

Signified Honkey: Stories In The Key of White

William Ryan Blosser, MA., Ed.S.

James Madison University

Abstract

In *Signified Honkey*, I invite the reader into my personal history as a White emerging counselor and then provide a framework for thinking about my experience. I have opted for an approach both personal and interdisciplinary as a means of exploring White privilege. My approach can best be identified as auto-ethnographic, and in using this approach I have tried to discover and remain true to my own voice throughout the narrative. The reader may find this voice to be sharp at times, including profanity and a degree of mercilessness that Tony Hoagland refers to as poetic or metaphysical meanness. I have chosen this approach as a way to demonstrate my understanding of my personal journey through White privilege and to contribute my voice to the conversations around racial identity initiated and continued by previous academics and counselors both White and of color. My hope is that after having read my paper, you, the reader, will have a perspective of how this White thinker and professional approaches his life and work based on the study of White privilege, and that White readers will be challenged to go beyond the identity models when thinking about their own history and life.

The audience for this piece would be graduate students and professionals who have already been exposed to fundamentals of White privilege and professors seeking ways of integrating the White privilege discussion into various graduate training programs.

After a semester studying creative writing at the University of Hawaii, Ryan moved to the East Coast where he began training in Clinical Mental Health Counseling and received his MA., Ed.S. in 2010 from James Madison University. He currently works as a staff counselor at the counseling center at James Madison University.

Introduction

Meanness, the very thing which is unforgivable in human social life, in poetry is thrilling and valuable. Why? Because the willingness to be offensive sets free the ruthless observer in all of us, the spiteful perceptive angel who sees and tells, unimpeded by nicety or second thoughts. There is truth-telling, and more, in meanness.

—Tony Hoagland (2003, p.13).

Intense introspection is a motha'fucker. It can creep up from behind and smack you upside the head like a water bottle at a Pistons game. Last September, in fact, I was trying to recover from one of those psychic hold-ups, you know, the kind when the meaning you've planted your feet on has just dropped out from under you. A real Kierkegaard-I-stuck-my-finger-into-existence-and-it-stunk-of-nothingness type trip. Now, if you're anything like me, then this recovery can be a bit of a painful process, 'cause I'm severely lacking in mental bootstraps. And strapping myself up is what I needed.

You see, as a result of a multicultural counseling class during my training, I finally began to view myself as a White person. The discovery ground through the digestion tract of my consciousness as though I were a lifetime vegan who just glugged out on some ill-prepared tripe. And, just when I thought my free-falling identity might find itself stuck in the abyss forever, I wandered into a used bookstore.

Aren't they all the same? Patchouli choking, Miles playing, with a twenty-something anorexic behind the counter with dyed hair, rocking secretary porn star glasses and talking UFO conspiracies with an overweight, bearded, and barefoot

Viking, looking like he just stepped out of Middle Earth.

Ignoring the obviousness of the environs; I scooted into a random aisle and scanned the shelf. Sitting next to a tattered copy of *The White Boy Shuffle* by Paul Beatty, was a copy of *Memoir of a Race Traitor* by Mab Segrest. Being firmly aware of the general belief in the field that counselors who examine their racial privilege and the active role it plays in the therapeutic relationship are less likely to rely on racial stereotypes and impose their own ethnocentric values, I thought the book might be a valuable resource (Neville, Worthington, & Spanierman, 2001). Really though, I was drawn to the John Brown posturing of the title, so I bought it.

Needless to say, the book and the dumbstruck experience of racial awareness inspired me. For me, this awareness has been a 20-year becoming, an emerging perspective on self that was launched into warp speed by the evolutionary slingshot of a counselor training program. What follows is my account of a journey through my own Whiteness blended with some thoughts and ideas of other thinkers on what it means to be White and become aware of one's own privilege. The trick will be communicating my experience and my thoughts in a cohesive manner without sacrificing much of the spirit of my journey to academic niceties.

But few, if any, want to get their hands dirty these days, and it costs us. Consider, just for an example, the subject matter of race in America. Why hasn't racial anxiety, shame and hatred—such a large presence in American life—been more a theme in poetry by Caucasian-Americans? The answer

might be that Empathy is profoundly inadequate as a strategy to some subjects. To really get at the subject of race, chances are, it's going to require some unattractive, tricky self-expression, something adequate to the paradoxical complexities of privilege, shame and resentment. To speak in a voice equal to reality in this case will mean the loss of observer-immunity-status, will mean admitting that one is not on the sidelines of our racial realities, but actually in the tangled middle of them, in very personal ways (Hoagland, 2003, p.14).

Like Hoagland, I'm after unattractive and tricky self-expression. Therefore the voice and tone of this project will be as equal as I can make it to my experience of reality; the effort will be at removing me from observer-immunity status.

I hope that through this account I may add to the conversations taking place around White privilege and assist other White helpers (and those seeking to understand us) to grapple with the madness of the funhouse some of us find ourselves in when faced with the reality of our own privilege.

