

African-Americans and Latinos are undergoing a painful period of political and economic adjustment. They are finding that the struggle for power and recognition will be long and difficult. The wars in the L.A. County jails are a tragic, deplorable symptom of that.

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## “IS THIS A WHITE COUNTRY, OR WHAT?”

Lillian Rubin

“They’re letting all these coloreds come in and soon there won’t be any place left for white people,” broods Tim Walsh, a thirty-three-year-old white construction worker. “It makes you wonder: Is this a white country, or what?”

It’s a question that nags at white America, one perhaps that’s articulated most often and most clearly by the men and women of the working class. For it’s they who feel most vulnerable, who have suffered the economic contractions of recent decades most keenly, who see the new immigrants most clearly as direct competitors for their jobs.

It’s not whites alone who stew about immigrants. Native-born blacks, too, fear the newcomers nearly as much as whites—and for the same economic reasons. But for whites the issue is compounded by race, by the fact that the newcomers are primarily people of color. For them, therefore, their economic anxieties have combined with the changing face of America to create a profound uneasiness about immigration—a theme that was sounded by nearly 90 percent of the whites I met, even by those who are themselves first-generation, albeit well-assimilated, immigrants.

Sometimes they spoke about this in response to my questions; equally often the subject of immigration arose spontaneously as people gave voice to their concerns. But because the new immigrants are dominantly people of color, the discourse was almost always cast in terms of race as well as immigration, with the talk slipping from immigration to race and back again as if these are not two separate phenomena. “If we keep letting all them foreigners in, pretty soon there’ll be more of them than us and then what will this country be like?” Tim’s wife, Mary Anne, frets. “I

mean, this is *our* country, but the way things are going, white people will be the minority in our own country. Now does that make any sense?”

Such fears are not new. Americans have always worried about the strangers who came to our shores, fearing that they would corrupt our society, dilute our culture, debase our values. So I remind Mary Anne, “When your ancestors came here, people also thought we were allowing too many foreigners into the country. Yet those earlier immigrants were successfully integrated into the American society. What’s different now?”

“Oh, it’s different, all right,” she replies without hesitation. “When my people came, the immigrants were all white. That makes a big difference.” . . .

Listening to Mary Anne’s words I was reminded again how little we Americans look to history for its lessons, how impoverished is our historical memory. For, in fact, being white didn’t make “a big difference” for many of those earlier immigrants. The dark-skinned Italians and the eastern European Jews who came in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries didn’t look very white to the fair-skinned Americans who were here then. Indeed, the same people we now call white—Italians, Jews, Irish—were seen as another race at that time. Not black or Asian, it’s true, but an alien other, a race apart, although one that didn’t have a clearly defined name. Moreover, the racist fears and fantasies of native-born Americans were far less contained then than they are now, largely because there were few social constraints on their expression.

When, during the nineteenth century, for example, some Italians were taken for blacks and lynched in the South, the incidents passed virtually unnoticed. And if Mary Anne and Tim Walsh, both of Irish ancestry, had come to this country during the great Irish immigration of that period, they would have found themselves defined as an inferior race and described with the same language that was used to characterize blacks: “low-browed and savage, grovelling and bestial, lazy and wild, simian and sensual.”<sup>1</sup> Not only during that period but for a long time afterward as well, the U.S. Census Bureau counted the Irish as a distinct and separate group, much as it does today with the category it labels “Hispanic.”

But there are two important differences between then and now, differences that can be summed up in a few words: the economy and race. Then, a growing industrial economy meant that there were plenty of jobs for both immigrant and native workers, something that can’t be said for the contracting economy in which we live today. True, the arrival of the immigrants, who were more readily exploitable than native workers, put Americans at a disadvantage and created discord between the two groups. Nevertheless, work was available for both.

Then, too, the immigrants—no matter how they were labeled, no matter how reviled they may have been—were ultimately assimilable, if for no other reason than that they were white. As they began to lose their alien ways, it became possible for native Americans to see in the white ethnics of yesteryear a reflection of themselves. Once this shift in perception occurred, it was possible for the nation to incorporate them, to take them in, chew them up, digest them, and spit them out as Americans—with subcultural variations not always to the liking of those who

hoped to control the manners and mores of the day, to be sure, but still recognizably white Americans.

Today's immigrants, however, are the racial other in a deep and profound way. . . . And integrating masses of people of color into a society where race consciousness lies at the very heart of our central nervous system raises a whole new set of anxieties and tensions. . . .

