

# RACE IS NOT A LIE—NOT YET

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When I was asked to respond to “Working Together on Race,” I hesitated. Being personal and reflexive about race is almost always risky—professionally and personally—and even though I have written about race before, this writing has been cloaked in the niceties of scholarship (McDavid 2007). I will attempt to step outside this cloak now, because I know of no other way to respond to the rawness and boldness of Echo-Hawk’s piece. This will not be a response to all of what he has written—only to the idea of whether we (all) still “have race,” and if so, what we should do about it.

I am a middle-aged white female archaeologist who studies two main areas—the historical archaeology of the African Diaspora, and the ways that this archaeology intersects with public uses, needs, and agendas. Both areas of study are at least in part “about” race, but my choice to study them has very little to do with a fascination with archaeology or even with an interest in “the past”—other than my personal past. My professional agendas spring directly from my personal journey—from watching the hoses and dogs on TV during the civil rights movement in the 60s, and while doing so, keeping my own adolescent protests against those hoses and dogs quiet. They spring from sitting quietly by while my relatives spouted racist bile and anger as they bemoaned the integration of Mississippi’s schools. They spring from watching, without dissent, as the supposedly Christian members of my church responded with fear and hate after a black family visited our Houston church one Sunday morning. Did I speak out about race to others of my own race then? No. I only watched.

Then I grew up and after many years doing other things, I found in archaeology a pathway of study which allowed—no, forced—me to confront race and racism, and to do it openly. I do not want to elaborate on my personal journey, other than to contextualize these brief comments and to point out that it was the countless “everyday reminders” (Lippert 2008) of a

still-racialized America which finally offered a platform from which I could speak out.

I decided some years ago that, in addition to pursuing my scholarly interests, I would use whatever bully pulpits those interests provided—the public talks, lectures and tours about our archaeology—to speak directly to white people in ways that I did not (or to be fair to myself, could not) as a child. Simply put, I use these forums to initiate conversations, where I suggest that other white people stop denying the privilege we have because we are white, that we try to understand the structural racism that results from it, and that we work purposefully towards dismantling it. By using the archaeology of African America (and its role in the present) as a starting point, conversations like this can start people thinking about what white privilege is. They can call into relief the everyday realities of the “invisible package of unearned assets which [we] can count on cashing in each day...about which [we were] meant to remain oblivious” (to quote Peggy McIntosh’s seminal article—sadly, still fairly current; McIntosh 1988:1).

I do this little confrontation dance—some times gently, sometimes not—in just about every public talk I do about my “real” research, and the reactions are more or less what you might expect. Obviously not all of my audiences and fellow-conversationalists are white, and I have found that responses from mixed groups are especially revealing. Blacks frequently approach me afterwards to express surprise at hearing a white person talk about such things, whereas whites are, with few exceptions, puzzled: “Who, me!?!? But I voted for Obama!”

With white audiences, I admit that I focus on the topic a bit more directly than I do with mixed ones, or black ones. For the most part I simply suggest that people think about the reality of white privilege—people will take the suggestion on board, or not, and hectoring from me will not help much in

whether they decide to do one or the other. But I do suggest that whiteness is *not* normative, neutral, and that white privilege means having the luxury, in most situations, to simply ignore race (Thandeka 1999). Sometimes I ask white people how often they refer to others as “my white friend,” or “my white colleague”? I listen closely to people’s responses (these are conversations, after all) and have noticed that most people will readily agree that this would feel odd, and will also admit that they have used the term “my black colleague” before—but they have never thought about why. We also talk about the term “color-blind,” because white people often tell me how they try to live their lives in a color-blind way. But when pressed, most will acknowledge that despite best intentions, most of us tend to notice each other’s colors whether we want to or not (McDavid 2003, 2007). The problem with color-blindness, as the critical race theorists have pointed out, is that because it is *presumed* to fully incorporate racial justice (“justice for all”) it has not allowed American society to develop a concept of justice (or anything else) that takes account of racial difference without being vulgarly essentializing (Bell 1992; Crenshaw et al. 1995; Delgado and Stefancic 2001). That is a new idea to many—but to paraphrase Roger, once white people see that they “have race” too, they start to understand. We also talk about the differences between “racism” and “prejudice”—this usually comes up in response to some comment about how “some blacks are racists too”—and how racism is not dead yet, despite recent electoral events.

They key point here is that my archaeological work gives me a platform to raise these issues, and that one of the reasons I *can* raise them, as frontally as I often do, is *because* I am white. I am aware, of course, of the irony that doing this is actually *enacting* white privilege, and as aware that I could be accused of essentializing “what white is,” ignoring the ways that whiteness itself is contested, fluid and multidimensional (Bonnett 1997). It is also true that by foregrounding race, acknowledging whiteness as a race, and in effect “owning” our whiteness, we whites run the risk of foregrounding ourselves. We have to take care that confronting and discussing white privilege does not deflect the conversation away from the real goal—to dismantle it.

For the most part, though, I choose to accept those risks—to be “real” about the “reality” of race. Yes, race is a cultural construct, and yes, “race distorts the nature of human biological diversity”. But I am not sure if knowing that really gets us anywhere. Race is not a lie, not yet...and until it is, Kennewickman, I will keep talking. And listening.

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