Honkey See Honkey Do

I am staring at a white word document-blank and trying to put as many black letters on it as I can. This is what white meant to me before I understood what it meant to be White. White was a blank slate to fill with the "other." In the eighth grade, I hadn't read Mailer, The Beats (minus Amiri Baraka), or the other White cultural theorists trying to provide elegantly

worded excuses for White folks trying to steal Black culture. Back then, the term was simply *Wigger*; and that's how I identified. I was trying to put as much black over me as possible; I was pretty fly for a White guy; aka a wannabe. Through basketball, I gained access to Black culture and, from the moment I got my first taste, I was hooked.

I wanted to be Black, or at least the Black stereotype that I had internalized. I wanted the music, the style, the walk, the talk, etc. Thus began a deliberate and focused effort to construct my adolescent identity based on Black stereotypes. I was a Wigger by choice and wore the marks with pride.

Fortunately, I ended up being pretty good at basketball, which made the cultural shift easier for me than many other White kids. The story smacks of embarrassment when I have to admit this. Basketball was my in, my access to the Black community of my town and I exploited this fiercely.

Like some starry-eyed anthropologist, I got myself invited to Thanksgiving dinners, to church, watched Aunt Birdie catch the holy spirit, listened to lectures on the historical and dietary importance of collards. I loved every minute of the experience. Be it eager youth or sheer persistence, somehow, I wasn't seen as a threat like most of the White people in town ... at least not yet.

Throughout this experience I came to identify myself through the Black community as a White boy. Which is to say I had a pass, I was accepted; *White boy* being a term of endearment signifying me as not so different as to be unfamiliar. I was the down-ass White boy, I was cool. I even learned to hate White people like many of my friends.

Like when I got my license I became the taxi for my crew. On the way to play ball every day we would drive by the golf course and shout out the window while some old man was in his back swing, “Fuck you, White people!”

Years of this trajectory set the stage for what would prove to be a significant blow to my identity. The summer between my junior and senior year, I was invited by my hero Cory Alexander, who at the time played for the San Antonio Spurs, along with a couple of my friends, to work a basketball camp for at-risk youth in Richmond, Virginia. I arrived at camp excited and ready to soak up the urban experience from the distance and immunity my all-state talent afforded me. I had reached a point in the social life of my town where I didn’t have to put so much effort into identity presentation. I made it. I was accepted by the Black community and even had extra pull due to my status as a Division I recruit. I was the cool White boy who got game.

In the beginning of basketball camp, most camp coordinators like to open the week by introducing the staff to the campers. This is a time when introductions are accompanied by a lot of hype from the presenter (in this case it was Cory) and are met by campers with applause, enthusiasm, and excitement.

At an early age I developed the habit of counting the White people in the room. I took pride in being the only White boy and if another was present, I would size him up. I would think, “Imposter, poseur, if a fight breaks out I’m gonna’ fuck that White boy up.” I viewed White people as a threat to my own authenticity and felt relieved on this day to find myself once again the only White person in the room.

On this particular day, Cory cruised through the introductions with the expected hype and a very enthusiastic crowd. When it came time for Cory to introduce me he did so with flair, hyped me up, and I walked out in front of the campers to bask in this acceptance, to soak up the experience of having a camp full of young Richmond City Black youth captivated in awe by my talent and general presence. In the split second between when the introduction was finished and applause usually erupted, I spanned the audience and that’s when my eyes met a little 6-year-old named Na Na.

The moment our eyes met, Na Na’s face turned to a big smile and he shouted: “Check out this honkey yo.” The campers erupted in laughter; some were indeed rolling on the floor. I expected Cory to stop this and so I looked in his direction and he was doubled over laughing, too. I then looked to my friends for some sort of rescue or sympathy and they were laughing.

There I stood, signified honkey, being laughed at by everyone in the gym ...

I don’t remember how I got out of the moment. I probably slinked back to where my friends stood. Throughout the day they kept laughing and saying things like: “Bloss just got carried by a hood rat.” Not even years of intimate friendship could fill the empty space I felt between them and me.

The story ends on a darker note. At lunch the first day of camp, I, using my parent’s money, took my friends out on the west side of Richmond while Na Na sat eating free lunch provided through the free lunch program with the city. The difference struck me as appropriate. I could even sense a whiff, a hint of resentment deep in my psyche towards both my friends and Na Na.

Now, after articulating this sentiment, it takes no large leap for me to view the action of buying lunch for my friends as the expression of this resentment. At the time I just thought, “Na Na should be so lucky to find a rich honkey to take care of him.” I tucked the thought deep into my soul as quickly as it bubbled up and spent the rest of the week nursing my cracked identity and trying to forget that word—*honkey*.

