

## THE WHITENESS OF TRUTH AND THE PRESUMPTION OF INNOCENCE

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I began this morning doing something I have done too many times to count as a woman of Color in the academy—assuring another woman of Color that although some White women and men on our campus questioned her character, integrity and ability to behave professionally—I understood that it was her detractors who were the problem and that I would advocate on her behalf. Of course this is not how I planned to spend my morning. The plan was to begin this chapter. Interestingly, my conversation with Karla supports the argument I want to make here, an argument I have been making in my head for years: truth is white.

Having experienced the “academy” on predominantly White campuses as a student, faculty member and administrator, I have learned many lessons as an African American woman about what I have long termed the “whiteness of truth.” In this chapter I explicate my “theory” that truth is indeed a wholly-owned subsidiary of White people. The purpose of this book—the un-restraining of the strained relationships between women of Color and White women—offers an opportunity to examine the ways in which White people, White women in particular, own the truth in ways that negate the realities of women and people of Color in the academic setting.

An obvious product of the whiteness of truth is the presumption of innocence. In short, if White women own the truth in every setting they can and will be “found innocent” of improper or racist motives, judgments, intentions and actions. Necessarily, since women of Color do not own the truth, we have been “found guilty” of being wild, untrustworthy, angry, crazy, violent, disrespectful and rude in a world where truth, whiteness and innocence walk in concert. Hence, it was easy for a group of White people on our campus to question Karla’s professionalism, ability to keep a confidence and be trusted while ignoring numerous examples of their own multiple failures to do the same.

Lest the reader understand the questioning of Karla’s integrity to be something trivial, I want to explain the insidious nature of truth when it is owned by Whites and never, or rarely, in the possession of people of Color. The untruths spoken about Karla were being used to justify her elimination from a project that would contribute to her professional development, placing her in line for greater responsibilities and promotion. The only thing required to halt Karla’s professional growth was the speaking of a single untruth in the form of truth through White lips, the gentle nod of agreement from other Whites around the table and eventual “ah ha” or “oh” from everyone else in attendance. Of course, Karla may attempt to deny the untruth that has been spoken as truth. But, as someone whose skin color makes it impossible for her to own truth, Karla is not a credible witness. What’s more, the “testimony” of Karla’s shortcomings will travel with each person present, spreading across campus like a virus becoming part of every explanation for not working with, hiring, promoting or drawing upon Karla’s expertise because “well, I can’t recall the entire story, but I’ve been told that we simply can’t trust Karla to...”

Whether the untruths spoken about women of Color take the form of “simple” and out-right lies or exaggerations *about* the behavior of women and men of Color or come as inaccurate statements that are *reactions* to people of Color who behave as if they are equal to White women by questioning, challenging, instructing, reprimanding or introducing new ideas, they have the power and potential to do irreparable professional and personal damage.

### Colored Truth

Some observations about the character, motives, demeanor and intelligence of women of Color and White women demonstrate the whiteness of truth, innocence of White women and guilt of people of Color. In this section I discuss these observations and the ways they work by providing actual examples from the frontlines of predominantly white institutions.

**Observation I: Having black or brown skin makes it impossible to be objective where race is concerned and/or when the potential for a dispute occurs between another person of Color and a White person. However, those with white skin can always be trusted to remain objective in these situations.**

I first experienced this “reality” during an interview for a position that would give me control of a rather large budget and decision-making power about key expenditures. The position had the potential to place people of Color at odds with one another (some of whom were women) and with White women although no one could come up with an example when such a problem occurred. Still, many of the White women involved in the interview

process were concerned that such a problem could happen should the wrong candidate be given the position. Hence the importance of the question in a room full of White women and me, the lone Black-woman candidate for the position: "How are you going to handle being Black when you have to decide between spending limited resources on minorities versus us (White women)?"

There are so many problems with this question that it is difficult to know where to begin. Without missing a beat, the White woman posing the question discounted my gender, something I would argue was easy to do since, for so many White people, whiteness is required in order to be considered fully a woman. But that is a subject for another volume. She could have just as easily stated, "You know you all stick together and that means you will have to fight everything within you to be fair to us poor little White women." Since my childhood I had been taught that black was beautiful. In the academy, and elsewhere in the American psyche, I have learned that black is overpowering, overwhelming and reduces one's ability to reason, be fair and objective. Of course it would be difficult for me, or any other woman of Color, to think rationally when I might have to decide between my White "sisters" and my "real" brothers and sisters of Color. Interestingly, I appeared to be the only person in the room bothered by the question. Everyone else seemed to lean forward, waiting for me to promise that I would try, hard as it might be, to not allow my blackness to overtake my ability to treat White women fairly. I made no such promise but rather reprimanded the questioner for posing such an inappropriate question. One wonders whether the discussion after my departure centered around my refusal to address such a racist question as evidence of my bias against White women.

