



# Building Blocks

## MY JOURNEY TOWARD WHITE RACIAL AWARENESS

by Patti DeRosa  
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When the call came, it was hard for me to contain my excitement. A student from my alma mater had heard about my anti-racism work and called to invite me to be part of the "Forming Cross-Cultural Alliances" weekend at the State University of New York at Oneonta, where I had graduated from in 1979.<sup>1</sup> This young Latina woman was instrumental in organizing a weekend of events, with the goal of opening a dialogue about racism on campus in this small, mostly White town in upstate New York where tensions had been building since the infamous "Blacklist Incident" of 1992.<sup>2</sup> I eagerly accepted the invitation and anxiously looked forward to the opportunity to return to the undergraduate school that had been the site of some of my most profound learning about racism.

Immediately thereafter the panic set in. I wondered how contemporary college students would relate to me, a graduate of 1979. Decades had passed since I was a student, and I wondered if they would see me as ancient and hopelessly out-of-date. A great deal has changed since my college days, yet I felt that there were elements of my own journey of White racial awareness that could be relevant and useful "building blocks" for the students' own understanding of racism.

Although racism has an alarming capacity to mutate to new forms and new circumstances, it tends to retain its core elements, basically remaining the same poison, but packaged in new bottles.<sup>3</sup> Students today may have more inter-racial contact than I did, they may have more friends from different racial backgrounds, see more people of color on TV, listen to more music from a variety of cultural styles, and see more people of color in positions of power and influence. Yet, most of that is illusion, a smoke-screen that hides the continuing realities of racism in America. Angela Davis has observed that "The vast changes mask the reality of the continuity of racism... The fact that we can witness the end of racism in mass popular culture does not alter the reality of racism in the real world... We tend to recognize racism only when it rears its head in old forms... Racism still wears the old garb but has learned to clothe itself in more contemporary apparel..."<sup>4</sup>

The superficial multiculturalism of popular culture has a direct relationship to the resistance to anti-racism activism, diversity, affirmative action, and multicultural education that we see in the nation today. Swayed by the current hype, many White people believe not only that the fight against racism has been won, but that it is White people who are now at a racial disadvantage. For example, a recent survey found that 58% of Whites think that most Black people have better jobs than most White people. 56% think that Black people are better off in education and 41% think that Black people make more money than White people. The reality is that only 17% of Black women are officials, managers, professionals, and technicians, compared with 32% of White women, Black college grads make only 76% of the money of White male college grads, and the average Black family makes only 59% of the money the average White family makes.<sup>5</sup>

The need for accurate information about racism is urgent and immediate, and the task is huge. White people often have very strong feelings about issues of race. At the same time, they have very little accurate information that supports those feelings, yet they think of themselves as well-informed. With little accurate knowledge of the history of oppression in the United States, no concept of institutional racism, minimal contact with the realities faced by most people of color, and no insight into White racial advantage, it is understandably difficult for many White people to make sense of the need for the continued struggle for racial justice. The recent trend of manipulating the language of the civil rights struggle in order to dismantle and undermine racial justice, such as the attacks on Affirmative Action, create even greater confusion.<sup>6</sup>

When I framed it this way, it got me thinking. What was it that made me begin to see the world differently? What made me *want* to? What propelled me to question most everything about the racial mythology I had been taught? Why did I listen? What made the difference? And could sharing my experiences perhaps help others who in many ways were very much similar to me?

### *Growing Up*

The best place for me to start was to think about how racism affected me personally and about how I've come to understand it in my life. I am White, Italian American woman, in my forties, who was raised Catholic,

middle-class, and heterosexual. I grew up in New York and Florida, and live in Randolph, Massachusetts, a suburb south of Boston. I was born in 1957, which means that my formative years were the 1960's and 1970's. These were times filled with enormous pressures for social change — the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, "Women's Liberation," the sit-ins, the demonstrations, the "riots." Social change was everywhere and while some may have remained untouched, my worldview was profoundly changed by it all. Yet I was still in elementary school when the mass marches of the Civil Rights Movement occurred. I was too young to participate in many ways, but not too young to be deeply and permanently affected. I'm also aware that most of my recollections and early learnings are based on racism as it relates to African Americans and Whites. In the 1960's and 1970's, the experiences of Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans were not yet a part of my consciousness in any substantial way. This was the background from which I began to think about what racism means to me as a White person in a racist society.

I grew up in a fairly "typical" middle class family on Long Island, New York for the first fourteen years of my life, with my mother, father, and older brother. That's not totally accurate—I was actually born in Brooklyn, Bensonhurst to be exact, and my parents were part of the exodus of White folks who were new entrants to the middle class. We moved to the suburbs in the 1950's chasing the "American Dream." When I shared an early draft of this article with my mother, she was able to fill in a significant piece of family history. She told me that she and my father did not initially want to move to Long Island. They first looked in Bensonhurst (a White, Italian neighborhood) but quickly discovered that the homes there were more expensive than they could afford. It was only then that they decided to explore Long Island, which was aggressively marketing to young White couples to fuel the housing boom of the 1950's (many developments included restrictive covenants that excluded Blacks and Jews). Prior to purchasing my childhood home, she and my father had seen a house in another Long Island town that she loved. Seeing her enthusiasm, the real estate agent spoke with my father privately and warned, "Are you aware that there are Blacks living on either side of that house? I advise you to reconsider, as I see that your wife is really set on this house." When my father shared this conversation with my mother, she remembers her response as, "So what?" My father then got quiet and said, "Maybe we should keep on looking." She does not recall fighting him on the issue, and that was the end of the discussion. They eventually purchased a house in Franklin Square, where I grew up.