I have not forgotten the word or the experience. The memory has since taken on a much larger meaning to my development. The story of how I came to be called a honkey is in fact an entry point into understanding who I am and what it means to be White and privileged. Spurred on by the recognition of my personal meaning tied up in the word “honkey” and a yearning to become comfortable with my emerging identity, I went searching for a way to name the experience.

Clarence Major (1994) in his book *From Juba to Jive, A Dictionary of African-American Slang* defines honkey as deriving from the West African Wolof word *honq*, meaning a pink man or woman; it is a derisive term used to identify a White person. Through Na Na’s choice of word, he was carrying on a verbal tradition going back more than 500 years to pre-American slavery West Africa. Na Na was also participating in another tradition, the art of signifyin’. There are probably as many definitions to the word *signifyin’* as there are writers who write about it. Major’s dictionary defines *signifyin’* as “Performance talk; to berate someone; to censure in twelve or fewer statements; speaking ironically” (Major, 1994).

Daryll Dickson-Carr (2000) in his book on African American satire titled:

African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel, describes signifyin’ as verbal behavior used in African American vernacular communities to describe verbal jousting, consisting of insults and trickery used to create a critique of a person, idea, or object.

When viewing my experience through this lens not only was Na Na identifying me as an imposter via vocabulary, he was also twisting the act of signifyin’ on its head. While for me the situation may have felt ironic, Na Na’s invective needed no ironic encoding or persuasion. Signifyin’? No sir. I was signified. In doing so, Na Na managed to identify me as outsider not only in language but in tradition and technique as well.

Assimilation Happens

And all the girlies say, I’m pretty fly for a white guy.

—*The Offspring*

I was born White to a mom and dad who paid lip service to the civil rights movement of the ’60s from the comfort of their dorm rooms and went on to receive advanced degrees in human service fields. They then moved to Charlottesville, Virginia, bought a Volvo, joined the Unitarian Church, and decided to have kids. From there, my life can be read like a movie script written for one of the Osmonds by a Jimmy Carter speech writer. My childhood was spent being serenaded by Harry Chapin and Jim Croce, playing neighborhood soccer, eating green onions over sea bass, and having family game night where we laughed for hours over an edgy game of Chutes and Ladders. When I was nine, the family moved to a small working-class

suburb in Virginia. Soon, I gave up soccer for basketball and everything changed.

Writing about his own childhood in a segregated town in 1950s New Jersey, professional counselor Mark Kiselica (1999) noted that Black and White children rarely mixed, except on the basketball court, where sporting events brought the town together for superficial contact. My home town fit Kiselica's description, despite integration 30 years earlier. After school, I'd leave the all-White public school of the country club neighborhood to go to the YMCA and experience integration for the first time.

When my world was integrated it went something like this:

"May I please play?"

"Fuck you talkin' 'bout?"

"Can I play?"

"Sitcha' ass down."

Of course I sat down, and everyone started laughing. "Damn dude, you a bitch. You gonna' do everything I say?"

Thus began my adolescence and maneuvering of a cultural landscape I had previously never known existed. Within a year the differences melted away into jump shots and a local version of the dozens fondly remembered as "holdin' up the porch" or "jonin."

You get to know people well when you spend five hours a day with them, and hey ... assimilation happens. My parents did what they could to prevent me from forgetting all of the "straight English" I'd learned. But soon, basketball increasingly took over my life; I chose to refuse to put

band on my school schedule and dropped both Latin and geometry. The high school didn't know what to do with a country club kid who didn't want to pad his college application with meaningless extracurriculars and AP courses. As a result, the only classes available to me were all remedial. Suddenly I found myself in classes with kids from neighborhoods with nicknames like "The Hill," "The Quadrangle," "Philipines," and "Maupintown."

The remedial track granted me even more pull in the black community, although it was a status that created a great deal of inner turmoil. In Paul Beatty's (2000) novel, *Tuff*, there is a White character surrounded by a cast of Black characters. Beatty illustrates this character's position in the following passage:

Charles "Whitey" O'Koren was an American anachronism, the last of a dying breed: the native, destitute, inner-city white ethnic. ... It was the neighbors who revived the old Anglo-American sobriquet and dubbed the boy Whitey. ... Whenever a stranger asked Charles whether he found the ethnic blatancy of his nickname a hindrance, the hard-hearted, freckled boy of nineteen replied, "It makes me no nevermind." In private he preferred to be called C-Ice or Charley O'. (pp. 52-53)

When I was first told that I had a "Hill pass" granting me immunity in the black neighborhood, I felt like a small-town version of Whitey. And like Whitey, it was the "old heads" or old-timers that greeted me with the sting of condescension.

Around the same time I got my “Hill pass,” my parents gave up fighting my social transformation and the breezy middle-class liberalism they had inherited from residual hippy sensibilities left over from their own cultural revolution and eventually turned our home into what on the surface seemed to be a suburban center for racial harmony, despite the frustrations of our neighbors and the harassment of our city’s finest.

