



ANNA KAUEMAN MOON

BY THE COLOR OF THEIR SKIN

TIM WISE ON THE MYTH OF A POSTRACIAL AMERICA

DAVID COOK

IN the fall of 1968, six months after civil-rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on a hotel balcony in Memphis, Tennessee, Tim Wise was born to lower-middle-class white parents down the road in Nashville. Wise, who would later commit himself to carrying on King's fight for a racially just society, grew up in a nation struggling to redefine itself: sweeping reform legislation had been passed, ending legalized segregation, but black Americans remained largely shut out of decent jobs, housing, and education.

Wise went to Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana, where he called for the university to divest its holdings in apartheid South Africa. In the early 1990s Wise fought fiercely to defeat political candidate David Duke, a white supremacist who ran for various state and national offices as a Republican. Soon after that, Wise began lecturing and writing about issues of racial justice.

When Wise introduces himself to an audience, he often starts with his ancestry. Like most of us, he has inherited a complex past. His maternal ancestors were early colonists who took ownership of land that had once belonged to the Powhatan and Shawnee Indians, and they farmed it with the help of slave labor. On his father's side, Wise's ancestors arrived from Russia in the early twentieth century, Jewish immigrants looking for a refuge from oppression. Though many of Wise's ancestors embodied the values of hard work, honesty, and responsibility, they had one trait Wise believes made an even greater difference in their success in this society: their white skin.

As a white Southerner, Wise is somewhat unique among antiracism activists. African American scholar Michael Eric Dyson has proclaimed Wise "one of the most brilliant, articulate, and courageous critics of white privilege in the nation." Over the last decade Wise has spoken at more than four hundred colleges and universities, including Harvard, Stanford, Yale, and Columbia. He's also appeared on hundreds of radio and television shows and has helped train law-enforcement officers, corporate executives, government officials, and journalists to spot racial bias in their work. Wise is the author of four books, including *Speaking Treason Fluently: Anti-Racist Reflections from an Angry White Male* and *White like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son* (both *Soft Skull Press*). Earlier this year *City Lights* published his latest, *Between Barack and a Hard Place: Race and Whiteness in the Age of Obama*, which debunks the idea that we live in a "postracial society."

Wise believes race continues to be a defining quality for people in our nation, a trait that grants either advantage or disadvantage. I have heard him speak several times, and he reminds me of a James Baldwin quote: "The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it — at no matter what risk."

Wise and I met over a pot of coffee in Nashville, where he lives with his wife and their two daughters. Barack Obama had recently become the nation's first black president. It was Sunday morning, when many Americans go to church, the time of the week that Martin Luther King Jr. called "the most segregated hour" in America.

Cook: By your definition, what is racism, and what does it mean to be racist?

Wise: Racism is an ideology that says certain people, by virtue of their race, are either inferior or superior to others of a different race, with *race* usually being defined by skin color. Like any word that ends in "-ism" — capitalism, communism, socialism — racism is a system as well as an ideology. It's a way of organizing society.

There are two different types of racists. First there are the overt racists: the neo-Nazis, Klansmen, and white supremacists. Then there are the ones we might consider "passive" racists. In a society like ours, where racism is so prevalent, the vast majority of us — maybe all of us — silently collaborate with systemic racism. We don't consciously believe in racial superiority or inferiority, but we've become so used to the existing policies, practices, and procedures that we don't question them. To the extent that we don't challenge this system of racism, we are collaborating with it.

I think the second type of racist is actually more dangerous. The first type we can easily recognize, and it doesn't take much courage to condemn them. The second type is like an invisible gas: you don't know it's there until you've been lulled unconscious by it.

Cook: You often write about "white privilege." Can you give us some examples?

Wise: White privilege is any advantage, head start, or protection the system grants whites but not people of color. It's the flip side of discrimination. If people of color are victims of housing discrimination 3 million times a year — and that's a safe estimate — then that's 3 million more opportunities for housing that whites have. If people of color are discriminated against in employment, then that's more employment opportunities for whites. The flip side of disadvantage is advantage. You can't have a down without an up.

Privilege also takes the form of less pressure to perform. If a white student in a classroom doesn't answer a question correctly, no one will say, "Those white people don't even deserve to be in this school. They obviously had standards lowered for them." We whites are able to be as incompetent or mediocre as we want and never have our mediocrity ascribed to our race. George W. Bush mangled the English language with regularity and still became president. If Barack Obama had mispronounced words the way Bush did, would he have been given the same degree of slack?