It is significant that I almost forgot to include this transition from Brooklyn to Long Island, for in many ways that simple act was the beginning of my "White educa-

tion." One of the ways that White racism works is by inducing a kind of historical amnesia, conveniently forgetting the ways we get access to privilege and benefits, and denying what our motivations were to begin with.

I rarely heard overtly racist statements in my home, although I have no doubt that I received a million implicit messages. When I heard the overt variety, they came during occasional visits of particular relatives or friends of the family, or from my father who would from time to time throw out a flippant comment to provoke me to respond with righteous outrage, which I did with predictable consistency. His prejudices were real, and while I don't want to romanticize his memory (he died when I was 18 years old), he never tried to impose them on me. I think he admired my determination to fight him on these points. Without his ever realizing, or even intending, to do so, I think these interchanges helped me to "toughen up," develop verbal agility, and the ability to think quickly on my feet to respond to racism.

I learned racism in much more subtle, hidden, and indirect ways. Lillian Smith highlights this in her classic book, *Killers of the Dream*, when she says, "We were given no formal instruction in these difficult matters, but we learned our lessons well... This process of learning was different for each child as were his parents' vocabulary and emotional needs. We cannot wisely forget this. And we learned more from acts than words, more from a raised eyebrow, a joke, a shocked voice, a withdrawing movement of the body, a long silence, than from long sentences... These ceremonials of White supremacy, performed from babyhood, slip from conscious mind down deep into muscles and glands and become difficult to tear out."<sup>7</sup>

My grandparents were Italian immigrants, and my maternal grandmother was a particularly strong force in forming what I believe later developed into my anti-racism. She shared stories about the difficulties she faced as an Italian and as a woman, yet she never seemed defeated or bitter. She lived and espoused a value system that was open and loving. She was tireless, courageous, and defiant, and I worshipped her (She died in 1988, one month short of her one hundredth birthday).

My mother was the activist of the family, always involved in community events, heading up the local civic association, participating in the Parent Teacher Association at school, or being a Cub Scout mother for my older brother's troop. She, like my grandmother, was tireless, courageous, and defiant. She did her best to teach me the values from which to challenge prejudice and racism. She had no real lived experience with people of color, but she fought small battles on private fronts, like allowing me to go to a certain movie theater that most of the other kid's mother's wouldn't let them attend because "there were too many blacks there." It sounds minor, but this simple act caused quite a ruckus among the mothers at the time. My mother helped me to be

clear about my values, and her modeling showed me how to behave consistently with those beliefs.

It seemed to me that the adults around me never gave me accurate information about race and racism although I now understand that they did the best that they could given the misinformation they too had received. Questions about these topics seemed to generate nervousness and tension, similar to the way many adults act when children ask about sex — full of caution and anxiety. Other times, the answers were simplistic: They said things like “Everyone is the same” and “All people are equal.” These kinds of answers did not explain the social changes and conflicts that I saw happening all around me, and I started to feel that if the grown folks weren’t telling me something, then it must be very important indeed. I made it my business to find out what it was — but that comes a bit later.

My Long Island neighborhood was multicultural, but not multi-racial. There were a variety of White European ethnics in my community, but no people of color. Italians and Jews were the two largest groups, and I thought that was true for most other places as well. I now realize that this experience was regionally limited and not reflective of the reality of the rest of the country. There were few White Anglo Saxon Protestants in my environment, and I thought of them as a small minority group. I most certainly didn’t think of them as a powerful majority holding most of the leadership positions in U.S. society. Although I consciously remember conversations with an Italian girlfriend in which we said we thought the Anglo kids were kind of “boring,” I also recall how we were already becoming aware of the benefits and privileges accrued to this group.

As early as elementary school, my dark haired girlfriends and I discussed how the boys seemed to think any girl with blonde hair was pretty, just because she was blonde. Like Whoopi Goldberg in one of her famous skits, I too used to play “make-believe” by putting a long white slip on my head pretending to have long silky blonde hair rather than the coarse, curly dark hair that I did have. The pressures for assimilation were clearly not the same for me and young African American girls. Yet at the same time, there are enough similarities for Goldberg’s portrayal to resonate with me. The similarities and differences of these two experiences hold much potential for exploration between African American and Italian American women. At six years old, I remember wanting to change my name to “Alice,” like “Alice in Wonderland,” so I could be more like that idealized image of Nordic beauty — blonde, blue-eyed, small nosed. I was already beginning to internalize standards of White supremacist beauty that had little room for even my Italian American self.

I remember being aware of race from a very young age. My earliest recollection is from age 4 or 5, of going

shopping with my mother to a department store in Hempstead, the county seat and a town with a large Black population. I was carrying my favorite Thumbalina doll, when a little Black girl about the same age as myself approached me and pulled on my doll’s arm. I recoiled and hid behind my mother. I’m not sure if I was afraid because she was Black, because she was some strange kid grabbing my doll, or both. What I do remember is my mother’s response. She said calmly, gently, and immediately, “Don’t worry, Patti. The little girl just wants to play with you.” That was all the encouragement I needed, and the little girl and I went off to play, hiding under the clothes racks until our mothers had to pull us away from each other. My mother’s response was echoed years later when I first dated a Black man. All she said was, “I’m not sure how I feel about this, but I guess I’m going to find out if I really believe everything I tried to teach you.” Her modeling of owning her feelings and holding herself accountable for her own racism has been an inspiration to me.