One summer between my freshman and sophomore year, I met Matt Williams. Matt was the only other “young’n” at the YMCA evening open gyms and Matt is Black. In addition, Matt was not from my town. Matt grew up on the streets of D.C., where he lived with his mom and spent summers in town with his dad. Being from out of town and my age, Matt overlooked the dark potentials my skin color might mean and we became close friends. This friendship set the stage for my first real-time experience with flagrant old-school racism; a racism with the nobility to drop all subtlety, though the power to cause great pain.

Soon we were spending every minute together. One night I’d spend the night at Matt’s house where we would drink Sunny Delight and eat microwaved miniature hot dogs bought pre-packaged in bulk 40 at a time. The next night we’d spend the night at my house and drink fresh-squeezed orange juice and eat grilled steak with asparagus something-or-other. Matty often tried to tell me that White folks’ cooking was bad for his digestion.

One day we managed to find a ride home from the Y for lunch and an afternoon swim before heading back for open gym. When we arrived at my house, sitting in the driveway was my mother’s mother, Grace.

At an early age I picked up on the tension between my dad and Grandma Grace. Add to it the myth that grandma hated men and this was one woman that I just didn’t feel like being in the same room with. She was nurturing like the praying mantis that eats the weak offspring so the others can thrive its nurturing. She is the pink Cadillac the MaryKay lady wins for selling more products in a month than any other employee only to find out the Cadillac needs new tires and won’t start when it’s too cold. She had a scary old lady grump face and liked to save her scowl for me.

On this day, Matty and I were unusually hungry and we hopped out of the vehicle to run into the house before the full-on blood sugar crash. I knew Grandma was home because of her old maroon Reliant K car, smelling of Red Door perfume and parked in the driveway. As I approached the door I saw the curtain in the window close quickly. When Matty and I stepped into the house, it was silent and still. We went straight to the fridge and scarfed down pizza left over from the night before. After finishing off the pizza, we drank about a gallon of orange juice and then decided to go swimming. At this point there was still no sign of life at the house with the exception of the family golden retriever outside barking.

After the swim, we came into the house and I went upstairs to get a change of clothes for Matt and myself before heading back to the Y for more workouts. Still a little confused about where Grandma and my sisters might be, but not really putting any effort into worrying about it, I tried to open the door to my parent’s room to see if Mom had finished the laundry to be put away. The door was locked. When I knocked on the door, nothing happened. Curious about why Mom and Dad’s

bedroom door was locked in a house that didn't even lock the front door and thinking that it might have been a mistake I got a clothes hanger from my closet and jimmied opened the door.

When I pushed the door open it felt heavy and I was able to get my head in the door. On the other side was Grandma Grace leaning with her ear stuck flat to the door. Our eyes connected and her first question was; "Who is that boy?" I ignored Grandma and asked my sisters what they were doing in the bedroom. In unison they stated: "Grandma made us."

At first I shook this behavior off as more eccentric old lady stuff. Matty and I changed our clothes and I yelled upstairs that I was going back to the Y to work out and would be home by 9:30 that evening. At this announcement I heard a door open and shut and little feet rush down the steps knocking off pictures on the wall and knocking over a bell on the table in the Hallway. Grandma Grace reached us out of breath and with a look of terror in her eyes. Holding one finger out and propping herself up with the other hand on her knee we waited for a full minute for her to catch her breath.

When she was finally able to make a sound, she shouted for us both to "stop right there." Which of course we didn't have to do, seeing as how we were already standing there staring at her to make sure she wasn't going to pass out. She then proceeded to make Matt empty out each of his pockets and turn them inside out before we could leave for the Y. I told Matt he didn't have to do it, but Matt did anyway.

That was the first time it dawned on me what the look of anger and embarrassment in a Black person's eye

might mean. The gesture triggered something dark and violent in me and I flipped out. I threw an explosive tantrum crashing through the house breaking the nearest things I could find. This, of course, validated all of my grandmother's fears but I didn't care. I was embarrassed and pissed off. The tantrum ended with me using my size to physically intimidate Grandma out of the door of our house and into her car. I screamed at her before going back to the Y that she was never allowed back into our house again.

Mom and Dad came home that afternoon from work to a mess. I don't know if Grandma was there or not, I stayed at the Y until closing and then spent the night at Matty's house. When I got home the next day, Grandma was gone and my parents were furious. I didn't care and tried punishing Mom and Dad with silence for tolerating this behavior. Being a teenager, my every attempt to contextualize her worldview didn't work. I wrote her out of my life forever. And for the next couple of years if she came over to the house, I either stayed far away or made sure to roll up to my house deep with a crew of friends to terrorize her.

A few years later, my grandmother out of the blue called Mom up and asked if she could come see me play basketball. It turns out we were playing a game near her town and she came to watch us play. She had a great time cheering for us. While I know better than to think that her racism was cured, in fact it could have just been reinforced, she also got excited to see Matt and a third member of my close friends, J.R., on the court.