**Observation II: When women of Color talk about race they always do so with a not-so hidden agenda. However, when White women do the same it is out of the goodness of their hearts.**

This is not a new observation but was first identified by Peggy McIntosh (1988) as part of a lengthy list of white privileges. I suggest that this particular privilege necessarily leads to the assumption of white truth, innocence and purity of motive when White people find themselves involved in discussions about race. Perhaps the best example occurred during a meeting about a separate issue when the discussion turned to the inappropriate and potentially racist behavior of a White male faculty member during one of his classes. He had admitted to using a racial slur during a lecture and students, both of Color and White, complained to university administration. Although the purpose of our meeting was not to discuss this incident, the topic arose toward the end of our discussion. One of the White women present explained "when you take into consideration *who* he is married to, you know he is not biased." All of the White faculty members in the room nodded in agreement.

In other words, when a White person marries someone who is not White, s/he gets an automatic pass on the "racism test." Apparently, sleeping black or brown exempts White people from being viewed as racially biased. The notion that a White faculty member who uses racial slurs but sleeps brown or black cannot be biased suggests something about the inherent goodness and innocence of whiteness. It is almost as if the White woman who jumped to our colleague's defense was saying something about his generosity in marrying someone who is not White. Being willing to talk about race or marry a "race woman" or "race man" implies that Whites have somehow lowered themselves, marrying beneath their station, when they do not have to do so or discussing something of little or no real consequence to them. They are noble, these White men and women who take up the banner of race during meetings or sleep with Brown and Black women and men. Because they are so generous, there is nothing really in it for them when they talk about race or marry a person of Color, these White people get to "own" truth and trust and be presumed innocent of all racist offenses and motives. Additionally, having bi-racial children or a partner of Color seems to exempt White women and men from having to explain, acknowledge or apologize for racist behavior. It is almost as if their decision to be in a relationship that includes people of Color gives them an automatic "get out of jail free" card when they behave in ways that would be unacceptable for anyone else.

However, possessing black or brown skin necessarily makes one suspect as evident in the conversation I was engaged in about the status of the African American Studies Program on our campus when a White colleague began by explaining the need for our meeting: "We are here to discuss African American Studies because it is important and well, Karen, we know why *you* are interested in this program." Again, as an African American woman, I must have a bias when it comes to African American Studies. The presence of the Whites around the table is genuine, sincere. While I am present, in their minds, *because of my race*; my White colleagues are there *in spite of* their race and *because it is the right thing to do*.

**Observation III: Women of Color are inherently angry and intimidating. These qualities are often revealed when they express dissent, challenge or question the behavior of White women. Anger and intimidation make it difficult for Whites to accurately recall exchanges with women of Color. The exaggeration and misreporting of events and outright lies about women of Color "feel" true to White women and will, over time, become true in the minds of most hearers.**

Should a woman of Color dare to disagree with a White woman, whether during a public meeting or in private, she is often described as angry and intimidating. When a woman of Color offers new information that challenges the long-held opinion of Whites or asks a question about the practices and

behavior of a White person, the woman of Color has crossed into dangerous and forbidden territory. As the following example illustrates, the "facts" of the exchange will be repeated again and again often portraying women of Color as attackers and White women as innocent victims.

As one of two organizers, both of us African American women, I was the instructor in a year-long workshop on best practices for incorporating diverse materials into university courses. During our first session, we arranged for students of Color to address the faculty participants to discuss their positive and negative classroom experiences when race, class and gender issues arose. We intentionally decided not to instruct the faculty members how to react to the stories they would hear. What I mean here is that I have yet to witness a discussion of any kind during which people of Color have been asked to be vulnerable in discussing race where they have not been challenged by White audience members. Confident that the "interruption" would occur, we planned to use it as a "teachable moment" explaining that the discomfort experienced when listening to examples of racism in one's community, workplace or campus often provokes some to question the reality of those experiences or label them as atypical. We thought we would use the "interruption" of the students' stories to demonstrate how students of Color can be silenced in the classroom by instructors and classmates and the role a professor can decide to play to make certain that every voice is heard.