When I was around eleven years old, a business colleague of my father’s was invited to our home for dinner. Mr. Fox was from the South, and my father warned us that he might say some things that were “upsetting.” I’m sure he never mentioned the word “racist,” but like all good White folks, he was talking in racial code and we knew how to decipher it. I’ll never forget that night at dinner when Mr. Fox said with a big smile on his face, “There’s nothing cuter than a little pickaninny. The only problem is that they grow up to be Nigras!” Then he laughed out loud. My face flushed, and I opened my mouth to speak, but my mother firmly squeezed my hand under the table and gave me a pained but instructional look to keep quiet. I hated that man at that moment, and I was disappointed in my parents. Why did they let him come here? Why didn’t they stop him? Why did I have to be quiet? Was a business deal that important? I am reminded of another passage from *Killers of the Dream* in which Smith describes her reaction as child witnessing her parents’ collusion with racism:

“I knew my father and mother whom I passionately admired had betrayed something which they held dear. And they could not help doing it. And I was ashamed by their failure and frightened, for I felt they were no longer as powerful as I had thought. There was something Out There that was stronger than they and I could not bear to believe it.”<sup>8</sup> Facing the contradictions between values and behavior was to become a driving force for me.

My internal struggles with prejudice and racism spilled over onto my elementary school playground. A little boy insisted on telling me that his father told him about “all those Black people in the city” and how terrible they were. I intuitively fought back, saying that was unfair and wrong. He then challenged me by saying, “What makes you think you’re right? How do you know? Do you know any Black people?” I had to admit that I did not

indeed have some concerns, I have to wonder about their silence and our inability to communicate about it. I remember approaching the situation as an adventure and being excited about meeting so many new and different kids. I was an out-going adolescent, extremely verbal, mature for my age both physically and socially, and I made friends easily. Many of my new White friends were predictably other New Yorkers, many from New York City and Brooklyn. They had had a lot of inter-racial contact, and much of it had not been positive. They were somewhat jaded, cynical, and fearful, and they warned me not to walk down the school hallways where Black students congregated. I thought they were paranoid.

My racial naiveté may have worked to my advantage in my new environment, as racial isolation can work in strange ways. For better or worse, I had very limited contact with people of color, and I was less fearful than curious about people different from myself. I just ventured out boldly into the unknown. I quickly found out that I was breaking some unwritten rules that I did not understand, from both Blacks and Whites. White folks told me to “be careful” (of what they never said directly) and scolded me for being “too friendly” with “them.” Black folks introduced me to their inner circle by saying I was “different” from the other White kids. Everyone was so new to me that I found it hard to keep names and faces straight. When I continually confused the names and faces of White kids who in reality looked nothing alike at all, I remember consciously realizing that the old racist saying “they all look alike” was actually a statement about social distance, unfamiliarity, and fear of the unknown.

Florida was no racial utopia by any means. Friendship groups were by and large rigidly segregated, as were neighborhoods and the job market. I observed that the White school administrators clearly came down harder on Black students for minor infractions, and one of the dean’s actively lived up to her name — “Dixie.” I experienced inter-racial friendship for the first time, yet those friendships rarely crossed the line outside of school. In this environment, I experienced more challenges to racism than I ever had before through the Black adults and young people I built relationships with, but I was also privy to more blatant racism than I had ever witnessed before either, such as the White man in my neighborhood who proudly told my mother and I that he trained his dogs to attack Black people. As always, I could count on mom to set him straight. She told him he was disgusting and promptly changed the subject.

It was in this environment that I began to see the rituals of racial oppression first hand. In biology class, a young Black girl offered me some of her “Screaming Yellow Zonkers,” a popcorn-like snack food, but before I could respond she lowered her eyes and said softly, “Oh! I’m sorry...you might not want to eat from my box....” My favorite teacher was an African American man who was

the first Black adult role model in my life. He gave me a ride home from school one day, only to stop his car a block from my house to ask if it was alright to drive me to my door, or if I preferred that he drop me off a block away. My racial consciousness at the time was extremely limited, yet intuitively I knew that there was something very wrong in these interactions. I ate the popcorn, and asked my teacher to drop me off at my home, to demonstrate my alliance, as well as to reaffirm my own self-image as “non-racist.” Other experiences, however, severely tested that image of myself.

I learned about Black pride and my own racism from a Black male friend, who was the first person who befriended me on my very first day in my new school. I once used the term “boy” in referring to him in a conversation — not in the racist usage, but descriptively, as we were, after all, only fifteen years old. He cut me off mid-sentence, and in a tone of voice that demanded attention and respect said, “I’m not a boy, I’m a man.” An awkward silence followed, and I learned an important lesson about the assertion of racial dignity. This incident taught me the power of how words can wound, and that we bear the weight of their history and legacy, regardless of our intent. My relationship with this young man was the first time I remember having to seriously confront the hypocrisy of my own racism. Although we were crazy about each other and secretly admitted our feelings in private, it was I, not he, who did not yet have the courage to publicly acknowledge them.

This is another example of how the recurring theme of anger, pain, and shame at collusion with racism — my own, as well as other White people’s — pushed me forward in my own growth. My professed values and my actual behaviors were out of sync, and seeing myself betray my own ideals, and betray my friend, was unbearable.