Grandma soon became a huge fan of us and when our games were written up in other nearby print, she would clip them out

and save them. After one game in Lynchburg, Grandma insisted we come over for a late dinner. I agreed to come over for a couple of minutes but when we got to the house she grabbed Matt and J.R. by the arm and escorted them into the house. We sat around the table that night while Grandma cooked for us. Matt acted like the humiliation three years before never happened, and when it came time to leave, Grandma gave all three of us a hug. She then asked Matt if she could call him Dark Chocolate and dubbed J.R. Milk Chocolate.

While I wanted to cringe at this oblivious old woman disrespecting my closest friends in the world, it was known by all of us that this was a huge turning point for her. And Matt and J.R. handled her shift from anger and fear to curiosity and condescension with grace and forgiveness. After the dinner, she would seek Matt and J.R. out when she came to the house. Grandma Grace's shift didn't stop here; she joined a church committee that started organizing fellowship socials meant to create a bridge between her all-White church and traditionally Black churches. Grandma even went out and bought a church "crown"—once again meaning well, but in her curiosity and enthusiasm reducing the Black experience to a stereotype: Black church ladies in big hats. In Black culture, Grandma found a bridge to connect with me.

As I'm writing this my fingers are shaking over the keyboard; knuckles white with tension. How sick and fucked up and condescendingly beautiful it is that my racist grandmother found in Black culture a way to connect and heal the broken relationship she had with her grandson. And how inappropriate and embarrassing to realize that in doing so, Grandma and I turned my best friends into some twisted version of magic Negroes. What's worse to realize is

that my whole life I've been guilty of the same curiosity and enthusiasm, the same exotic otherness that defined Grandma's shift.

There are many questions and levels to examine about the above anecdote. For now, I'd like to continue to position my personal narrative as a lightning rod for racial confrontation and volatility. Of the many anecdotes to pull from, the previous demonstrates that well. There is one episode however that has left a lasting impression on my life, my relationship to my wife's family (and my wife), and my experience around people of color.

The story ends with a marriage, so relax; it's got a happy ending. Joy and I were married in a blur of festivities, excitement, and drama. For our wedding we were attempting to integrate wealthy White Long Island Catholics with working-class Black Baptists with suburban middle-class White Lutherans with Southern White, rural, and poor Methodists. A couple of kegs were added just in case things already weren't interesting enough, and for the most part we pulled it off—with one huge exception.

Two days before our wedding, Joy's family threw a party for us out in the country. Naturally everyone in the wedding party was invited and the party began low key and fun. As the evening progressed so did the drinking and folks whom neither Joy nor I knew were showing up to the party.

It didn't take long before tensions spilled out in conversation and after a couple of racially charged comments were made, a friend of a member of Joy's family addressed J.R., a Black member of the wedding party as "boy" and threatened to go get his shotgun. My tensions escalated by the guilt I was experiencing for putting my

friends yet again in a situation where they would feel the flagrant sting of racism and the fear I was experiencing around the memory of my college teammate being shot in a Baltimore bar by a White boy from the county just eight months before, I asked everybody to get in their cars in order to avoid a fight.

I then exploded at Joy's family with a verbal tirade of accusation and poorly aimed comments about meth-addled toothless hillbillies. The tantrum ended with me in a scene perfect for a comic book. Drunk on Hennessey and adrenaline, I stood in front of the bonfire, ripping the shirt from my chest like some pasty pathetic hulk and declared as loud as I possibly could to my wife's family, soon to be my family, "You're all fucking racist rednecks."

We left without a fight, but the next day Joy's family came to my parent's house to announce that they were boycotting the wedding because of the damage I might cause some of the other family members with my slander. The logic around the boycott was that many of them own working-class businesses and if people found out that I accused them of being racist, then none of the "Mexicans" would work for them. That's not a joke; by the way, this was actually presented to me in this manner.

That night I wrote an apology letter to the family connecting the threat of the shotgun to the event of my teammate being shot. The letter worked, and Joy's family decided it would be safe to participate in our wedding.

The wedding went smoothly and all seemed to enjoy themselves. I could still sense the tension at the reception, though I possessed neither the wisdom nor self-

awareness to understand it. Nor had I considered the emotional toll all of this might have taken on my Black friends. Towards the end of the reception, after most of the people had left, somehow an argument erupted between Joy (remember we were married only hours before) and J.R. (the target of the shotgun threat). Pissed off over the racial drama of the week and feeling guilty, angry, and pressure to take my wife's side, I blew up at J.R.

We traded blows before being broken up. A couple of days later, Joy and I flew to Hawaii to start a new life. I haven't seen or spoken to J.R. since. I was married nine years ago this month. I can't find any other way to think about this event than to view it through the lens of my own privilege. I've shifted from hating him for "creating trouble" on my wedding day to wanting to apologize to him and having to accept that I may never get the chance.