The increased visibility of other racial groups has focused whites more self-consciously than ever on their own racial identification. Until the new immigration shifted the complexion of the land so perceptibly, whites didn't think of themselves as white in the same way that Chinese know they're Chinese and African-Americans know they're black. Being white was simply a fact of life, one that didn't require any public statement, since it was the definitive social value against which all others were measured. "It's like everything's changed and I don't know what happened," complains Marianne Bardolino. "All of a sudden you have to be thinking all the time about these race things. I don't remember growing up thinking about being white like I think about it now. I'm not saying I didn't know there were coloreds and whites; it's just that I didn't go along thinking, *Gee, I'm a white person*. I never thought about it at all. But now with all the different colored people around, you have to think about it because they're thinking about it all the time."

"You say you feel pushed now to think about being white, but I'm not sure I understand why. What's changed?" I ask.

"I told you," she replies quickly, a small smile covering her impatience with my question. "It's because they think about what they are, and they want things their way, so now I have to think about what I am and what's good for me and my kids." She pauses briefly to let her thoughts catch up with her tongue, then continues. "I mean, if somebody's always yelling at you about being black or Asian or something, then it makes you think about being white. Like, they want the kids in school to learn about their culture, so then I think about being white and being Italian and say: What about my culture? If they're going to teach about theirs, what about mine?"

To which America's racial minorities respond with bewilderment. "I don't understand what white people want," says Gwen Tomalson. "They say if black kids are going to learn about black culture in school, then white people want their kids to learn about white culture. I don't get it. What do they think kids have been learning about all these years? It's all about white people and how they live and what they accomplished. When I was in school you wouldn't have thought black people existed for all our books ever said about us."

As for the charge that they're "thinking about race all the time," as Marianne Bardolino complains, people of color insist that they're forced into it by a white world that never lets them forget. "If you're Chinese, you can't forget it, even if you want to, because there's always something that reminds you," Carol Kwan's husband, Andrew, remarks tartly. "I mean, if Chinese kids get good grades and get into the university, everybody's worried and you read about it in the papers."

While there's little doubt that racial anxieties are at the center of white concerns, our historic nativism also plays a part in escalating white alarm. The new immigrants bring with them a language and an ethnic culture that's vividly expressed wherever they congregate. And it's this also, the constant reminder of an alien presence from which whites are excluded, that's so troublesome to them.

The nativist impulse isn't, of course, given to the white working class alone. But for those in the upper reaches of the class and status hierarchy—those whose children go to private schools, whose closest contact with public transportation is the taxi cab—the immigrant population supplies a source of cheap labor, whether as nannies for their children, maids in their households, or workers in their businesses. They may grouse and complain that "nobody speaks English anymore," just as working-class people do. But for the people who use immigrant labor, legal or illegal, there's a payoff for the inconvenience—a payoff that doesn't exist for the families in this study but that sometimes costs them dearly. For while it may be true that American workers aren't eager for many of the jobs immigrants are willing to take, it's also true that the presence of a large immigrant population—especially those who come from developing countries where living standards are far below our own—helps to make these jobs undesirable by keeping wages depressed well below what most American workers are willing to accept. . . .

It's not surprising, therefore, that working-class women and men speak so angrily about the recent influx of immigrants. They not only see their jobs and their way of life threatened, they feel bruised and assaulted by an environment that seems suddenly to have turned color and in which they feel like strangers in their own land. So they chafe and complain: "They come here to take advantage of us, but they don't really want to learn our ways," Beverly Sowell, a thirty-three-year-old white electronics assembler, grumbles irritably. "They live different than us; it's like another world how they live. And they're so clannish. They keep to themselves, and they don't even *try* to learn English. You go on the bus these days and you might as well be in a foreign country; everybody's talking some other language, you know, Chinese or Spanish or something. Lots of them have been here a long time, too, but they don't care; they just want to take what they can get."

But their complaints reveal an interesting paradox, an illuminating glimpse into the contradictions that beset native-born Americans in their relations with those who seek refuge here. On the one hand, they scorn the immigrants; on the other, they protest because they "keep to themselves." It's the same contradiction that dominates black-white relations. Whites refuse to integrate blacks but are outraged when they stop knocking at the door, when they move to sustain the separation on their own terms—in black theme houses on campuses, for example, or in the newly developing black middle-class suburbs.