An African American male graduate student discussed the differential treatment he witnessed when he was forced to miss the first class meeting at the start of a semester. He mentioned to another classmate that he had to withdraw from the course because the professor explained that it would be impossible for him to catch up after missing the first three-hour session. His friend, a White graduate student, was surprised to hear this since she also missed the first class but was allowed to remain in the class. As the African American male continued, a White woman faculty member in the audience began to speak "that happens to White people too, that happened to my sister." The graduate student continued speaking but was interrupted once more when the same White woman faculty member repeated "that happens to White people too, that happened to my sister." She then proceeded to tell her sister's story of being differentially treated by a White male professor.

Knowing that we had our interruption example or "teachable moment," we allowed the panel to resume once the White woman professor completed her sister's story. During the question and answer period an Asian American woman asked all of us to reflect on what happened when the student of Color tried to communicate his experiences and was interrupted. She explained that the White woman professor's need to tell a story that contradicted that of a person of Color helped to diminish the significance of the African American male's experience and placed the focus of attention on the White woman when students of Color had been asked to be vulnerable in a room full of

mostly White faculty. As she spoke, the African American male graduate student thanked the Asian American woman for making the point.

I probably do not have to write that we never saw the White woman professor in the workshop again. Shortly after the Asian American woman's comment, we broke for lunch and the White woman literally ran from the room, in tears. At that point, I did something for which I continue to kick myself to this day—I ran after her, calling her name. In a series of emails to me, the other workshop coordinator and her dean, a White male, she expressed her outrage:

I was taken aback by the personal attack made by another participant toward me last Wednesday during the workshop, and I was dismayed that neither you nor [the other coordinator] indicated that such behavior was inappropriate. Realizing that the attack was (at the very least tacitly) condoned, I decided I could not be comfortable participating in such an environment.

In addition to copying the dean of her college on the exchange, the White woman professor engaged numerous colleagues in discussion about how she was attacked by the Asian American woman while two African American women did nothing to protect her. She refused to acknowledge that she had actively dismissed the experience of the African American student. Although several attempts were made to bring her back to the discussion, she refused to be engaged. Well, she refused to engage the three women of Color involved. But she had no problem discussing the situation with other White men and women in the workshop and colleagues in her academic department. Many of those discussions were relayed to the rest of the workshop attendees when we debriefed the event. My last communication with the White woman professor included an attempt to acknowledge the difficulties associated with talking about race, the discomfort many of us feel and the need to press through it:

I have to say that doing the work of diversity, including infusing our curriculum with diversity, is often uncomfortable, tense and challenging for both faculty and students. Had you remained in the session, you would have received information and participated in the discussion about tension and discomfort experienced in these classes. Honestly, opting out of the discussion is always the easiest route, an option not usually afforded marginalized groups. The students present in that room discussed classroom and campus events that they would love the opportunity to avoid, to walk out on. However, that is a privilege they are not afforded. This work takes both courage and commitment from all parties or everybody loses. I encourage you to talk with me about this issue.

Of course, she did not talk with me about the issue. She opted to disparage the work of the workshop and the three women of Color she held responsible for an attack on her privilege. I am happy to report that we had a very powerful discussion with the remainder of the participants during our next meeting. Many of the White participants agreed that the White woman's motives had been misunderstood. When she interrupted the African American male graduate student it was to show the similarity in mistreatment of students who are either White or of Color, some explained. In the end, many participants understood that interrupting the student with an example that contradicted his experience could be interpreted as dismissive and shut down communication in the classroom. Still, some of the participants, after talking at length with the White woman professor, expressed the very fragile position in which she continued to find herself because of the "attack." Remember, the so-called attack involved a woman of Color suggesting that we all reflect on what happened when someone on the panel, a student of Color, was interrupted during his presentation. Very little consideration was given the vulnerable position the student occupied by talking about his experiences on a predominantly White campus in a room full of White faculty members. Nearly one year later, our office was asked to develop a mandatory sexual harassment and discrimination training for the entire campus. Once again, we heard from the White woman faculty member in an email forwarded by her dean. She wanted to know if she could be exempted from the training since our office had treated her so poorly in the past. Again, the "truth" that she shares with her colleagues (and anyone who will listen) is one that disparages three women of Color and, by association, everything we touch.

### Acting White

I am convinced that the problem many women of Color face on predominantly White campuses stems from our belief that we are indeed equal to White people. Acting on that belief, we sometimes pose questions, challenge ideas, correct inaccuracies, draw attention to inequities and even expect to be paid the same wage as our White counterparts. Although there may be policies in place, mission and vision statements and the occasional speech by high-ranking administrators about the importance of every voice, culture, experience and way of being, the reality for many people of Color on predominantly White campuses does not match the rhetoric.