Welcome to the Panopticon

Earlier in the paper, I mentioned briefly the deflating experience of engaging the White privilege material for the first time in a multicultural counseling class. In many of the previous anecdotes, I have written myself into the hero role, the savior out to fight or convert any racists I sense on the horizon. This held true the first day of class when I sat among my cohort feeling superior because I knew that I had multicultural clout.

In fact, I had the gall to compare my own personal narrative around race to the story of the poet Gary Snyder when he was a young anthropology student at Reed College and attempted to join the spiritual tradition of the Hopi tribe he was studying. The story

goes that the Hopis rejected Gary because he was White. Gary, feeling frustrated with this rejection, fled the United States and joined a Buddhist monastery in Japan where he studied Buddhism for seven years before returning.

As I shared the story, the professor eyed me with what I interpreted then as suspicion. Now, the memory of the professor's expression has softened into a gentle and worried look. I believe that she was seeing my blind spot and witnessing my own obliviousness to racial grandiosity. It's a grandiosity that can be read throughout the first two sections of this paper in my personal episodes. It's the grandiosity that puts me as the central character in a racial conflict out to smash racism wherever I find it, while also being ignorant of my own racist transgressions.

Shannon Sullivan (2006), in her book *Revealing Whiteness*, describes this grandiosity as ontological expansiveness. She defines the expansiveness as a relationship between self and the environment in which the self assumes that it can and should have complete mastery of its environment. Sullivan develops the idea in the following passage.

To be a white person means that one tends to assume that all cultural and social spaces are potentially available for one to inhabit. The habit of ontological expansiveness enables white people to maximize the extent of the world in which they transact. But as an instance of white solipsism, it also severely limits their ability to treat others in respectful ways. Instead of acknowledging others' particular interests, needs, and projects, white people who are ontologically expansive tend to

recognize only their own, and their expansiveness is at the same time a limitation (p. 25)

Slowly the material and the very idea of White privilege grabbed onto my psyche. The experience and paper for that matter can best be described as an attempt to define or better yet to identify. As I dug deeper into the literature, definition after definition bubbled up into my consciousness.

To be "white" means to be insensitive to the possibilities for oppression within one's self, therefore out-of-touch, for opportunistic reasons, with who one is and who others are. If "white" meant all-inclusive, like white the color of light containing all colors, then "white" would be a term of love and life. But the "white" I am talking about is a whiteness of exclusion, an absence of color, an absence of responsibility and self-awareness. Whiteness is a death trip. And the attempt to break out of it is an attempt to gain life. (Eakins, 1996, p. 88)

This particular passage blew me away, what with the whole "Whiteness is a death trip" rhetoric. Was this the self-loathing I've been experiencing most of my adolescence and young adult life? At this point I started to understand myself not through who I was, but rather through who I wasn't. I wasn't Black, but I certainly wasn't White. And right on cue, I discovered Tim Wise (2008) and he had a thought to offer up on my thought process around racial privilege.

To define yourself, ultimately, by what you're not, is a pathetic and heartbreaking thing. It is to stand denuded before a culture that has

stolen your birthright, or rather, convinced you to give it up. And the costs are formidable, beginning with the emptiness whites so often feel when confronted by multiculturalism and the connectedness of people of color to their various heritages. That emptiness then gets filled up by the privileges and ultimately forces us to become dependent on them.
(p. 171)

I wasn't empty, was I? Is this what I really meant when I so proudly proclaimed to be a cultural orphan because of my own drab interpretation of my White heritage? Furthermore what does this mean for me as a professional helper?

My definition of what it means to be White took on an evolutionary trajectory that, if graphed, might serve as a great model for the latest design of a thrilling theme park ride. Simply put, I was existing, and to some extent continue to exist, in a state of racial crisis.

The material and my own fear that I have been acting out a racist script on autopilot for two decades launched me into a chaotic state. And remembering that both neurosis and creativity are attempts to solve the same problem, I understood that I would fluctuate from neurotic to creative states. However, I wanted to take the Creative path. I want to make something new from the situation. And so, much like before, I set out to name the experience of my own personal crisis (Echterling, Presbury, & McKee, 2005).

This part of the journey led to, of course, the White racial identity models. The common goals of White racial identity models include acceptance of and appreciation for diversity, greater interracial

comfort, openness to racial concerns, awareness of one's personal responsibility for racism, and an evolving nonracist identity (Parker, Moore, & Neimeyer, 1998). Seeing these goals as noble, I sought to position myself within a model in hopes of becoming clearer as to where I was and where I wanted to be.

The model that at first glance seemed to work the best for me was Helms's (1993) White identity model. White racial identity statuses described by Helms are Contact, Disintegration, Reintegration, Pseudo-Independence, Immersion/Emersion, and Autonomy.