### *“Anywhere South of the Canadian Border...”*

Due to my parents’ separation, my stay in Florida was a brief two and a half years, but it was transformational in many ways. In 1973, my mother and I returned to the same community in New York that we had left. I returned to the same school and the same friends, but I was not the same person. I had a new set of eyes and ears and everything seemed different. When I left New York in 1971, my primary interests were cheerleading and football games. When I returned, I was focused on playing guitar, writing songs, and working for social justice. My former social studies teacher even approached me one day and asked me if I was on drugs because I didn’t seem interested in the same old things anymore. I remember thinking, “He’s got to be kidding! There’s racism and poverty and war, and he’s worried about the football team?”

Here I was back in “liberal” New York where I heard

of hateful ideas about people who may be different from me to include the concept of White privilege and institutional power. When I made this shift, I began to see how oppression is not solely personal attitudes and behaviors, but also an institutionalized system of privilege, advantage, and power that was operating all around me and structured my life in innumerable ways. Examining the systemic nature of institutional racism helped me move past my feelings of guilt and shame, because I saw that the system operated even as I personally rejected that system and struggled against it. In other words, even as I commit my life to fighting racism, I still benefit every day as a White person from a system of White privilege that was established for White people, even though my ancestors were not even in the country when those systems were set up.

For example, in 1979, a Black family tried to purchase a home in my New York neighborhood. My neighbors, who prior to this had had their share of ethnic conflicts, immediately bonded together as “White folks.” They formed a “civic association” that tried to block the sale by colluding with a local real estate agency. My mother and I attended one of the association meetings to challenge the racism, and were both physically evicted. I went public about what was occurring by writing a letter that was published in *Newsday*, the primary newspaper on Long Island, and immediately we began to be harassed and threatened by our White neighbors. During this period, I was driving home alone late one night, when I noticed I was being followed by another car. I zigzagged erratically to try to lose him, but the driver continued to follow me. Frightened, I drove to the local police station and asked them to follow me home. They easily obliged and gave me an escort to my door. I have since realized that even though I was being harassed because of my anti-racism activities, it was my White privilege that allowed me to feel safe enough to ask the police for protection. A person of color in a similar situation might be less likely to see that as a viable option.

Another example occurred when my husband Arnold and I took a trip to London several years ago. I had filled out my declaration card on the plane so I went through the line first, while Arnold stayed behind to complete his form. The immigration agent was friendly and courteous, and asked me if I was there for business or pleasure (my answer: both), and how long I would be in England (two weeks). He said “Thank you” and I was on my way. I stood on the other side of the counter and waited for Arnold to come through the line. The agent was equally friendly and courteous, but a strange thing happened. In addition to the questions he had asked me, he asked Arnold how long he was staying more than once, and asked him to produce his return ticket. Arnold complied, the agent said a cheery “Thank you,” and that was it. I asked Arnold if he had noticed anything unusual in

the interaction. He said no, and then I proceeded to tell him what I had witnessed. What explained the different treatment? I am White and American, and Arnold is Black and an Antiguan citizen. The British government was closely monitoring all Afro-Caribbean people entering the country and carefully checking to make sure that all who entered had tickets to leave. White privilege and institutional racism had operated right in front of us, with a polite and non-intrusive face. It was only in contrasting our experiences that we were even able to figure out what had happened.

When we lose sight of the concept of privilege, those of us who are White can easily become defensive when we are told that we are racist. When we define racism only in individual terms, it becomes easy to distance ourselves from racism by saying, “Well, I don’t believe those hateful things, so I’m not racist.” In doing so, we neglect to see the extent of the ways privilege and advantage influence our experiences on a daily basis, just by virtue of our whiteness (or maleness, or heterosexuality). This happens with or without our cooperation. Even our resistance to racism bears witness to its existence and power in our lives.

### *Lesson # 2: Liberal Racism*

When I was a student at Oneonta, I was part of a group that was called the Concert Committee. We planned musical events and selected the artists that would perform at the college. As best as I remember it, the Concert Committee was a multi-racial group—which probably means there were a few, though not many, people of color in the group. At one meeting, an intense conflict arose about the selection of performers. The Black students stated that there were very few Black acts booked on campus, that the few that were booked were cross-over artists defined by White musical tastes, and that they, the Black students, were always out-voted anyway.

An argument ensued, with the White students going on about how the Concert Committee was for the whole campus, and how we had to do what was in the best interests of the majority. One particularly vocal White male student was a senior, and Chair of the Committee, and often ran meetings in a very controlling way. He argued and argued with several Black students. Finally, I decided to speak up and intervene. I remember talking about how we had to remain calm, and listen to all sides, and that the Black students had a point, but after all, weren’t we trying to book Stevie Wonder? Would enough students, meaning White students of course, show up to see Confunktion or Tavares? What happened next I have conveniently forgotten, probably because it likely entailed some polite rolling of the eyes and frustrated shaking of the head by the Black students. As I recall, the Black groups that were requested never did come to Oneonta.

The lesson here is that of Liberal Racism. I thought I was helping, but my help not only didn't help — it made things worse. I thought I understood an experience that I had no insight into whatsoever. I thought I was being anti-racist, when in fact I played the classic role of the color-blind liberal. In *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, bell hooks states:

“It is the very small but highly visible liberal movement away from the perpetuation of overtly racist discrimination, exploitation, and oppression of black people which often masks how all-pervasive White supremacy is in this society, both as ideology and as behavior. When liberal Whites fail to understand how they can and/or do embody White supremacist values and beliefs even though they may not embrace racism as prejudice or domination (especially domination that involves coercive control), they cannot recognize the ways their actions support and affirm the very structure of racist domination and oppression that they profess to wish to see eradicated.”<sup>16</sup>

I was seduced by the myth of “fairness,” but what I was really perpetuating was the “tyranny of the majority.” Majority rule is very convenient when you *are* the majority. A liberal racist, I colluded in the illusion of participatory democracy, even though mine, and other White students' desires and choices were virtually guaranteed success at every turn. Liberal racism entails being able to mouth the rhetoric of democracy and equality without having to give up anything or make any changes. An essential element of liberation is not only sharing power, but also sharing discomfort.<sup>17</sup> In that meeting, I, along with the other White students there, was unwilling, or unable, to share either.