I wondered, as I listened to Beverly Sowell and others like her, why the same people who find the lifeways and languages of our foreign-born population offensive also care whether they "keep to themselves."

"Because like I said, they just shouldn't, that's all," Beverly says stubbornly. "If they're going to come here, they should be willing to learn our ways—you know

what I mean, be real Americans. That's what my grandparents did, and that's what they should do."

"But your grandparents probably lived in an immigrant neighborhood when they first came here, too," I remind her.

"It was different," she insists. "I don't know why; it was. They wanted to be Americans; these here people now, I don't think they do. They just want to take advantage of this country. . . ."

"Everything's changed, and it doesn't make sense. Maybe you get it, but I don't. We can't take care of our own people and we keep bringing more and more foreigners in. Look at all the homeless. Why do we need more people here when our own people haven't got a place to sleep?"

"Why do we need more people here?"—a question Americans have asked for two centuries now. Historically, efforts to curb immigration have come during economic downturns, which suggests that when times are good, when American workers feel confident about their future, they're likely to be more generous in sharing their good fortune with foreigners. But when the economy falters, as it did in the 1990s and workers worry about having to compete for jobs with people whose standard of living is well below their own, resistance to immigration rises. "Don't get me wrong; I've got nothing against these people," Tim Walsh demurs. "But they don't talk English, and they're used to a lot less, so they can work for less money than guys like me can. I see it all the time; they get hired and some white guy gets left out."

It's this confluence of forces—the racial and cultural diversity of our new immigrant population; the claims on the resources of the nation now being made by those minorities who, for generations, have called America their home; the failure of some of our basic institutions to serve the needs of our people; the contracting economy, which threatens the mobility aspirations of working-class families—all these have come together to leave white workers feeling as if everyone else is getting a piece of the action while they get nothing. "I feel like white people are left out in the cold," protests Diane Johnson, a twenty-eight-year-old white single mother who believes she lost a job as a bus driver to a black woman. "First it's the blacks; now it's all those other colored people, and it's like everything always goes their way. It seems like a white person doesn't have a chance anymore. It's like the squeaky wheel gets the grease, and they've been squeaking and we haven't," she concludes angrily.

Until recently, whites didn't need to think about having to "squeak"—at least not specifically as whites. They have, of course, organized and squeaked at various times in the past—sometimes as ethnic groups, sometimes as workers. But not as whites. As whites they have been the dominant group, the favored ones, the ones who could count on getting the job when people of color could not. Now suddenly there are others—not just individual others but identifiable groups, people who share a history, a language, a culture, even a color—who lay claim to some of the rights and privileges that formerly had been labeled "for whites only." And whites react as if they've been betrayed, as if a sacred promise has been broken. They're white, aren't they? They're *real* Americans, aren't they? This is their country, isn't it?

The answers to these questions used to be relatively unambiguous. But not anymore. Being white no longer automatically assures dominance in the politics of a multiracial society. Ethnic group politics, however, has a long and fruitful history. As whites sought a social and political base on which to stand, therefore, it was natural and logical to reach back to their ethnic past. Then they, too, could be "something"; they also would belong to a group; they would have a name, a history, a culture, and a voice. "Why is it only the blacks or Mexicans or Jews that are 'something'?" asks Tim Walsh. "I'm Irish, isn't that something, too? Why doesn't that count?"

In reclaiming their ethnic roots, whites can recount with pride the tribulations and transcendence of their ancestors and insist that others take their place in the line from which they have only recently come. "My people had a rough time, too. But nobody gave us anything, so why do we owe them something? Let them pull their share like the rest of us had to do," says Al Riccardi, a twenty-nine-year-old white taxi driver.

From there it's only a short step to the conviction that those who don't progress up that line are hampered by nothing more than their own inadequacies or, worse yet, by their unwillingness to take advantage of the opportunities offered them. "Those people, they're hollering all the time about discrimination," Al continues, without defining who "those people" are. "Maybe once a long time ago that was true, but not now. The problem is that a lot of those people are lazy. There's plenty of opportunities, but you've got to be willing to work hard."

He stops a moment, as if listening to his own words, then continues, "Yeah, yeah, I know there's a recession on and lots of people don't have jobs. But it's different with some of those people. They don't really want to work, because if they did, there wouldn't be so many of them selling drugs and getting in all kinds of trouble."

"You keep talking about 'those people' without saying who you mean," I remark.

"Aw c'mon, you know who I'm talking about," he says, his body shifting uneasily in his chair. "It's mostly the black people, but the Spanish ones, too."

