

## **Learning and Unlearning White Supremacy**

*Moyo: Where Contemplation and Action Meet*

September 2014

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As a white man reared in a culture of colorblindness, I, like many others, did not learn how to talk about race until well into adulthood. While the proponents of colorblindness in my life were well meaning enough, I have come to understand that colorblindness depends upon the belief that race should be ignored because, it is presumed, racism is a thing of the past, which means that the only way to keep it in the past is by pretending not to “see” racial difference at all. This was a seemingly tenable approach in the context in which I was raised in the northeast, in a relatively conservative but compassionate multiracial Christian church. The composition of our “church family,” I believed, was at least one proof of the fact that racism was no longer an issue in our society.

I know now, however, that the racism I learned about in history class never went away; it just reinvented itself, and continues to, over and over again. From state and vigilante violence against black people, to the racist disproportionality of the criminal justice system, to the black displacement that comes from gentrification, to simultaneous economic divestment from and hyper-criminalization in impoverished communities of color, to interpersonal and structural xenophobic violence against immigrant communities, racial injustice remains alive and well.

Race might be a construct, but even constructs have the power to deal death.

I didn’t learn how to talk about race for so many years, too, because I didn’t have to. I’m white, and to be white is to inherit the privilege of never being forced to reckon with my racial identity or the world it creates for me, because my racial identity is the embodiment of a historically constructed normativity and superiority that enables the possession of immense properties and protections. Whiteness just *is* so fundamentally that it hardly appears in the consciousness of most white people at all, and as a result, it is one of the most powerful and deadly forces in the world.

That’s how racism works: the more deeply embedded in social imaginaries and institutions it is, the harder it is to see, and the harder it is to see, the easier it is for it to thrive unabated.

Having been taught that my siblings and I were the first generation of the family to be completely beyond any trace of racism, and attending a church that seemed to embody that post-racialism, it was confusing to eventually discover that racism in fact lives on, and in ways I had no reason to perceive—even in myself. It didn’t matter that I didn’t consciously “choose” racism or white supremacy; as a white man reared in an economically comfortable environment in the 1980s and 90s in a northeast just as racist as the south in which I’ve now lived for over a decade, racism and white supremacy had already chosen me, whether I realized or liked it or not.

The process of coming into consciousness about—in order to unlearn—white supremacy can be overwhelming or embarrassing for folks like me who have, until fairly recently, spent their lives in a culture of relative ignorance or avoidance of the subject. But a state of being overwhelmed,

guilty, or afraid is less than conducive to fruitful, long haul participation in the work of co-creating a more just world. So what are white folks—including white folks of faith—to do?

I am still learning myself, but what I know is that in order to unlearn white supremacy, we must first learn what it is, how it works, and how it keeps on reinventing itself. This means listening carefully to the voices and experiences of people of color in our communities, but without simply asking black people to explain racism to us or tell us what we should do about it. To that end, we should seek out other white folks who have been thinking on these matters and engage in mutual learning, unlearning, and support towards transformation. Racial injustice didn't come about by way of one person, and it certainly won't end that way: it takes all of us chipping away and building up collectively.

Likewise, it is important that we educate ourselves on the histories that led us to the present moment. That means reading about European colonialism, chattel slavery, black codes, convict leasing, Jim Crow, the war on drugs, and the prison industrial complex—and theological treatments that explore how theological concepts made some of these institutions possible, and how they can help undo them. It means reading about civil rights, black power, and multiracial working class movements for freedom. It means learning about the invention of “whiteness” as we know it: how it originated with wealthy, land- and people-owning men of European descent who needed a way to fragment the diverse coalitions of poor people challenging the premises of their exploitation in the American colonies. It means learning about the racial histories of our own communities, and seeing how those histories live on in subtle and not so subtle ways today. It means learning, too, about white people who have been called “race traitors” for finding ways to undercut white supremacy.

Theologian Willie Jennings argues that Christianity since European colonialism has been beset by a diseased social imagination characterized in part by conflation of whiteness with something akin to god-like-ness, which makes all manner of racist violence against and displacement of non-white “others” possible. If racism in the United States flourishes in part because of a diseased social and religious imagination, then part of the task of co-creating a new world lies in fostering new social and religious imaginations—in dismantling racist ideologies at their root and in our minds and systems and co-laboring with others to envision new ways of arranging our common life together.

Ultimately, the task of learning and unlearning is most fruitful and transformative when carried out alongside others. To that end, part of our task also lies in stewarding the process of learning, unlearning, and transformation for members of our own families and communities. Moreover, we must find ways to participate not just in individual and group transformation, but also in the actual transfer of power and resources to communities of color. This might mean childcare for community organizers of color; raising funds at church or in the neighborhood to support a local grassroots organization led by community members directly affected by racial and economic injustice; gathering white folks in your community to make a statement that black lives matter; or organizing to reroute government funding away from increased prisons, jails, and police departments and toward youth programming, jobs, and economic development that benefits all. There are many ways to participate in the ending of white supremacy, and none are too small.

For those of us in Christian communities, we must continue to learn that, because humans embody something of the divine—“God’s image”—and because the Hebrew Bible and New Testament tell us that we encounter God in others, any act or process of *de*-humanization should be understood as what the tradition calls “sin.” White supremacy in all its forms constitutes “sin” because it originated with and continues as a process of social fragmentation, dehumanization, and death.

The tradition also understands oppressors and exploiters as people who invite their own eventual destruction: those who create hell on earth for others will one day be consumed by their own flames. As such, the more “white people” divest from white supremacy in concrete ways and thereby support the freeing of those confined by centuries of oppression, the more free and whole we become. Unlearning white supremacy might even be understood as a religious task: resisting dehumanization and co-laboring for a world where the image of the God who loved and loves us into being is discernible in communities where walls are made into bridges and all people sit under their own vines and fig trees, and where no one is afraid (Micah 4:4).

May it be so, and may we be brave enough to participate in its becoming.

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