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Whiteness at Work

Confession: By the time I graduated from college, I thought I was the white culture whisperer. I was fearless. I thought any future encounters of racism would rear their ugly heads like purple dragons, and I had no doubt in my ability to slay racist nonsense wherever I found it. I was so wrong. Far from an imposing beast, I found that white supremacy is more like a poison. It seeps into your mind, drip by drip, until it makes you wonder if your perception of reality is true.

Being a Black woman in the professional world of majority-white nonprofit ministries was far more difficult than my younger self could imagine. In school I had been surrounded by whiteness, but colleges often encourage students to question authority, to navigate cultural conflicts, to be creative

in starting alternative organizations and clubs. While every school certainly contains boundaries for students, at some basic level it is expected that students push those boundaries, that they learn not only through books but through new experiences. The professional world, I soon discovered, is altogether different.

Companies love talking about their "diversity and inclusion efforts," but I remember one unusually frank conversation with our organization's board of directors, in which I learned how those efforts often work. Less than a year into the job, I was seeking approval for a new racial diversity training program. I knew the meeting wasn't going well when the treasurer said, "Just to play devil's advocate . . ." and then posed a series of questions, speaking gently so as to preserve an air of innocence. "Why don't we want assimilation? Isn't that the point of an organization's culture? Don't we want to bring in people of diverse backgrounds and then become one unified organization?"

My mouth dropped open, but the rest of my body froze. I had no idea how to speak truth to the person who held my program in his hands. How could I possibly explain that the unity he desired always came at my expense? I had worked for a

number of organizations that struggled to create meaningful opportunities for people of color, but I had never heard anyone make an overt case in favor of assimilation—particularly at an organization that promoted diversity in its mission statements and messaging. Granted, many people of color on our team had grown suspicious of those statements, suspecting that the organization wanted our racial diversity without our diversity of thought and culture. I just never imagined someone with his influence would say it aloud and with positivity.

It's so easy to believe the pretty pictures on the website filled with racial diversity, to buy in to the well-crafted statements of purpose, to enjoy being invited into the process of "being part of the change." The role of a bridge builder sounds appealing until it becomes clear how often that bridge is your broken back.

It usually begins with the job interview.

Overcompensation is hard to resist in this moment. When you need a job, and are genuinely drawn to the work described in the job posting, it's tempting to sit in that seat and say all the right things, laugh the right laugh, extend all the right jokes. The goal, after all, is to impress. Do I make myself more likable? Do I use references to movies,

music, books that I know the folks around the table would appreciate—references that would imply *I am just like you*? Sometimes I just want to prove I can do it. That I can make them comfortable, make them believe. But the question is always, *Is it worth it?*

White institutions are constantly communicating how much Blackness they want. It begins with numbers. How many scholarships are being offered? How many seats are being “saved” for “neighborhood kids”? How many Black bodies must be present for us to have “good” diversity numbers? How many people of color are needed for the website, the commercials, the pamphlets?

But numbers are only the beginning. Whiteness constantly polices the expressions of Blackness allowed within its walls, attempting to accrue no more than what’s necessary to affirm itself. It wants us to sing the celebratory “We Shall Overcome” during MLK Day but doesn’t want to hear the indicting lyrics of “Strange Fruit.” It wants to see a Black person seated at the table but doesn’t want to hear a dissenting viewpoint. It wants to pat itself on the back for helping poor Black folks through missions or urban projects but has no interest in learning from Black people’s wisdom, tal-

ent, and spiritual depth. Whiteness wants enough Blackness to affirm the goodness of whiteness, the progressiveness of whiteness, the openheartedness of whiteness. Whiteness likes a trickle of Blackness, but only that which can be controlled.

Here’s how all of this plays out if you’re a Black woman trying to survive in a culture of professional whiteness:

8:55 A.M.: I arrive at work and walk through the lobby to get to my office. On the way, I am asked three times if I need help finding the outreach center. My white co-worker, whose footsteps I hear behind me, is never asked this question. *The message: I am a Black woman, so I must be poor and in need of help.*

8:58 A.M.: I set my purse down in my cubicle. The white co-worker who was walking behind me stares in shock. She has never seen me with my hair in a pineapple fro. She reaches out to touch my hair while telling me how beautiful it is. When I pull back, startled by the sudden act of intimacy, she looks hurt and isn’t sure what to do next. *The message: I am different, exotic. Anyone should have the right to my body in exchange for a compliment.*

