

When ethnic equals “non-white,” we are at the mercy
of “non-ethnic” Whiteness

Melissa Tandiwe Myambo

I. Lurking Invisibly

In apartheid South Africa, the system of racial segregation relied on two primary categories: white and non-white. In the US today, the adjective ethnic as commonly applied also means non-white.

For instance: a colleague who moved from cosmopolitan New York to a more homogeneous Middle America complains that there are no ethnic restaurants in his town. When I ask what he means by that, he says there are no Indian or Thai or Japanese restaurants.

“But there are some restaurants, right?” I ask.

“Yeah but I really miss Ethiopian food. The restaurants here only serve hamburgers and American food.”

“And what’s the ethnicity of hamburgers and ‘American’ food? Is it non-ethnic? Isn’t white/European an ethnicity too?”

You see this - or more to the point, don’t see this - erasure of whiteness as ethnicity everywhere.

For example, there are a plethora of summer classes on offer entitled “Ethnic New York” and “Ethnic Los Angeles,” often taught in Ethnic Studies departments, but if you flip through their syllabi these classes emphasize the non-white areas of the city like Chinatown, Little Tokyo and Harlem.

What about Bel Air, the Upper East Side, Malibu and Wall Street?

What do we miss by not marking these white neighborhoods as ethnic?

This question might be reformulated: who gains from (not) being identified as ethnic?

II. Moment of Clarity

Whilst attending an extremely progressive liberal arts college during those ancient times before the Trump [Trainwreck](#) when Political Correctness was still de rigeur, I had a strange experience which suddenly made the above questions urgently and viscerally real.

Although I had grown up in a racially-charged postcolonial Zimbabwe, the child of an Italian American mother and a black Zimbabwean father, until that day I had never understood with such acuity the blindness that is enabled by the bleaching power of whiteness to make itself so omnisciently invisible. My moment of clarity occurred one hot and steamy August when I had flown back to the US before the semester began to undergo intensive “cultural awareness training,” a requirement for all students in leadership positions.

The flight back from Zimbabwe was always a strange interregnum of transiting from one type of racial politics to another. The country had fought a bitter civil war between the white minority and the black majority until 1980 when Rhodesia became the new nation of Zimbabwe in which I had grown up. The violent past was so recent, so raw, everyday life was still seething with racial tensions, weighed down by the legacy of racial oppression like our neighbor South Africa.

Ironically, and despite that recent, violent history, there is a cliché widely circulated amongst people from southern Africa who have spent time in post-Civil Rights America. They say that in southern Africa, if you encounter a white person who is prejudiced against so-called “non-whites,” you will immediately know because racist attitudes are boldly declared, especially by

Afrikaaners. Oddly enough, this type of candor helps race relations because one can identify white people who are not bigoted. In America, however, before the Trump era and even now, racism does not announce itself with that same southern African forthrightness.

Covert racism is more perilous because it can sideswipe you.

My undergraduate experience that humid August morning would render this truism starkly, garishly clear when a well-meaning, middle-aged white lesbian whom I will call Betty facilitated our workshop on ethnic and racial awareness.

Betty's goal was to make us more sensitive to the diversity of the student body we would be working with and in order to do that she suggested we play the "Multicultural Game." It was a simple game. We had to position ourselves along a continuum of knowledge about certain groups i.e. People of the African Diaspora, Native Americans, people of Asian ancestry etc. There were three positions on this continuum: "low knowledge," constituting very little knowledge of or interaction with this particular group of people; "medium knowledge" implying some knowledge, perhaps friends, teachers or a few mentors in this group; "high knowledge" indicating a very intimate knowledge of this group - you are part of the group or have relatives, many friends and mentors belonging to the group.

When Betty called out Native Americans, a high proportion of mostly fair-skinned women sat at the highest point of the continuum. Betty asked a few about their relations with Native Americans; one woman said she had high knowledge of Native Americans because her great-grandfather had been a Native American and they still had his arrowheads.

Next was Asian Americans. Over fifty per cent of the group sat in the high knowledge section although there were no more than two Asian Americans in our group of mostly white Americans. At the top of the continuum was a woman who had gone out with a Taiwanese boy in high school for two years and "used to go over for dinner at his house a lot." Another white woman

said she had high knowledge of Asians because when she was a little girl she had lived in the Philippines for a couple of years and could even speak their language but unfortunately had forgotten it.

People of African ancestry was once again a top-heavy continuum, a European American citing high knowledge of this group because she had been on Rotary Exchange and lived with an African American family for a year.