An exchange I had nearly 20 years ago with, of all people, a White nail technician helped me understand that while many White women and men *talk* about being inclusive their hearts (or maybe their minds) are not completely sold on the notion of equality. In an attempt to explain just how open and inclusive she is to all people, races and religions, the White woman nail technician relayed story after story of the numerous women of Color

she had served. But there was one African American woman who left a "bad taste" in her mouth. The nail technician continued to tell me how that African American woman wanted her nails to be perfect in every way. "She kept telling me how she wanted things, that she wanted me to shape her nails this way and that way ... she was treating me like I was Black!" Little did that African American customer know that in expecting to get what she paid for she was "acting White."

The mistake that women of Color often make on predominantly White campuses, is expecting their voices to be desired. Too many of our White colleagues want diversity if it means that they can attract people of Color who will be just like them in every way except the color of their skin. They forget that a diverse professorate, staff and student body should bring a diversity of opinion, outlook, ideas and experiences. That means that when a person of Color says something that a White person has not thought of or would not say, problems arise. When White women are on the receiving end of a question about their behavior, they are often shocked, offended and often feel attacked. Every time a woman of Color questions a White woman, she is acting like her equal, she is acting White. Unfortunately, in systems of privilege and power there just are not enough spaces for everyone to be White.

### Colored Realities

One of the most damaging consequences of whiteness and the white ownership of truth and innocence is the power to silence women of Color, stopping us "dead in our tracks," removing us from the discussion and rendering us incredible, untrustworthy and suspect. In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, bell hooks (2000) notes the not-so-subtle messages women of Color receive from White women in the feminist movement when their comments fail to toe the party line:

When I participated in feminist groups, I found that white women adopted a condescending attitude towards me and other non-white participants. The condescension they directed at black women was one of the means they employed to remind us that the women's movement was "theirs"—that we were able to participate because they allowed it, even encouraged it; after all, we were needed to legitimate the process. They did not see us as equals. They did not treat us as equals. And though they expected us to provide first-hand accounts of black experience, they felt it was their role to decide if these experiences were authentic ... If we dared to criticize the movement or to assume responsibility for reshaping feminist ideas and introducing new ideas, our voices were tuned out, dismissed, silenced. We could be heard only if our statements echoed the sentiments of the dominant discourse (pp. 12–13).

As hooks (2000) notes, in many academic settings, women of Color are merely window dressing, present to signal the openness of White women and men but not required to speak. Countless university committees include people of Color for the sole purpose of legitimizing a search process that fails to yield candidates of Color. White committee chairs and members can always assure outsiders that the process was unbiased because of the presence of a committee member of Color. However, should that committee member of Color point to the lack of diversity in the candidate pool, she or he may be silenced or ignored. Every time a person of Color is labeled problematic when she asks questions or introduces new ideas, the message is clear—the university is “theirs” (hooks, 2000, p. 12). We are invited guests who must mind our manners by remaining silent or risk being seen as obstacles and “in the way” of the real work of the committee.

Until White women and men can see the multiple ways they are negatively impacted through their sole ownership of truth and innocence, little will change for women and men of Color on college campuses. Although much attention is paid the importance of a diverse student body, faculty and staff, the realities of that diversity—different ideas, understandings, ways of knowing and being—prevents us all from benefitting from that diversity. When our White women colleagues take offense at our questions, disagreements or suggestions they not only shut down communication, they set in motion a “story” about these exchanges that negatively paints women of Color as mean, abrasive, inappropriate, radical, intimidating, etc., while White women are depicted as innocent victims of a ruthless tirade. When White men and women own truth, they get to call the shots in the academy. Too often those shots, or messages about their exchanges with women of Color, turn into weapons with the power to limit or destroy opportunities for growth and development.

Belief in the inherent inferiority of people of Color aids in the creation of destructive stories about them and their behavior that are accepted by other Whites. White women committed to this work must be willing to do what Papusa Molina (1990) recommends—work at the personal level, unlearning attitudes and behaviors of oppression (p. 329). But White women cannot unlearn what they deny exists. Too many White women and men in the academy assume their advanced degrees, service on diversity committees and willingness to mentor people of Color are evidence that they lack bias or are capable of acts of oppression. I am asking for a monumental shift in the way White women think about themselves and people of Color in order to allow all of us to be seen as legitimate parts of the academy with the right to be ourselves as we interact and engage one another. Barbara Smith (1990) makes this point beautifully:

I am sure that many women here are telling themselves they aren't racist because they are capable of being civil to Black women, having been

raised by the parents to be anything but. It's not about merely being polite ... Racism and racist behavior are our white patriarchal legacy. What is your fault is making no serious effort to change old patterns of contempt—to look at how you still believe yourselves to be superior to Third World women and how you communicate these attitudes in blatant and subtle ways (p. 26).