9:58 A.M.: An hour later, I am asked to see my supervisor. When I get to her office she asks me

to shut the door. She tells me she received a note saying that I made someone uncomfortable when they were just trying to be friendly and kind. She suggests that I work on being more of a team player, and not being so closed off. I look at her incredulously. I now wonder if this is just about the one co-worker, or if my supervisor gets emails about me every week from awkward white people. *The message: I am responsible for the feelings of white people, and my boss will not defend me from these accusations.*

10:05 A.M.: I attempt to respond, but before I can finish, my supervisor asks if I don't mind changing my tone a bit. I sound angry and she was trying to be helpful, trying to make sure I can stay here long-term. I mumble something about my own frustrations, but they are dismissed with a wave of her hand and a promise to work with me. *The message: My tone will be interpreted as angry, even if I'm just feeling hurt or misunderstood. My actual feelings are irrelevant and could be used as reason to fire me.*

12:00 noon: It's lunchtime now, and I desperately need to talk to my girlfriends in another department. I find a seat among this group of women of color who use the lunch break to offer support and encouragement to one another. After talking with them for a little bit, I feel like I can breathe again. Even though we don't work in the same de-

partments, they are the reason I've survived here this long. I return to my office.

1:00 P.M.: I have a project due at the end of the week, so I put on my headphones to block out the office noise while I work. Another team member comes to my door. "Austin, can I talk to you for a second?" "Sure," I respond. "I noticed that you wear your headphones a lot in the office," she says. "It sometimes feels like you don't want to be around us." I take a deep breath. Because we work in cubicles, many of us wear headphones when we need to focus. Mine aren't on more often than anyone else's. *The message: My body is being scrutinized in ways that others are not subjected to, and the worst is being assumed of me.*

1:05 P.M.: I respond to the co-worker but quickly turn the conversation to the project we're working on together, hoping to discuss the changes I made that morning. Thirty minutes into this conversation, I realize I am answering questions about Black music, a news segment on "urban violence" she saw the other night, and something her adopted Black nephew said the other day. She emphasizes the word *black*, clearly not used to saying the word. I am tired. I am not sure what led us here. *The message: I am here to educate my white co-workers when they are confused about a racial issue in their lives.*

1:40 P.M.: I take a deep breath. "Hey, I need to stretch my legs. I'm going to get some coffee, you want anything?" I don't like coffee, but I will get some anyway if it helps end this conversation.

1:50 P.M.: Standing in line at the coffee shop next door, I quickly notice a man who stopped me in the hallway and referred to me as "colored." He had come to one session of my Tuesday night class on race and thought it appropriate to pepper me with questions about Blackness (well, "coloredness") since he'd decided not to continue coming. Rather than answer his questions on the spot, I'd told him he should come back to the class. But now here he is behind me. Maybe he won't speak up, or maybe he'll think he has me confused with another Black person. He doesn't say anything, but my body is stiff with anticipatory tension.

2:07 P.M.: As soon as I get my coffee and turn toward the door, it happens. Someone I have never met insists that she emailed me and can't wait to chat more. She is right that we work at the same organization, but I've never seen this woman. "I think you have me confused with someone else," I say.

She insists I am wrong. "Oh no, don't you remember . . ." I stare at her blankly, my warm coffee reminding me that I am not in the sunken place.

I let her finish, then I repeat slowly, "I think you have me confused with someone else." The explanation continues until I am given enough information to know which Black person she has me confused with. "Nope, that's not me. You're talking about Tina in the communications department. She is amazing, you two will have a good talk, I'm sure." Her eyes grow wide, embarrassment climbing her face. "I'm so sorry, I have to run!" I say, before the apologies get messy. *The message: My body, my person is not distinct; I am interchangeable with all other Black women.*

2:17 P.M.: I'm back in my office; preparing for an afternoon staff meeting in which I will give a short presentation. I feel good about my content—I've worked hard on it, knowing my perspective is often different from my co-workers'—but my heart still beats fast. How will I be received by my team?