Liberal racism is the trap that I most frequently still get caught in, and about which I must remain most vigilant. For example, I at times find myself arguing electoral politics with African American friends, championing all the reasons we need to support the current “liberal” *du jour*, despite the candidate's usually uneven and unimpressive record on racial issues. I have to wonder why I am so willing to defend traditional liberalism in this context, especially when I am usually the one critiquing it when I am among my more politically middle-of-the-road friends — both White and of color. Although my friends and I agree that the threat from the right wing is real and serious, my “lesser of two evils” argument seems to ring hollow. Liberal reforms may give some comfort and legal protection to many, but they do not necessarily address the realities of people of color nor do they fundamentally transform the racial landscape of the United States. In fact, the superficiality of these changes may serve to entrench the existing power imbalances even deeper. I think my middle-class Whiteness makes it easier to defend,

and harder to turn my back on, token liberal changes.<sup>18</sup>

### Lesson #3: Racism as Tourist

While an undergraduate student at Oneonta, I was an Anthropology major, and it was through these classes that I was exposed to the writings of Paolo Freire and Franz Fanon — none of which I understood when I read them the first time. I was also a music minor, which I transformed from a study of western classical music into a minor of “non-western music,” as it was called at the time. I took courses in Javanese Gamelan, Indian Raga music, West Indian and Latino music, and African Drumming and Dance.

African Drumming and Dance was not a class for observers — you basically joined the drumming and dance troupe that was lead by a man from Ghana. I was excited and thrilled by the music and the class. I remember feeling self-conscious about being the only White person in the class, and this is probably because I rarely had other occasions where I was in the minority and that made me have to think about being White. I'm also aware that I never considered how the African American and African students felt about my being there. In retrospect, I recall that several African students actively befriended me, but that the African American students eyed me cautiously. What a sight I must have been at our final dance presentation dressed in full African traditional dress and dancing up a storm. It might have been a more difficult experience if I had not been a pretty good dancer and a quick study! While I gained a great deal from this experience, it is telling that I never paused to consider the impact on Black students of my presence in this class — this class which provided rare African-centered space on the very White campus of Oneonta. Though my naiveté allowed me to be open to new cultural learning and to explore new ways of knowing, and I tremendously value the experiences I had in that class, I am not sure of the cost of that to others.

In the 1980's, I joined a Caribbean steel drum band in Boston. By that time, I had learned enough to have a candid discussion with the bandleader about the racial implications of my being the only White person, and non-West Indian, in the band. I played with the band for five years, and was awkwardly aware of the status that gave me as a “cool White woman” in some people's eyes, and to a certain degree my own. As the years went on, I no longer had the time or energy to commit to the band, and I think I may have stayed on longer than I should have in order to protect that image in some regards. When I finally did make the decision to leave, I was conscious of the fact that I no longer felt the need to be a band member to legitimize me. This was an important step in the development of my own healthy White anti-racist identity.

The lesson here has to do with Racism as Tourist — stopping along the road of life to learn bits and pieces of

other cultures, but not understanding the political implications of misappropriation, cultural intrusion, and the seeing “the other” as “exotic.” Racism as Tourist often manifests itself in the form of cultural theft, with White people taking credit for or inappropriately identifying or using traditions and cultures of people of color to suit their own purposes. Sometimes this is done for financial gain (as in the case of the theft of Black music by White musicians). At other times, it may start as an honest attempt at spiritual evolution (as in the case of White explorations into Native American spirituality). Ironically, this kind of searching for “the other” is in many ways a reaction against the ugliness and emptiness of White supremacy and the oppressive and sterile value system that it represents. Yet, deep ethical questions about the line between the celebration of other cultures, and the exploitation of them, remain.

#### ***Lesson #4: The Loss of the Joy of Living***

The musical theme of Lesson #3 reminded me of a story about a dance club that was once in downtown Oneonta called “The Fleetwood.” Young middle class suburban White folks did not dance much in the early seventies. This was tough for those of us who loved the music of the 1960’s and grew up loving to dance. It was especially tough for heterosexual women, because although women would occasionally dance with other women, guys just did not dance, period. White guys did not dance again until the height of the disco scene, courtesy of John Travolta in “Saturday Night Fever.” So here I was, bridging the gap from the twisting 1960’s to the flashy disco era of the mid to late 1970’s.

The Fleetwood was the only disco in town, and the one place you could dance to something other than the Grateful Dead. The Fleetwood was also the only club in town that had a multiracial clientele, with the other exception being the Black Oak, which tended to pull in the arts and theater crowd (but even that was still overwhelmingly White). The Oneonta bar scene was quite segregated. The crowd at the Fleetwood tended to attract a lot of international students, both male and female, and a fair number of White women.