This is a call for White women to make a “serious effort to change” the academy and themselves. Whenever what we believe to be true about ourselves is questioned discomfort, uncertainty and perhaps embarrassment wash over us. In my mind, the key to successfully dealing with these feelings is to avoid allowing them to turn in to anger and resentment. Rather, those feelings provide an opportunity for exploration. White women dedicated to becoming our allies will have to resist giving in to and participating in these well-established systems designed to silence and discredit women of Color by portraying their dissension as inappropriate and threatening. What would happen if White women and men, when confronted with a difficult question from a person of Color about a plan or idea, reflected on their answers to the following:

- What am I feeling right now? Why?
- What would happen if I refused to take the question or comment personally?
- Am I able to suspend the frustration that I am feeling right now to actually hear what my colleague is saying to or asking of me?
- Have I really thought the issues through?
- Why am I unwilling to answer or consider the question being posed?

I always wondered how different the outcome might have been had the White woman professor mentioned above “stayed in the room” and participated in the powerful discussion that followed her interruption of the African American student. Interestingly, five months before the workshop, the same White woman professor visited my office expressing a desire to work with and mentor students of Color in her academic unit. She noticed that many of the students of Color in her classes were struggling with the material and wanted some guidance in approaching them. She admitted being concerned that students of Color would not view her as genuinely interested in their success. In an email to me after our initial meeting, the White woman faculty member articulated an appreciation of the complexities of the faculty-student relationship and explained, “I haven't wanted to make things worse by being too pushy, especially given the power differential ... This is an area where, even when people try to understand, misunderstandings can occur.” Yet, in just five months she managed to forget the power differential that

once concerned her, having no problem interrupting an African American male student serving on a panel as a guest of the workshop. Although she expressed the desire to be vulnerable and genuine, as well as an appreciation for the possibility of being misunderstood, five months later she was no longer willing to "try hard" or deal with her behavior. It was easier to become the victim of Asian American and African American women while wallowing in the innocence of her whiteness than to confront and acknowledge her own behavior.

The ease of whiteness, of owning truth, along with the privilege of being found innocent in the presence of angry women of Color, is the root of the problem. My earnest hope and advice to White women who are truly interested in building relationships across racial lines is that they be open to the frustration, discomfort and embarrassment that result when pushed to think differently or accept information that counters long-held beliefs. I suspect that the discomfort does not last forever and that on the other side of all those feelings is a better understanding of situations, structures, white privilege and the possibility of a relationship with a woman of Color. Since refusing to engage is an act of power and privilege most women of Color do not have in their toolkits, it is White women who must be willing to move through the discomfort toward women of Color who have already made themselves vulnerable, making the first move by asking for a salary equal that of others, pointing out a possible error in a plan or asking for more information.

Finally, I hope that our White women colleagues will relinquish their sole ownership of truth and innocence and begin to interrogate "angry women of Color stories," asking for specifics and, when appropriate, pointing out possible alternate explanations. If White women in the academy are interested in becoming allies with women of Color, they must be willing to speak up for us when they hear outrageous stories about our behavior. White women must also be willing to hear us when we speak and move beyond being offended by our presence, ideas and questions. They must also be willing to accept and acknowledge women of Color as their equal and necessary partners in the academy. A sure sign that we see others as our equals is our acceptance of their views, questions and challenges as credible and worthy of consideration.

White women must be willing to "stay in the room" when it is easy and when it is difficult to do so. What I mean here is that, it might be easier to challenge someone complaining about women of Color "fighting" to receive equal pay, especially if you played no role in the decision-making process that led to the inequitable pay. It will be harder when a woman of Color asks a White woman, who has communicated her commitment to creating genuine relationships across racial lines, how as the chair of a search committee she has managed not to identify any viable candidates of Color.

One of the problems associated with the presumption of innocence is the idea that White women cannot afford to be found to be human, that is to make mistakes, to totally "drop the ball" from time to time.

I understand I am asking White women to walk away from a system of power and privilege that not only gives them the upper hand with women of Color but further cements their solidarity with powerful White men who may also be at odds with women of Color. Perhaps these facts have caused so many of the women of Color I interact with in the academy to be doubtful about the prospect of improving relationships with the White women on their campuses. The realist in me knows that many White women will not reject the system of privilege and all of its benefits. The optimist in me looks forward to creating sustained professional and personal relationships with the White women courageous enough to try.

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