After we had finished covering all the “minorities” - who of course are only minorities in the US but certainly not on a global scale - including bi-racial/multicultural people (with the exception of Jewish people I believe), Betty informed us that the game was over, we were to take a lunch break and then, meet back in the afternoon at which time we would deal with homophobia/gay/lesbian/bisexual/ transgender issues.

Then it occurred to me that we hadn't had a chance to situate ourselves on a continuum of knowledge about European Americans. I liked the term European American because the plain term American, although hardly ever expressly stated, really means white American in colloquial speech. All other Americans must mark their colorized, ethnic, hyphenated identity in relationship to that unmarked subject – the omniscient, invisible but ever present white American. White America does not speak its ethnicity whilst all other colors/races/ethnicities have no other choice but to do so. They must, in fact, invoke their race/ethnicity to access Americanness e.g. Arab Americans, Armenian Americans, Mexican Americans etc.

Are these hyphenated American identities a diluted, less legitimate form of Americanness?

As a person who grew up in southern Africa, what is most confusing to me about American identities is that even the indigenous inhabitants have to access Americanness through a form of ironic hyphenation, Native American. Shouldn't they be known by the simple adjective American since they are the original “sons of the soil” – a term we use in southern Africa to

refer to those who legitimately own the land?

It seems that the Tangerine Bully's poisonous immigration policy – deporting “illegals,” banning Muslims, building a stupid wall – can be undone by the fact that neither he nor his ancestors nor his progeny are the real Americans. They are not native to the place. They are in fact settler-colonialists who now claim title to the land and all that comes with it, the fallacy that it is theirs in the first place.

So that steamy, humid morning, I was heartened by the fact that we were referring to European Americans – a more accurate term which seemed to promise a more level playing field. So I put up my hand and requested a chance to play the game using European Americans as our designated group.

Furrowed brow, flailing hands, heaving shoulders. Betty was startled, flummoxed. It seemed like the thought had never even crossed her mind. She silently ruminated for a long while and then finally she asked, “Do you guys wanna do European Americans or should we wait until after lunch or should we just forget it altogether?”

“What?” I murmured to the one other international student there, a South African. Betty had not asked a single Latina or Asian if she minded if we use her racial grouping to play our multicultural game. Was this a game for everyone to see how much they knew about other types of people or was this a game for white people to see how much they knew about non-whites? As perturbing as that thought was, minutes later I was to become much, much more distraught.

After some back and forth, the students agreed to play the game. Now, everyone took up their position on the continuum and the majority huddled somewhere towards the center - medium knowledge. I found myself to be one of a handful of students in the high knowledge section because for some reason, this roomful of mostly white people, in positioning themselves on a continuum of knowledge about themselves, claimed that they had little self-

knowledge.

The woman who had alleged a profound knowledge of Asian peoples because she had a Taiwanese boyfriend for a year in high school said that although she was born into a white family, grew up with white parents, had white relatives, watched white T.V. and read white books all her life, she knew so little about her family's European roots. Were they really German, Irish, French or Scandinavian? Her family had a complicated ancestry and their bloodlines were difficult to trace. The "complexity" of whiteness was reiterated by several other participants who also explained that they didn't know much about the original European culture from which their forebears had sprung so how could they claim high knowledge.

I was stunned by these claims. Do European Americans have to comprehend Europe to fathom themselves when they claim to know their ethnic "Others" by dining at their house or owning arrowheads? Do they not see how white American culture, thanks to its promiscuous hybridity and entangled roots, dominates the entire world's media, arts, politics, economics, technology etc.? The idea of whiteness as an ethnicity is of course as deeply problematic as blackness or Latinoness or Asianness as ethnicity but what I saw in these claims of ignorance was not humility but hubris. When the white Self claims complexity, does it infer that blackness, Asianness, Latinoness etc. is simplicity, a mere foil?

This allusion to the complex Self versus the simplified Other re-establishes whiteness as the "neutral" background against which all others must become visible. In later years, I would read scholars of whiteness who argue that part of the power of white privilege is to function as the invisible "standard" by which all other "non-white" ethnicities must mark their difference but despite this important work, the power of whiteness continues to operate through its persistent effacement of its own centralizing power to define by silent negation, not just ontological ethnic identities, but categories of knowledge and omniscient epistemics.

III. Museums/Knowledge/Philosophy/Epistemology/Literature/ Music and “non-ethnic” Whiteness

A few years ago, Professor Hamid Dabashi penned a caustic article in Al Jazeera entitled, [“Can non-Europeans think?”](#) He writes: “Why is European philosophy ‘philosophy,’ but African philosophy ethnophilosophy.” Then he goes on to ask rhetorically why, “do you only see animals and non-white peoples and their cultures featured inside glass cages [at New York’s Museum of Natural History], but no cage is in sight for white people and their cultures.”