A friend and I rather spontaneously decided that we had had enough of this culturally imposed moratorium on dancing, and without much discussion, we started going to the Fleetwood on occasion to dance the night away. Immediately our friends cautiously whispered questions: “Why are you going there?,” “Aren’t there a lot of Black people there?,” “Does anyone who goes there speak English?” to the ultimate “Are you trying to pick up Black men?” The racism in this is self-evident. The lesson I draw from this has to do with the way racism has distorted White people to the point that many cannot even enjoy dancing, music and movement, without racializing the experience, either by engaging in “wannabe” pretensions

of trying to look or act Black (whatever that means), or by sexualizing any interracial contact. Several years ago, a White male student in a graduate course I taught on racism disclosed to me that he had great difficulty being sexual or dancing unless he fantasized that he was a Black man. This speaks volumes about the loss of true self and distorted White identity, and the way that White racism causes White people to project feared aspects of themselves onto others in racist ways. I call this lesson the Loss of the Joy of Living, and it is a high price to pay for White privilege.

#### ***Lesson #5:***

##### ***Hyper-visibility and Hyper-invisibility***

I lived in a dormitory on campus during my freshman and sophomore years. My dorm director during that time was a Black man who had a reputation for being rather strict, and we also had two Black RAs (Resident Advisors). This was pretty unusual on campus in those days. The fact that I even remember it, again, is significant because I have little recollections about the White RAs in my dorm. The only racial comments I recall being made about our dorm director are vague, and involve someone saying they felt he thought he had to be tougher on us than the other dorm directors because he was Black. We were also aware of the relationship between the Black male and Black female RA, and speculated about their romantic involvement. I recall no conversations about what it might have felt like to be one of so few Black people on campus in general, and in our dorm in particular.

This lesson is about visibility — the paradox of the *hyper-visibility* of people of color — living under the microscope, your every move noticed, coupled with *hyper-invisibility* — despite being keenly aware of the presence of people of color, as a White student I never really saw beyond the superficial nor made efforts to get to know students of color as individual people. I unconsciously made assumptions that their experiences were “just like mine” in colorblind fashion.

I see this hyper-visibility/hyper-invisibility paradox dramatically play out in many of the organizations where I work as a diversity consultant today. When the people of color in these organizations succeed, they are perceived as individual “exceptions” and treated to comments like “I don’t even think of you as Black,” which not only insult, but which also de-race them and render them invisible. Yet, if they exhibit any real or perceived performance problems, their visibility is heightened as a group, with comments on the office grapevine reflecting the more familiar racial stereotypes generalized to all members of the group. In other words, if you’re a person of color, you’re perceived to succeed as an *individual*, but fail as a *group*. Another example is how racism is kept largely invisible by the media until a major “incident” occurs, such as the Rodney King beating, the O.J. Simpson trial,

or the Texaco tapes, at which point the issue is discussed repeatedly, albeit in distorted ways, that reinforce the dominant mythologies.

### *Lesson #6: The Impact of Transformative Education*

Some of the most profound learnings I gained from my college days have to do with what I learned in the classroom.<sup>20</sup> I took several courses during my junior and senior years that fundamentally altered the way I view the world. It's funny how I even decided to take these courses. For a few weeks at the start of my freshman year, we had seven people living in our six-person suite, because of overcrowding. One woman named Karen, who was notably different from the rest of the women I lived with, eventually moved out. She was a free spirit, into nature and New Age things, and she meditated and chanted. We weren't close, but I was intrigued by her, and we had several long and interesting conversations. Karen and I parted ways when she moved out, but we periodically ran into each other on campus, and it was through her that I heard about two classes: "The Dynamics of Racism" and "The Psychology of the Black Experience." She was aware of my interest in racism from our talks about national and global politics, and she told me she had taken these incredible courses that I just *had* to take.

These courses, and a few others, transformed the path of my life. It was through these classes that I came to understand the concept of institutional racism, and began to understand that racism was more than just a set of attitudes that one group of people has toward another. I learned about the role of power to impose those beliefs in far-reaching ways. I learned about parts of U.S. history that no one had ever really told me about before. I began to develop a framework for understanding oppression that continues to evolve. I was like a sponge in those classes, soaking up all the professors had to offer. I took notes like a "human typewriter" (computers weren't on the scene yet), and I still refer to those notebooks to this day. I began to read everything about racism that I could get my hands on. I became enraged about how I had been miseducated, lied to, misled, brainwashed, and confused by racist conditioning, and my anger propelled me into activism.

In one of these classes, I remember several White women who often argued with the African American professor about sexism, women's issues, and homophobia. At the time, I couldn't quite grasp why they were so upset. I thought of myself as a feminist, yet I had never taken a women's studies course, had never read feminist books, nor attended any women's meetings. In my mind, I was a strong, independent, and self-confident woman, who believed in equal rights, and so I thought I "got it" — but it became increasingly clear to me that I had a lot to learn. As for heterosexism and homophobia, I was, in a word, clueless. I thought I was enlightened, yet I just could not

understand why these women were battling with my beloved teacher.

I have since come to realize that although this man was brilliant when it came to racism, he had yet to explore his own sexism and homophobia, and that came across in the classroom. I am still forever grateful for the knowledge about racism he gave me, for the foundation of understanding oppression that I received from his classes exposed me to a new mode of analysis that led me to question other "isms" and to see the connections between all forms of oppression. Just as I have continued to grow and learn in the intervening years, I trust that this professor has done the same.