Then there's the privilege of not having to worry about being singled out for suspicion or mistreatment. I can go through the airport and not be viewed as a likely terrorist despite the fact that Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, the terrorists behind the Oklahoma City bombing, were white like me.

Cook: Some people dispute the notion that in 2009 white Americans have access to better lives simply because of the color of their skin.

Wise: Most people who say that will acknowledge that white privilege existed at some point. I always ask them: When did it stop?

Some think that racism ended with the Civil Rights Act of

1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968. Those were important steps, because they made it illegal to engage in discrimination. But just because you've made something illegal doesn't mean it no longer happens. No enforcement mechanisms existed for the Fair Housing Act until 1988, and evidence suggests there are still millions of cases of race-based housing discrimination every year.

We also know that job applicants with "white-sounding" names are 50 percent more likely to get called back than those with "black-sounding" names, even if both have the same qualifications. That is privilege. Is it as blatant as a "No Blacks Need Apply" sign? Of course not. The privilege has become more subtle.

Justice Department data tells us that black and Latino males are two to three times more likely to be stopped by police and searched for drugs, even though white men are up to four times more likely to have drugs on them.

Many generations of privilege have left whites with a financial advantage too. Young black couples just out of college start out on average with one-fifth the net worth of similar white couples. Their ability to start their own business, to finance further education for themselves or their kids, and to put money down on a home will all be less than that of the white couple.

The mistake people make is to think that history stops and starts with each new generation. But what happens in one generation affects the next, and the next, until some social force pushes back. It's not like a video game where you hit RESET and we start over again with each generation.

Cook: Why do you think so many white Americans deny the existence of privilege?

Wise: One reason is that most people want to believe they are living in a just society. Another is that to acknowledge the truth would call upon us to make some tough changes, and people are afraid to give up their advantage. It can also be psychologically harmful to confront the fact that one is benefiting unfairly from the system. The first thing whites tend to do, when they open their eyes to their own privilege, is fall into guilt and self-flagellation, and that isn't helpful. This becomes another reason not to confront the truth.

White denial isn't new. It has always existed. In the early sixties, when we were an apartheid nation, polls found most whites didn't think there was a problem. In 1963 two-thirds of whites thought blacks were treated equally. Every generation of white Americans, by and large, hasn't believed the problem to be real.

What is so disturbing to me about white denial is that we are denying the reality of other people's experiences. We are saying to people of color that what they *think* they experience is not what they actually experience. It's true that not every allegation of racism is well-founded. People can make mistakes of interpretation, and none of us is a perfect chronicler of his



TIM WISE

or her life. But white deniers are saying that people of color are hypersensitive, that they overreact and "play the race card."

Cook: Is racism a natural part of being human? Are we born with racist tendencies?

Wise: We are naturally predisposed to notice height, weight, eye color, skin color, facial features, hair texture. And there is probably a human tendency to favor those who are more like oneself. But there is a difference between that and having antipathy toward other groups. Also, the focus on skin color doesn't make sense to me. We have elevated its importance because powerful elites decided to do so. Skin color hasn't always been a primary concern. The Greeks viewed the African kingdoms as far superior to Europeans, whom they thought were slow and stupid, even though

they were closer in skin color to the Greeks. In the colonies that would become the United States, white indentured servants and African slaves worked, lived, slept, and played together — and some in the Virginia colony even conspired together to overthrow their masters. The elites needed a way to divide them, so they extended the notion of supremacy to servants of European descent and passed laws to segregate the races.

In a way segregation laws themselves are proof that racism isn't natural. If people naturally refused to associate with other races, there would be no need for laws to keep them apart.

Cook: What is your response to people who say race is a social construct, an illusion, and that they don't "see" it?

Wise: It is a *biological* illusion, but it's a social fact. There were no witches in Salem in 1692, but women died because people thought there were. There may not be separate races of humanity, but skin color has been given social meaning that affects people's lives. It's a sign of privilege for whites to say they are going to view people of color *only* as people. If I don't see their race, I'm not going to see their lives as they really are. I'm seeing them as abstract "human beings," not as people who've had certain experiences. I'm going to miss or misunderstand how their experiences have shaped them.

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