2:30 P.M.: I'm in the staff meeting. I give my eight-minute spiel. There is a pause, and then some pushback. I knew this was a possibility, so I hear them out, trying not to form a response as they speak. Another co-worker pipes in before I can respond: "I think what Austin is trying to say is . . ." Suddenly everyone is nodding in agreement even though I'm pretty sure she repeated me almost

word for word. *The message: I need white approval and interpretation before my idea will be considered good.*

3:30 P.M.: The meeting has closed, and some co-workers race back to their cubicles. Even though I am behind on emails, I know that I must stay and chat. If I race back to my cubicle it will be interpreted as me being antisocial. I stick around and make small talk, leaving with another co-worker so that my body doesn't stand out.

3:40 P.M.: I'm back in my office. I glance at the clock. There are still two more hours in the day.

These are the daily annoyances, the subtle messages of whiteness. But we bear other scars, too. Over and over I have seen white men and women get praise for their gifts and skills while women of color are told only about their *potential* for leadership. When white people end up being terrible at their jobs, I have seen supervisors move mountains to give them new positions more suited to their talents, while people of color are told to master their positions or be let go. I have been in the room when promises were made to diversify boardrooms, leadership teams, pastoral staff, faculty and staff positions, only to watch committees appoint a white man in the end. It's difficult to express how these

incidents accumulate, making you feel undervalued, unappreciated, and ultimately expendable.

Over the years, I have grown used to hearing the response "Well, why don't you just leave if you don't like it here?" As if this experience is a unique phenomenon, or specific to only a handful of delinquent organizations. Even if it were unique, it's highly privileged to believe that Black women can just quit and find another place to work without missing paychecks or losing benefits. Just changing jobs is rarely that simple. So Black women come up with life hacks.

These life hacks don't involve nifty uses for egg cartons or finding unique ways to use paper clips. They involve helping one another write emails to our supervisors or coworkers, which we know will be scrutinized for tone. Our life hacks include keeping folders in our in-boxes where we place every single email that praises our project, attitude, or giftedness. This is not for our self-esteem; it's an insurance policy, because we know there are emails being sent to our bosses that say the opposite. Our life hacks include finding a cohort, a girlfriend, an ally—someone who is safe. Someone to have lunch with who doesn't need an explanation of our being. Our life hacks include secret Facebook groups

where we process awkward interpersonal microaggressions and suggest ways to tackle them in the future.

But for many of us, life hacks can't stop the inevitable. They can slow it down, yes. But eventually, those of us who work for white Christians are asked the question *Are you sure God has really called you . . . here?*

And then I know just how invisible and dispensible I am.

Rather than having a conversation about policy or assumptions or interactions, I am asked what God thinks about me. This is convenient, because it allows the people in charge to wash their hands of the conflict. But the suggestion that I assimilate doesn't always come passive-aggressively, or with ill intent. Sometimes it sounds loving.

It's been a hard week at the office. Because I work at a Christian organization, my co-workers ask if they can pray for me. I am moved that they've noticed my emotional distress. They gather round, lay their hands on my shoulders. I close my eyes and breathe deeply, listening to their words. But before I know it, the prayers take a turn. They are no longer about my circumstances but about me. They ask not that I would be understood but that

I would find it within myself to give more grace. The prayers don't ask that doors would open for me; they ask that God would gift me with skills they wish I had. These prayers aren't for me. The prayers are that I would become who *they* want me to be. "Lord, make this Black person just like us."

I'm not sure my co-workers even realize the difference; they've been praying the prayer for so long. In this way whiteness reveals its true desire for people of color. Whiteness wants us to be empty, malleable, so that it can shape Blackness into whatever is necessary for the white organization's own success. It sees potential, possibility, a future where Black people could share some of the benefits of whiteness if only we try hard enough to mimic it. The initial expectation is that I simply code-switch, conforming to the cultural communication of white people when I'm with them. But in the end, this is never enough. The ultimate expectation is that I will come to realize that white ways of thinking, behaving, communicating, and understanding the world are to be valued above all else.

Rare is the ministry praying that they would be worthy of the giftedness of Black minds and hearts. So we must remind ourselves. It's the only way to spit out the poison. We must remind ourselves and

I'm Still Here

one another that we are fearfully and wonderfully made, arming ourselves against the ultimate message of whiteness—that we are inferior. We must stare at ourselves in the mirror and repeat that we, too, are fully capable, immensely talented, and uniquely gifted. We are not tokens. We are valuable in the fullness of our humanity. We are not perfect, but we are here, able to contribute something special, beautiful, lasting to the companies and ministries to which we belong.