It was in one of these classes that I first read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (Haley, 1986), which I think should be required reading for everyone. One part of this book in particular gave my life direction. There is a story that Malcolm tells of a young White woman who approached him on a college campus and asked him what she could do to help the Black struggle. Malcolm turned to her and abruptly said, "Nothing," and walked away, leaving the bewildered White woman to ponder what happened. Later in his life, Malcolm said he wished he could tell that White woman that there was something she could do. She could take responsibility by working with other White people in White communities to challenge racism, and then work in alliance with people of color to end White supremacy. In Spike Lee's movie version of Malcolm X's life, he used only the first part of this story when Malcolm told the White woman there was nothing she could do. I've always felt that the omission of Malcolm's later reflections on the matter were a lost opportunity to inspire and educate more anti-racist White activists. In any event, Malcolm's words were a wake-up call for me, and it guided me in the direction of my life's work. Malcolm's vision also helped me to reframe my racial questions from the paternalistic, ("What can White people do for people of color?") to those that expose White privilege ("What can Whites do to dismantle White supremacy?"), thereby helping me to take responsibility for racism as a White problem.

I call this the Lesson of Transformative Education. It was transformative education that encouraged me to push the limits, receive the gifts of learning offered to me, be open to my own growth, and helped me recognize the importance of being in the right place at the right time for my own learning. For me, pushing the limits involved taking the courses, reading the books, going to the lectures, meeting the people, visiting the places, doing all the things that I never thought I would or could do, and that I didn't perceive to be "about me." I came to find out how much our lives are interdependent and how what I thought was someone else's history was really part of my own.

I am reminded of how important the content of the curriculum and the nature of the student-teacher rela-



tionship can be to one's development. When I worked in the Boston Public Schools, an African American student came to my office, frustrated with his history class, which he found extremely boring and was failing. I gave him a copy of Dick Gregory's *No More Lies: The Myths and Realities of American History* to read. Two days later, he was back in my office, bursting with excitement, exclaiming, "This can't be history. It's too interesting! Why don't they teach us this stuff in class?" It was one of those precious "teachable moments."

Receiving the gifts of learning meant that I accepted the new concepts and information that were offered to me, even while I rejected certain aspects of that learning that was problematic to me. Had I shut down to my learning because of the sexism and homophobia, I never would have done the intensive learning I did about racism. In fact to do so might have colluded in my own denial about racism. Still, we must be vigilant to raise the contradictions as we see them, and not privilege one form of oppression over another.

Being open to my own growth meant learning how to push through my own defensiveness and denial. I thought of myself at the time as a feminist and an anti-racist, but it is clear to me now that I had minimal understanding of the depth of what both of those things truly meant. Learning to let go of my defensiveness and self-righteousness is an on-going challenge.

I've come to realize that being in the right place at the right time for my own learning was a critical element of why that learning was so powerful for me at that moment of my development. If I had taken those courses five years earlier, I might not have been ready to hear so clearly and the information might have gone over my head. If I had taken them five years later when I was working through issues of sexism and homophobia, I might have resisted the lessons on racism that I also needed to learn. Ideally I believe that this learning can, and should, be done together, and Black feminist scholars and activists including Angela Davis, bell hooks, and Audre Lourde have shown us the way.

Years later, I attended graduate school in Boston, gaining Master's degrees in Social Work and African American Studies. While there, I met a White man at a party who went to Oneonta at the same time I did. As we talked, we realized that we were in a racism class together. He then proceeded to say, "Wasn't that the worst class you ever took? That professor was so anti-White!" I was stunned. How could he have had such a different experience from me? This class had transformed me, forced me to look deep within myself, my history, and my identity as a White person—it was the best class of my life! I try to remember this now when I am teaching, and keep in mind that what makes a classroom safe or exciting for one student, may have just the opposite affect on another.

## Looking Forward

Since completing my undergraduate degree at Oneonta in 1979, my life has continued to provide me with a wealth of experiences that never fail to challenge me to understand oppression at deeper, more complex, and ever more personal levels. I am not sure where the next part of my life will lead me, or what form my work will take, but I know that anti-racism and social justice will be at it's core. My hope is that other White people will join me, and that there "is a generation of kids who are tired of racism and White supremacy, who are less willing to engage in denial, a generation that may be willing to launch organized collective resistance."<sup>21</sup>

For lessons to be truly meaningful, the learning must be put into action. And so, I pose these challenges to myself: What will I do to further develop my understanding of racism? What will I do with the insights I continue to gain? How, and to whom, will I be accountable? What actions will I take? How much am I willing to risk? What will anchor and support me in this journey?

The more I learn to acknowledge, value, and love all parts of who I am, the more open I find myself becoming to other people. This helps me to lessen my defensiveness when confronted with my own racism, and allows me to find allies in faces and places where I least expect. I try to claim all aspects of my multi-faceted identity and wear them proudly, while not letting any of them restrict or define me. I am a woman but that's not all I am. I am White, but that's not all I am either. I am Italian American, but as I embrace that culture, I can expand its boundaries without betraying my roots. Our identities are essential, but we are more than essentially our identities. We need to work apart at times to heal and grow strong, but we need coalition work to thrive and succeed. My personal desire is to find ways to work together to challenge injustice, reclaim all aspects of our own fragmented and destroyed humanity, and begin to heal ourselves and the planet from the nightmare of oppression.

My trip to Oneonta felt like a homecoming of sorts, like I had come full circle, though I realize now that the circle never ends. The imagery of a series of mountains and valleys helps me conceptualize the journey that I am on. Just when I think I've climbed to the top and got "it," I look over the peak to see another range of mountains that I couldn't have envisioned from my earlier vantage points. I have chosen to gather my energies and keep on moving.