In reality, however, it's a no-win situation for America's people of color, whether immigrant or native born. For the industriousness of the Asians comes in for nearly as much criticism as the alleged laziness of other groups. When blacks don't make it, it's because, whites like Al Riccardi insist, their culture doesn't teach respect for family; because they're hedonistic, lazy, stupid, and/or criminally inclined. But when Asians demonstrate their ability to overcome the obstacles of an alien language and culture, when the Asian family seems to be the repository of our most highly regarded traditional values, white hostility doesn't disappear. It just changes its form. Then the accomplishments of Asians, the speed with which they move up the economic ladder, aren't credited to their superior culture, diligence, or intelligence—even when these are granted—but to the fact that they're "single minded," "untrustworthy," "clannish drones," "narrow people" who raise children who are insufficiently "well rounded."<sup>2</sup> . . .

Not surprisingly, as competition increases, the various minority groups often are at war among themselves as they press their own particular claims, fight over

turf, and compete for an ever-shrinking piece of the pie. In several African-American communities, where Korean shopkeepers have taken the place once held by Jews, the confrontations have been both wrenching and tragic. A Korean grocer in Los Angeles shoots and kills a fifteen-year-old black girl for allegedly trying to steal some trivial item from the store.<sup>3</sup> From New York City to Berkeley, California, African-Americans boycott Korean shop owners who, they charge, invade their neighborhoods, take their money, and treat them disrespectfully.<sup>4</sup> But painful as these incidents are for those involved, they are only symptoms of a deeper malaise in both communities—the contempt and distrust in which the Koreans hold their African-American neighbors, and the rage of blacks as they watch these new immigrants surpass them.

Latino-black conflict also makes headlines when, in the aftermath of the riots in South Central Los Angeles, the two groups fight over who will get the lion's share of the jobs to rebuild the neighborhood. Blacks, insisting that they're being discriminated against, shut down building projects that don't include them in satisfactory numbers. And indeed, many of the jobs that formerly went to African-Americans are now being taken by Latino workers. In an article entitled "Black vs. Brown," Jack Miles, an editorial writer for the *Los Angeles Times*, reports that "janitorial firms serving downtown Los Angeles have almost entirely replaced their unionized black work force with non-unionized immigrants."<sup>5</sup> . . .

But the disagreements among America's racial minorities are of little interest or concern to most white working-class families. Instead of conflicting groups, they see one large mass of people of color, all of them making claims that endanger their own precarious place in the world. It's this perception that has led some white ethnics to believe that reclaiming their ethnicity alone is not enough, that so long as they remain in their separate and distinct groups, their power will be limited. United, however, they can become a formidable countervailing force, one that can stand fast against the threat posed by minority demands. But to come together solely as whites would diminish their impact and leave them open to the charge that their real purpose is simply to retain the privileges of whiteness. A dilemma that has been resolved, at least for some, by the birth of a new entity in the history of American ethnic groups—the "European-Americans."<sup>6</sup> . . .

At the University of California at Berkeley, for example, white students and their faculty supporters insisted that the recently adopted multicultural curriculum include a unit of study of European-Americans. At Queens College in New York City, where white ethnic groups retain a more distinct presence, Italian-American students launched a successful suit to win recognition as a disadvantaged minority and gain the entitlements accompanying that status, including special units of Italian-American studies.

White high school students, too, talk of feeling isolated and, being less sophisticated and wary than their older sisters and brothers, complain quite openly that there's no acceptable and legitimate way for them to acknowledge a white identity. "There's all these things for all the different ethnicities, you know, like clubs for black kids and Hispanic kids, but there's nothing for me and my friends to join,"

Lisa Marshall, a sixteen-year-old white high school student, explains with exasperation. "They won't let us have a white club because that's supposed to be racist. So we figured we'd just have to call it something else, you know, some ethnic thing, like Euro-Americans. Why not? They have African-American clubs."

Ethnicity, then, often becomes a cover for "white," not necessarily because these students are racist but because racial identity is now such a prominent feature of the discourse in our social world. In a society where racial consciousness is so high, how else can whites define themselves in ways that connect them to a community and, at the same time, allow them to deny their racial antagonisms?