For me, and I suspect for many White helpers, encountering this material in a counselor training program changes the game a bit. It is no longer about positioning oneself on Helms's developmental model. It's this objective and cool, detached approach to understanding myself on which I have spent so much of my life relying. In fact, most likely I would be tempted to place myself either on the full-on autonomous side of the model or place myself in a step in the model that implied I was not racially aware of self. This is performed with the explicit function of winning the hearts of those with whom I might be at the time. And yes, this is greatly influenced by the racial profile of the other people in the room.

Thinking on this, I experienced a pull of paranoia. In trying to present myself as if I was in a certain stage, yet also trying to be honest with myself, a dissonance developed. Every movement and every thought spoken was first passed through a filter before being acted on. I felt as though I was in jail, being watched by a thousand jailers at every angle waiting for me to make a mistake.

And then there was French theorist Michelle Foucault (1984). I went investigating further a word that stuck out from his writings: *panopticism*, which is the panoptic modality of power. Foucault describes panopticism as a technique of power created to make it possible to bring the effects of power to the most minute and distant elements. Foucault's work on panopticism stems from a much earlier idea known as the panopticon.

Panopticon is a plan of management using construction first developed by Jeremy Bentham in 1787. The panopticon was proposed to be used with any houses where inspection is required. These include: prison, houses of industry, work-houses, poor-houses, mad houses, and schools.

The panopticon was designed as a sphere with the inspection house in the center with the area reserved for the prisoners on the grounds inside the sphere below. The idea was that the workers, prisoners, or patients would not know when the inspectors were watching, but would know that at anytime and from any angle they could be watched. This type of system created an experience of paranoia and anxiety in many of the prisoners.

The panopticon is a concept that I felt immediately; more so than Helms' identity models. I am stuck in a liminal space, a space where I have to make the creative choice or the fear choice. This betwixt and between is the meta-experience of mind placing itself smack in the middle of the idea; the emotional expression of the Oroboros where the snake eats its own tail. It is the obstacle the White person must overcome in order to be a competent multicultural counselor.

The panopticon of privilege is the overwhelming attempt of the White helper to wrestle with Sullivan's paradox of ontological expansiveness; the moment when a decision is made to creatively strike a new path or make the fear choice and return to the homeostatic moment.

**Chewing on a Worn Out Chuck Taylor:
Was that a micro aggression, or did you
just stick your foot in your mouth?**

I do not think that this realization should lead to despair, although it does snuff out any Pollyannaish dreams of the easy elimination of racism.

—Shannon Sullivan

When I first named my experience and understood it through the lens of the panopticon, I was angry. I didn't need this shit. It was as if I had been de-skilled. Prior to taking the multicultural class and even joining a counseling program, I thought that I could coast by in multicultural settings on the strength of my own history. Now however there was something new to worry about. My gigantic goddamned privilege.

At first there were obvious ramifications. I had trouble sleeping and whenever I found myself encountering a person of color I would fall quiet. The ridiculous and grandiose part of me that views me as savior of Black folks reasoned that I was protecting them from me. When I really put some thought to it, the truth around it was that I just didn't want to look stupid. I didn't want to blow an image I spent years trying to construct. Soon, however, I started noticing mistakes I was making.

A big one is the need to rewrite my own history. The reader probably noticed my puffed-up posturing and positioning as anti-racist hero, converter of grumpy racist grandmas. I will have to reconstruct this narrative from a new perspective; one that rather than denying my own privilege sets it up front and center. This of course presents a new problem, the paradox of privilege. Sullivan (2006) writes that:

The very act of giving up (direct) total control over one's habits can be an attempt to take (indirect) total control over them by dominating the environment. The very act of changing one's environment so as to disrupt white privilege paradoxically can be a disruption that only reinforces that which it disrupts.
(p. 10)

Aggh! By actively taking on White privilege I must act as a White privileged person. I may be able to broach the topic of race by opening up a session with a Black or Latino client by asking "What's it like to work with a White counselor? This may be helpful, and then again, it may not be. In my effort to open up the racial tension in the room, I may just be caring for myself and using my privilege to push the client into talking about race.

Armed with the intent to use my own ontological expansiveness to confront my own ontological expansiveness and spinning from the zero gravity effect the panopticon of privilege was having on my psyche I dove into my training. And stepped on a few landmines in the process.

During my training, I had the opportunity to work under the structural family therapy model. Eventually, I was asked to become a lead counselor where it

was my task to put together a team of therapists to best serve each family, based on my impressions from the initial assessment.

Following one of these assessments, I was thinking about putting together a team and it struck me that, with this particular family, a Black therapist would be more helpful than a White therapist. So I made a decision that I wanted a Black therapist to work with me to help the family. The agency that I was doing my training with lacked diversity and when thinking about a Black therapist for my team, this meant that there was only one choice. Upon realizing that my choice was limited to only one person, it hit me how ridiculous it might seem for me to invite this counselor onto the team.

