10. Never be afraid to ask questions. People of color are often well-versed in BS detection. They can tell if you are sincere and will answer your questions or help you understand any misassumptions.

11. Learn the history and struggles of another culture. If you have never seen the award winning civil rights documentary "Eyes on the Prize", rent/borrow the DVD. PBS often airs it during February, Black History Month. It is also available in book form. Much civil rights history for Latino(a)s took place in the Southwest. Learn about the Crystal City boycotts in South Texas. There is a documentary called "Chicano! History of the Mexican-American Civil Rights Movement" that airs periodically on PBS. Take the time to explore the history of another culture.

12. Join another organization oriented towards another culture. National organizations like League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference founded by Dr. Martin Luther King), NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), AIM (American Indian Movement), JACL (Japanese/Asian Citizens League) welcome sincere white supporters. Sometimes you may have to join an organization as an associate member or supporter, but you can still participate in activities.

13. Try to put yourself in the other person's shoes. If you have trouble relating, try looking at an analogous situation. For example, at a recent meeting of a community organization, some white people

could not understand why people of color did not come back after an initial visit. I presented an analogous scenario: Imagine an organization founded for women but you attended a meeting dominated by men who did not understand the issues of women. Would you come back? Probably not. Likewise, if an organization wants to recruit people of color but the meeting is dominated by whites, people of color are not likely to return because they will probably not feel like they have a place there.

14. Learn to share the power. Don't be afraid to be led by people of color. We, as whites, must become more comfortable with accepting leadership by people of color. This is especially important for the coming decade as people of color become the majority and assume more leadership roles throughout the country.

15. Realize the enemy is not people of color. The force to be dealt with is oppression--racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, ableism, etc. Understand the connections between the "isms". Racism, sexism and other isms are about power and control and fear of those who are different.

16. Read feminist literature by women of color. Women of color face two biases: sexism and racism. Open your eyes by reading from their perspective. A good reading list includes:

- [This Bridge Called My Back](#) by Cherrie Moraga & Gloria Anzaldua (multi-cultural)
- [Women, Race and Class](#) by Angela Davis (African American)
- [Women, Culture and Politics](#) by Angela Davis (African American)
- [Ain't I a Woman](#) by Bell Hooks (African American)
- [A Gathering of Spirit](#) by Beth Brant (American Indian)
- [Sister Outsider](#) by Audre Lord (African American)
- [Yours in the Struggle](#) by Elly Buskin, Minnie Pratt, and Barbara Smith (Anti-semitism and racism)
- [When and Where I Enter](#) by Paula Giddings (Racism in the women's movement)
- [Three Asian American Writers Speak Out on Feminism](#) by Nellie Wong, Merle Woo, and Mitsuye Yamada (Asian American)
- [Mexican Women in the United States: Struggles Past and Present](#) by Magdalena Mora and Adelaid Castillo (Mexican American)
- [Breath, Eyes, Memory](#) by Edwidge Danticat (Haitian American)

17. Expand your spiritual horizons. If you are a spiritual person, acknowledge the female aspect of the Creator. If you study theological history, you will learn that female aspects of the deity were included in the original scriptures of the Bible but were edited out with the King James version for political reasons. Hasn't it ever occurred to you to question why one half of the population is not revered in the Bible? Why would a document only acknowledge a trinity of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost when women are the givers of life, the nurturers, the ones who understand the essence of life?

According to contemporary archeological findings, all civilization began in Africa, thus we are all African descendants. White people are thought to be mutations who survived over the years after migrating to the colder climates in the Caucasoid Mountains. Early civilizations regarded a Black Woman as the Creator. I strongly recommend reading [When God Was a Woman](#) by Merlin Stone and [The Great Cosmic Mother](#) by Barbara Mor and Monica Sjoo.

18. Visit the church of another culture. A good way to learn about another culture is by sharing in their worship service. Churches, mosques, temples, synagogues abound for Islamic, Protestant, Gaian, Jewish, Kemetic, Catholic, Vodoun, Sikh, Buddhist, Quaker, Mormon, and other worshippers.

19. Look at the people you have a choice in selecting--friends. How many of your close friends are of another race? If none of your close friends are of a different culture, analyze the reasons why.

Do you fear diversity? Why do you not seek out friends of color? Do you limit yourself to Anglo-oriented activities, neighborhoods, employers?

20. What kind of music do you enjoy? If you are a mainstream rock fan, have you ever explored reggae, salsa, konpa, or music of other cultures? Have you ever frequented a reggae club? Ever been to a pow wow or a taiko drumming performance?

21. Explore neighborhoods and communities of color. Have you ever acquainted yourself with cultural institutions in your city? Do you know where the Haitian, Cuban or Ethiopian neighborhood is? Have you ever shopped in those neighborhoods? Do you know where the closest Indian reservation is?

22. Support minority owned businesses. Do you shop mostly at white owned businesses? Try some affirmative action with your pocketbook. Is all the art on your living room walls Anglo art? Try some diversity in your home decorating and check out local shops that specialize in ethnic art. Join the Black, Haitian, Hispanic, American Indian or Asian Chambers of Commerce and get a copy of their business directories. Support minority vendors whether it is for furnishing your home or for business purchasing decisions.

23. Support non-profit organizations that empower minority populations. Volunteer time, donate money, or attend special events sponsored by such groups as the Lambi Fund of Haiti, Native American Rights Fund and other groups organized to empower people of color. Check out local non-profit organizations that are specific to your community. Remember your goal is empowerment, not patronization. Don't volunteer with a condescending attitude that you're going to "save these poor people".

24. Think globally, act globally. Remember that the majority of the world lives on less than a dollar a day. The environmental and economic conditions in other countries are beyond your comprehension. Make an effort to plant a tree in Haiti, sponsor an AIDS orphan in Kenya or help people in developing countries become self-supporting. Plant hope, trees, dignity and self-determination. These are ways you can truly make a difference.

25. Make a commitment to broaden your perspectives beyond your narrow euro-centric world. You will be amazed at how enriched your life becomes.

BIO:

Karen Ashmore is the Executive Director of the Lambi Fund of Haiti (www.lambifund.org), whose mission is to assist the popular, democratic movement in Haiti by supporting grassroots organizations that work for economic justice, democracy and alternative sustainable development. She has over 20 years experience in social change philanthropy and has won awards for her activism in human rights, racial justice and women's issues. She and her husband are the parents of five children, including two sisters adopted from Haiti.