Ethnicity and race—separate phenomena that are now inextricably entwined. Incorporating newcomers has never been easy, as our history of controversy and violence over immigration tells us.<sup>7</sup> But for the first time, the new immigrants are also people of color, which means that they tap both the nativist and racist impulses that are so deeply a part of American life. As in the past, however, the fear of foreigners, the revulsion against their strange customs and seemingly unruly ways, is only part of the reason for the anti-immigrant attitudes that are increasingly being expressed today. For whatever xenophobic suspicions may arise in modern America, economic issues play a critical role in stirring them up.

## NOTES

1. David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness* (New York: Verso, 1991), p. 133.
2. These were, and often still are, the commonly held stereotypes about Jews. Indeed, the Asian immigrants are often referred to as "the new Jews."
3. Soon Ja Du, the Korean grocer who killed fifteen-year-old Latasha Harlins, was found guilty of voluntary manslaughter, for which she was sentenced to four hundred hours of community service, a \$500 fine, reimbursement of funeral costs to the Harlins family, and five years' probation.
4. The incident in Berkeley didn't happen in the black ghetto, as most of the others did. There, the Korean grocery store is near the University of California campus, and the woman involved in the incident is an African-American university student who was maced by the grocer after an argument over a penny.
5. Jack Miles, "Blacks vs. Browns," *Atlantic Monthly* (October 1992), pp. 41–68.
6. For an interesting analysis of what he calls "the transformation of ethnicity," see Richard D. Alba, *Ethnic Identity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).
7. In the past, many of those who agitated for a halt to immigration were immigrants or native-born children of immigrants. The same often is true today. As anti-immigrant sentiment grows, at least some of those joining the fray are relatively recent arrivals. One man in this study, for example—a fifty-two-year-old immigrant from Hungary—is one of the leaders of an anti-immigration group in the city where he lives.

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## PERSONAL VOICES: FACING UP TO RACE

Carrie Ching

Abercrombie and Fitch is back on the hotseat—this time for racial discrimination in hiring practices. Last year the company was forced to pull T-shirts sporting slant-eyed Chinese laundrymen and the slogan “Two Wongs can make it white” when Asian-Americans protested. This time the stakes are higher. Nine Latino and Asian plaintiffs are suing Abercrombie for only hiring white people for sales floor jobs and pushing black, Latino and Asian applicants into stockroom jobs to project what the clothing company calls the “classic American look.”

Here we go again. The media and American public are shaking their heads at the company, but this is hardly a new phenomenon. The case is simply another manifestation of the prevalent belief that “American” still means white. But instead of pointing fingers at flagrant offenders like Abercrombie, we should instead look in the mirror to examine the ways that we all participate on a daily basis in this racist hierarchy that places whites in the center and pushes those whose backgrounds are more “ethnic” to the margins.

Think about it. When you go to an expensive restaurant, the managers and servers are almost always white, while the busboys and kitchen help are almost always people of color. At most offices the managers are usually white, while people of color appear only among the interns and junior staff. Often when you drive by the carwash you’ll see white and light-skinned people fanning themselves in plastic chairs while brown-skinned people are scrubbing tires and windshields. Diversity is great, but only when it happens at the lower levels of an organization so as not to challenge the skewed balance of power. The signs are everywhere: Race still plays a major if unspoken role in the way our society is organized.

Yet there are many people—mostly white—who refuse to believe this is true. Two students in my evening class told me recently that they didn’t believe race was an issue anymore in America, or at least, not in the San Francisco Bay Area. The two are both white, liberal, educated, upper middle-class professionals in their 50s,

and both live in exclusive neighborhoods in the Bay Area. Their argument: Since race relations are so much better today than they were thirty years ago, what are all these angry people of color complaining about? Besides, one of them argued, isn’t inequality in America based much more on class than race?

It’s true that race relations must be better than they were thirty years ago—as a biracial person I probably wouldn’t even be alive if they weren’t. But someone who thinks that race is a dead issue must have their head buried pretty deep in the sand, or more appropriately, pretty deep in a wealthy white neighborhood.

I asked the students why a person whose great-great-grandfather emigrated from China 150 years ago is still called an “Asian-American,” while a person whose father emigrated from Germany fifty years ago becomes just a plain old “American” in one generation—not a “German-American” or a “European-American.” We’re all pretty recent transplants here (unless you’re indigenous), so why is it that only people of color are forced to face up to their histories of migration? Why is it that people of color are still treated like visitors in their own home? Because being American is still very much about being white.

I’m so tired of hearing these kinds of things from white people. It’s like a skinny person saying that fat people aren’t discriminated against, or a man claiming that there’s no such thing as gender inequality. Is it so difficult to understand? One of the perks of being in a privileged position is that you don’t have to think about it.

