NOW YOU DON’T SEE IT, NOW YOU DON’T: WHITE LIVES AS COVERT RACISM

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“Plain and simp’ the system’s a pimp, but I refuse to be a ho”
- “Who Stole the Soul?” Fear of a Black Planet, Public Enemy

“Thus in effect, on matters of race, the racial contract prescribes for its signatories and inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made” (Mills 1997: 18)

In this chapter*, I want to look briefly at my own life, a life of one who has dedicated himself to understanding the workings of race, racial identity, racialization, and racism in order to be more able to fight for social and racial justice, through an autoethnographic lens, to critically question my own current lived experience as it relates to racial stories and racist structures, and to utilize the master’s tools to create new, inclusive, and just houses. Ultimately, moving somewhat afield of the problematic discourse of “white privilege,” this chapter seeks to begin the difficult road for all of us in assessing the possibility that white lives, in their current form, in this current capitalistic, neoliberal society, are a central form of “covert racism.” I will end the chapter with some preliminary suggestions for what can be done and call all who care about human rights, social and racial justice to think about this argument and to consider the various methodologies implied in the contours of this brief essay.

What’s in a Life?

What is in a life? Lives are structures and stories. To conceive of lives as structures is to recognize a blueprint for human existence; one that varies, is reflexive, and is implicated in social power. Lives are compli-

* I originally wrote this autoethnographic piece in 2006. While much has changed – much has stayed the same.
cated structures in that they are patterned and patterning, built environments and builders of environments, created and creating, positioned and positioning. Thus, our lives as members of society are an endeavor in structured structuring. In addition, to conceive of our lives as stories is to understand the role of meaning in human existence; the variation in the tales we tell to and about other lives, these too are highly reflexive, and animate the lexicon of humanity in the matrix of cultural power. Lives are fantastically influential stories in that they are narrated and narrating, valued and reevaluative, plotted and plotters, formulaic and formulating, articulated and articulating. Thus, our lives in societies are simultaneously a project in storied storytelling. So, living is not solely of our own making, it is also made (classic agency and structure). To live a life is to concurrently navigate and internalize storied structures as well as structured stories.

Race is a story that has been told for over 500 years. The contours and focus of this meta-narrative have ebbed and flowed, usually in a unidirectional stream – from the oppressors to the oppressed – but always catching up all in the flow of these hegemonic waters; allowing the powerful flow to continue. We know of many stories that are older than race, but few of these have been as relevant (nor as detrimental) to human existence as this particular one (with some exceptions, e.g., gender, hierarchy, etc.). For such a story to continue molding itself, reshaping itself, etch itself into human affairs for so long gives light to the fact that there is a systemic need for such a narrative. Since this story of race is lived, the system may continue to churn easily for some (i.e., “whites”) at the expense of others (i.e., “non-whites”). The system that embeds and connects our racially storied lives to societies, cultures, and institutions is racism.

Racism is a structure that has patterned our lives for almost as long as the story of race has been articulated – it needed time to fully enmesh itself in our social structures, while simultaneously creating new ones. Thus, our environments, our institutions, our social fabrics, our interactions are structured (and lived as structures) via racism. Racism is an exploitative, cognitive, epistemological, linguistic, and relentless social structure of domination. Race, as a story, and racism, as a well-storied house, as a structure, permeate our lives and we are both created by them as racialized and racist beings, as well as active creators in proliferating race’s story and racism’s structure.

Whites have been complicit in the writing of lives through race as well as in the construction and maintenance of societies through