I was nervous about how to broach the topic without seeming racist or communicating that I saw this counselor as a token in an all-White system. Secretly, I had always wanted to ask the counselor what it was like to be a token in an all-White system.

Even as I write this now, I'm unsure as to the most appropriate approach to the situation. At the time, based on my experience with White privilege literature, I was going to share with the counselor that I was interested in this counselor's help because of the counselor's potential ability to get to issues of the family quicker based on the position of the family as Black and struggling with issues of racism. When I finally was able to ask the counselor to join the team, my upper-middle-class White "politeness" and privilege reared its ugly head and what came out of my mouth was, "So, how do you feel about multicultural counseling?"

The counselor looked perplexed and I stumbled deeper into micro aggression territory in my effort to back away from my original idea. I can't remember the words that guided me deeper into dangerous territory, though I do remember that as my anxiety increased, my tone of voice grew increasingly smug. I may have even been trying to front with a calm smile. The conversation ended with the counselor looking at me and stating, "I don't want to work on this case with you."

I carried around the shame of this moment with me for the rest of the day. I don't know what may have been the best approach and even now, despite spending a couple of years reading, and thinking through my own privilege I don't know if it is appropriate to assume that a Black counselor can help a Black family through their community struggles with racism any better than a White counselor. What I do know is that the moment I asked that question to my colleague, I sent a message to my colleague that race was not a topic that I was open to exploring. I was an armchair anti-racist.

Another training story took place between me and a client. I had been working with a family of color for several months and through this work had developed what felt like a positive therapeutic relationship. On one occasion in a family session the energy of the session turned to the identified client in the room and the parents focused on the changes in language and self-expression the client was going through. At first the mother and father seemed to approach these changes with a light and joking manner. I can remember sitting in the room and feeling happy and even proud that I was able to sit in the kitchen of a Black family as a White professional counselor in training and have

the family participate with me in such a comfortable manner.

At this moment the father turned to me and made a statement that sent my pride through the roof. The father opened a question by stating, "Ryan, I got something to ask you and I know, I can tell, you've been around a lot of Black folks your whole life." I was feeling good about this statement. It was for me a mark of acceptance. As if I'd been given props and welcomed into the club of cool-ass White people that can be trusted. My ridiculous glow came crashing to a halt when the father followed the statement up by asking me, "What do you think of when you hear the term *niggerish*?"

The question struck me like a blow to the stomach. I stuttered my words and muttered something to the effect of, "I can't begin to know how to answer that." The room filled with silence on the tail of my response and members in the family, including my client, actually backed up.

I am a firm believer in the wisdom of the master counselors in my training program that taught me that feedback—not failure—is a constant in the counseling process. In most situations, the fractal patterning of the therapeutic dance proves this to be true. When it comes to this family—and, for that matter, multicultural counseling in general—the pattern of therapeutic dance seems too chaotic, too out of balance already, and feedback—not failure—is no longer a helpful mantra.

There are ruptures in multicultural counseling from which the relationship cannot recover. When I refused to respond to the family I was helping out of my own fear and baggage tied up in the word *nigger*, I sent the message to them that when it came

down to the real work, the uncomfortable work of helping, I was useless.

On another occasion, I was transporting a client to a treatment team meeting involving several social workers, therapeutic foster parents, counselors, and psychologists. The individual was presenting as nervous through pressured speech and rumination around what might be the outcome of the meeting. I wanted to try and join with the client by naming the client's experience without the client having to verbalize it. I took my time to carefully construct a short wondering about what it must be like for the individual to enter a room full of professionals. The individual looked at me with disbelief and proceeded to school me around making poor assumptions. The client stated; "Intimidated? By professionals? When you say professional, do you mean White? Man, what kind of shit are you talking? I put my pants on the same way everybody in that room does."

Another rupture I won't be coming back from. The remainder of the trip was completed in silence. And once again, the panopticon of privilege failed me. How did I miss such an obvious mistake?

The End: This One Can't Be Tied Up with a Tidy Conclusion

The above is my attempt at conceptualizing my own experience in struggling to become a competent multicultural counselor. I have told my stories in order to invite witness to this struggle. I am, and indeed remain, deep within the panopticon of privilege.

In revisiting an earlier passage in my paper when I wrote that feedback—not

failure—is a mantra that doesn't fit in the multicultural arena, I was wrong. It doesn't fit in the interpersonal immediate experience of the multicultural arena. Where it does seem to be most appropriate, however, is in the lifetime of the White helper. Feedback—not-failure. Every time a mistake is made, the White person must stick around and experience, even become sensitive to, the consequence of the rupture. When one can stomach this, and humble oneself in the moment of unconscious racism, when one can sit comfortably in the panopticon of privilege while the fires of self-doubt rage around, when one can tolerate, even enjoy this bewildered and hyper-vigilant state, perhaps it is here, through the exhausting lens of racial self-consciousness that appropriate and lasting personal transformation can be made. And this perhaps is how White helpers can be helpful.

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