Racism is so ingrained in our dominant culture that we don’t even recognize it for what it is anymore. And we’re so squeamish about talking about race that we avoid it at all costs. So we tell ourselves that the profiling of Arabs and other brown-skinned people as potential terrorists is about weeding out religious fanatics, not about race. And although the low-income housing projects in town are filled almost entirely with black men, women and children who ride the bus, while the neighborhoods of trendy boutiques and overpriced cafes are filled with mostly white professionals who drive brand new SUVs, it has nothing to do with race and historic oppression; it’s all about class, work ethic, and levels of education, right?

One of the most common arguments I hear against race-based affirmative action is this whole theory that the race problem has been solved and that inequality today falls much more along the lines of class.

I’m not trying to downplay the role of economic class in creating divisions in our society, but I don’t think class and race can be compared side-by-side as equally weighted factors. When we compare the struggles of a working-class white person to a middle-class or affluent black, Asian or Latino person, we forget the fundamental difference between class and race: class is mutable, race is not. So if a working-class white man puts on the right clothes, has the right connections, and gets the right education, he can transcend his class status and slip into a “white-collar” world because his skin color allows him to be somewhat “invisible.” But no matter how much money or education an affluent black, Asian, or Latino man or woman acquires, in today’s America, they will still be treated like a second-class citizen or an “other” in most elite social and professional circles. Many white

parents would be less upset if their kid brought home a girlfriend or boyfriend from a different tax bracket than someone who is Korean, black, Arab or Mexican. Let's not forget that up until 1967 it was still illegal in sixteen states for people from different racial backgrounds to marry.

We make these arguments about class so that we won't have to face up to two of the most painful—yet obvious—truths about the society we live in: (1) Our dominant culture is built upon a racist ideology that sustains and promotes a race-based power hierarchy, and (2) by not acknowledging the hierarchy that we all participate in, we help reinforce that racist hegemony every day. What a tangled web of lies we weave.

Yet just acknowledging and wanting to change a culture of racism is only half the battle. Taking responsibility for how it plays out in our private lives is somewhat more challenging. This entails taking an honest look at our friendships and romantic relationships and examining how larger forces shape our desires and social interactions. Because even though most of us refuse to admit it, attraction isn't colorblind.

I agree with critics who say that just having "friends" of a different color doesn't necessarily make you a more open-minded person. I know plenty of people who pull the "I have a black/Chinese/Cherokee friend" card when the cocktail party discussion turns to race, yet their circle of close friends and their history of dating reveals they've never ventured outside of their own kind in their most intimate relationships (see [blackpeopleloveus.com](http://blackpeopleloveus.com) for more on this topic). Tokenism is never a pretty sight, particularly when you're the token. On the other hand, you have to start somewhere, and taking the risk of getting to know someone of a different race or ethnicity is at least a step in the right direction.

What I bump up against time and time again is this sort of white liberal hypocrisy, where people stick to their own in their private lives, yet claim they feel solidarity with groups of indigenous people halfway across the globe with whom they will never have a meaningful conversation. This was an ongoing theme at my predominantly white and very liberal university, where everyone was in solidarity with the Zapatistas in Chiapas and the factory workers in China and the starving children in Africa. But when discussions about the sorry state of diversity on our own campus or the racist undercurrents (including an active KKK that regularly distributed leaflets) of the town itself came up, people could only shift uncomfortably in their seats. It's too easy to claim solidarity with people of different backgrounds from afar—you don't have to take chances and endure the discomfort of having your own perspective and unconscious assumptions about race challenged. Examining and breaking down the racial boundaries in our personal lives is just as important as addressing injustices on a global scale.

Now that I've graduated and moved to San Francisco, I've found the same willful blindness in the workplace—particularly within the news media. We pay a lot of lip-service to fighting racial discrimination and the need for diversity, yet there are few to no people of color in high-level positions on the masthead.

We want so badly to believe that institutional racism is something that is going on "out there" in the world, when in fact it has tangled roots in our private lives. Whether we want to acknowledge it or not we all have a choice to be either accomplices or everyday revolutionaries. It's time to face the fact that the small, unconscious choices we make in our private lives—like who we feel safe sitting next to on the bus, who we choose to be our colleagues at work, and yes, even who we choose as our intimate friends and lovers—become the blueprints for the shape and color of our society as a whole.