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## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge Roberta Caban of the Student of Color Coalition and the Center for Multicultural Experiences, and faculty Ralph Watkins and Caridad Souza for their commitment to antiracist activism on the Oneonta campus, and for their role in inviting me to participate in this event. This paper had its origins in the talk I delivered on campus on March 22, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> "The Blacklist Incident," as it became known, refers to an incident in September 1992 in which an elderly White woman was attacked in Oneonta by an assailant she described as a Black male. In response to a request from the police, the State University of New York at Oneonta gave the police a list of the 125 Black and Latino male students registered at the college. The other college in town, Hartwick College, and the local Job Corps refused to comply with the request. The state, local, and campus police used the list to track down, harass, and question the young men in their dormitories, classes, and jobs, violating their right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty, and violating the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (the Buckley Amendment) and their civil rights. The response from students and alumni was swift and intense in condemning the actions of the college. Yet, the vice-president who authorized the release of the list was suspended for only one month without pay and was demoted. He was reinstated to his prior position in December 1995, and students learned of his reinstatement just prior to my visit to the campus in March 1996. A class-action lawsuit was filed on behalf of the students. For a more detailed discussion of the incident see Ruth Sidel, *Battling Bias: The Struggle for Identity and Community on College Campuses*, Penguin Books, NY, 1994, pp. 82-84.

<sup>3</sup> Horace Seldon, "The New Racism?" in *Convictions About Racism in the United States of America*, Community Change Inc., Boston, MA, June 1990, and Valerie Batts, *Modern Racism: New Melody for the Same Old Tune*, Visions Inc., Cambridge, MA, January 1989.

<sup>4</sup> Angela Davis, Brandeis University speech, Waltham, MA March 31, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> "The Four Americas: Government and Social Policy Through the Eyes of America's Multi-racial and Multi-ethnic Society," prepared by Mollyann Brodie, Ph.D., The Washington Post, Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University, December 1995, and "Blacks vs. Whites: Through the Looking Glass," Derrick Jackson, in the Boston Globe, November 1, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Proposition 209, or the California Civil Rights Initiative, a ballot questions passed in California on November 5, 1996 is a good example of this.

<sup>7</sup> Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream*, W.W. Norton and Company, NY, 1949, 1961. pp. 27, 90, 96.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 96.

<sup>9</sup> For a great, and humorous, discussion of the hypocrisy of our so-called "Founding Fathers," especially Thomas Jefferson, see Lowell Thompson's *Whitefolks: Seeing America Through Black Eyes*, 1996. It is a self-published book and is available from Lowell Thompson, 1507 E. 53rd Street, Unit 132, Chicago, IL, 60615.

<sup>10</sup> Douglas, Frederick, "The Meaning of the Fourth of July to the Negro" in Philip S. Foner, *The Voice of Black America, Volume 1*, Capricorn Books, NY, 1972. He continues: "Go where you may, search where you will, roam through all the monarchies and despotisms of the Old World, travel through South America, search out every abuse, and when you have found the last, lay your facts by the side of the everyday practices of this nation, and you will say with me, that, for revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy, American reigns without a rival."

<sup>11</sup> This refers to Malcolm X's well-known statement about racism existing not only south of the Mason-Dixon line, but anywhere south of the Canadian border.

<sup>12</sup> See Becky Thompson's description of four stages of White racial identity in "Subverting Racism from Within: Linking White Identity to Activism," unpublished paper based on a keynote talk presented at "Racialization and Gender in the Academy" at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Roanoke, VA, September 27, 1996. In this paper, she identifies the four stages as: (1) I'm not a racist, (2) I don't want to be White; (3) Grappling for a steady position; and (4) Informed consciousness. For further discussion of White identity development models, see Janet E. Helms, ed. *Black and White Racial Identity: Theory, Research, and Practice*, Greenwood, Westport, CT, 1990; Rita Hardiman, *White Identity Development: A Process Model for Describing the Racial Consciousness of White Americans*, Dissertation Abstracts International, 432, 104A University Microfilms No. 82-10330, 1982.

<sup>13</sup> I heard Lani Guiner speak in Washington D.C. on April 12, 1995 on the topic of "Democracy in a Difference Voice." The same story is told in her book, *The Tyranny of the Majority: Fundamental Fairness in Representative Democracy*, The Free Press, NY, 1994.

<sup>14</sup> For a full discussion of White privilege, see Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies, Working Paper No. 189, Wellesley College, Center for Research on Women, Wellesley, MA, 1988.

<sup>15</sup> See Valerie A. Batts discussion of dysfunctional rescuing in her article, "Modern Racism: New Melody for the Same Old Tune," Visions, Inc., Cambridge, MA January 1989.

<sup>16</sup> bell hooks, in "Overcoming White Supremacy," in *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, Henry Holt and Company, NY, 1995, p. 185.

<sup>17</sup> I thank Nancy Richardson of the Harvard Divinity School in Cambridge, MA for this insight.

<sup>18</sup> See Jean Hardisty's, "My On-again, Off-again Romance with Liberalism," *The Brown Papers*, Women's Theological Center, Boston, MA, Vol. II, No. 6, March 1996.

<sup>19</sup> See Myke Johnson, "Wanting To Be Indian: When Spiritual Searching Turns Into Cultural Theft," *The Brown Papers*, Women's Theological Center, Vol. I No.7, April 1995.

<sup>20</sup> I would especially like to thank Professors Ena Campbell, Rashid Hamid, Don Hill, Jim Preston, Bill Starna, Ralph Watkins, and George Young.

<sup>21</sup> hooks, bell, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, Henry Holt and Company, NY, 1995.