The reason why is because white power and privilege are operationalized through being people tout court, not ethnically marked white people.

India-based scholar, Aditya Nigam, in a response to the debate Professor Dabashi’s article evoked, wrote a piece entitled, [“End of Postcolonialism and the Challenge for ‘Non-European’ Thought.”](#) In his essay, Nigam critiques the phenomenon of the complex (white) Self who can so easily “know” the simple and simplified Indian Other by demonstrating how the European philosopher, Slavoj Zizek, writes of the Hindu tradition of tantra after reading just one book on it.

Nigam claims that Zizek’s 2011 book, *Living in the End Times*, is not only full of blatant factual errors (such as claiming that the Maoist Naxalites operate in India’s urban slums – they operate in densely-forested areas) but it even misspells an Indian author’s name as Sudep rather than Sudeep. Nigam writes indignantly, “Imagine if I were to spell Zizek as Zizik,” and goes on to lament that Sudeep Chakravarti, author of the book, *The Red Sun*, about the Maoists, is quoted by “the Philosopher” not as a fellow thinker but merely as a “native informant.”

Being a philosopher allows Zizek to approach the Other without the ethnographic tools of the anthropologist because, according to Nigam’s

critique, Zizek is interested not in the Indian Self but the Indian as Other to the Self. More correctly, the ethnically European and Eurocentric Self which never speaks its name.

The power of whiteness to define through the omission of ethnic self-reference and the perpetual recentering of whiteness creeps into every area of life: world literature is often crudely reduced to literature by non-whites and world music is similarly music by non-whites but it can be accorded the adjective “world” because that world is still owned by those non-non-people who read and write literature and make and listen to music. And that Literature and Music operate on the level of the “universal” in contrast to the “particular” ethnic literatures and musical traditions that pertain to certain peoples, fixed in time and place by omniscient, omnipresent, invisible whiteness.

Every time the name of any European intellectual such as Marx, Foucault, Derrida or Freud is invoked as Theory in the academy, the same principle operates. Their thought is rarely positioned as emanating from a specific ethnohistorical context/subject position but instead is used, literally, to read the world which provides the raw material that then serves to corroborate their profound insights.

IV. The High Stakes for “non-whites” of “non-ethnic” Whiteness

When the white Self fails to discern her own knowledge of self, we should read this as enabling a certain power dynamic to continue through the dangerous effacement of whiteness’ own ethnicity. The most extreme example of this sort of erasure occurred at the end of that long, humid morning on the liberal, left-leaning East Coast of the United States.

A white woman who was seated all the way at the end of the European American continuum in low knowledge explained that she felt that the white

American culture of “plain old white people” was just “nothing.” It was so void of meaning that since she was a little girl, her father had decorated the house with African sculptures and she felt that these distant cultures were so much “richer.”

In the age of globalization when many countries are fighting against not only US military might but what they experience as American cultural hegemony, when upper-middle-class Indian kids are more keen to celebrate Halloween than Diwali, these trite comments echo hollowly in our eardrums. Are they not merely self-serving subterfuge that allows “non-ethnic” Whiteness to camouflage its own potency?

Why do so many of these students have such a perverse reaction to their own whiteness? The question is not only why they don't think they know anything about European American culture but why was it important to show that they knew about other cultures.

White guilt springs to mind. Perhaps by trying to align themselves with “diversity” (another code word for non-white), they were trying to sidestep that paralyzing guilt. But is it also because “people of color” are cool and hip in this media-saturated world where Beyonce reigns supreme? The more a white person knows about “minorities” in a liberal arts college the better because this knowledge of the Other is considered valuable. However, perhaps the first step in knowing the Other, is to recognize the complexity of one's own ethnic heritage by naming it, just as others have been named, and then by grappling with the complexity of Others.

When the white Self negates its own Self, it does not become a non-Self the same way that non-whites and non-Europeans have for so long been denied their personhood. White privilege accrues its power by both effacing whiteness and making itself invisible whilst making all other ethnicities hypervisible.

Although it is true that multiculturalism has been reduced like so much else in the US to a mode of consumption, primarily so-called ethnic food, every

time whiteness is allowed to function as an invisible non-ethnicity, its power to define the Other by negation is reasserted. And the term non-white or non-European should never ever be used! The only way to make sure that non-white doesn't mean non-person is to make whiteness visible as an ethnicity, just like all the others.

That's why when I teach about the constellation of "ethnic" neighborhoods that make up the "global city," I take my class to Beverly Hills. When my colleague comes to visit New York this summer to take advantage of the "ethnic" restaurants, I will tell him, "Sure, let's meet up. See you at McDonald's."

#\$%^&^&^&^&^%\$#