

# Lessons from The Color of Fear

VOLUME

IV



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## Field Reports: Using The Color of Fear in the Classroom

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Lessons from *The Color of Fear*

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## **VOLUME IV**

### **Field Reports:**

**Using The Color of Fear in the Classroom**

## WHITE PRIVILEGE AND *THE COLOR OF FEAR*

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By Jamie P. Ross

This chapter focuses on the role that *power, innocence, and ignorance* play in maintaining the position of white privilege. There are times when white people use their privilege in ways that overtly attempt to put and keep people of color in their places, but more often white privilege is less obvious. White privilege does not stand out in white people's behavior at all times. When white behavior is normalized, it is masked. At these times, white privilege and power hide behind the masks of innocence and the masks of ignorance. White people can hide their location, with relation to power, from themselves and/or others. In the film, *The Color of Fear (TCOF)*, David Christensen hides his power. As he hides his power, he keeps his privilege invisible, that is, behind a mask. In this chapter, we focus on the masking and unmasking of innocence and ignorance to get a better look at how the process of normalization of these masks makes whiteness powerful and consequently hides white privilege. The logic of power and privilege is reflected in the following relationship:

### **Masks of Innocence + Masks of Ignorance = Invisibility of White Privilege**

There are three goals in this chapter,

1. to analyze masking and unmasking,
2. to analyze the masks of innocence and ignorance, and
3. to analyze structures of power.

Each of the goals is achieved with an analysis of the film *The Color of Fear* along with other films, assigned reading, and writing assignments meant to tie together these different and varied forms of text.

References to the additional films, articles and writing assignments can be found in the endnotes.<sup>1</sup>

### Analyze Masking and Unmasking

When masks are created, new information is conveyed. This new information is actually a form of new knowledge, that is, what people count on when they say they know something to be true. When we accept something as true we may stop questioning its validity. We take “the truth” for granted. Unmasking reveals unexamined knowledge that has been taken as true, allowing us to question the validity of our “conventional wisdom”. For example, in *TCOF*, Loren says that David C. is taking his white privilege for granted. David C. does not seem to question his privilege. It is so masked that David C. does not even know that he has privilege, or unearned social advantage, because he is white. Loren says,

*I think he [David C.] did answer the question. As a white man, he doesn't have to think about his position in life, his place in the world. The history books tell him, as they are written, that this world is his. He doesn't have to think about, um, you know, where he goes, what he does. He doesn't have to think like a white person. The way the world has been set up, America in particular, white is human...that's what a human being is. So he doesn't have to worry about, “How do I think like a white person?” That doesn't, I don't know, but I would assume that doesn't enter a white person's mind, because they don't have to deal with that from day one. They step into a world that is theirs.*

Loren identifies something that David C. takes for granted. He takes being white for granted. He doesn't have to question what it means to be white in a white world. This is his privilege. David C. can deny that he has privilege because he cannot see it behind the mask. A mask has to come off of his whiteness in order for him to be able to question the presence and validity of his privilege. David C. has to see himself as having a color—white. As a white person, David C. can deny that he is affected by being white. He uses this form of denial to cover that race defines who he is—a man of the white race. David C. does not think he is of a particular race. He is just American. However, Loren's comment is meant to help David C. to unmask the color that David C. is, or more specifically, the meaning of his color in the social world. Unmasking helps show that being white is a particular race. When David C.'s whiteness is unmasked, David C. can question

the privilege that being white offers—“a world that is his,” as Loren states in his comment, a world where he does not have to try to think like a white person in order to understand the world around him as people of color do.

David C.’s identification as an American offers Victor an opportunity to introduce the idea that David C. has a color. Victor says,

*And when you say that your ethnicity is American—there is no American ethnicity! You had to throw away your ethnicity to become American. That’s what it means. That’s what it means. You give up who you are to become American. And you can pretend that it’s okay because you’re white.*

Victor is trying to get David C. to see that he has made himself invisible as an ethnic white man by calling himself “American.” And in so doing, David C. hides behind a mask of what it means to be white. When David C. says, “*because we don’t look at ourselves as an ethnic group,*” Victor tries to show David C. that there is a mask. He says,

*Do you know that that means something?...I just wonder, doesn’t it seem kinda deep to you, that you don’t have an answer to that question? That you have no—do you have any notion that the fact that you have no answer to that could actually be a source of meaning, experience, or knowledge?*

Victor is trying to suggest to David C. that he is wearing a mask. Yet at that point, the mask remains invisible to David C.

Masking creates knowledge that is invisible, taken for granted, and not questioned. The mask that David C. and other white people construct around themselves is created when they do not understand that “white” is a racialized identity and that as a member of the “white race” they have privilege.

Masks are created in at least the following three steps:

- First, knowledge is made by taking a particular point of view.
- Second, that point of view, that knowledge, is taken as true to the exclusion and/or devaluing of other points of view.
- Third, the devaluing dynamic takes place as that particular point of view is placed at the top of a hierarchy.

When those three steps are hidden, there is a mask at work. In TCOF, David C. does not realize that being white is taking a particular point of view. Second, he devalues the other members of the group's points of view when he repeatedly suggests that their feelings are "unfounded." The invisibility of the unequal hierarchy of knowledge becomes apparent when Loren says,

*I worked in corporate America for awhile, and now when I see guys walking down the street in a suit and a tie I'm like, "Whew, I bet he can't wait to go home and become a Black man again." You know, because you're not allowed to be a Black man in corporate America. Walk through some halls with some pride, you're gonna scare some people. Show that you have some intelligence, you scare people. You gotta shuffle. It's a 1993 shuffle, but it's still a shuffle.*

Knowledge is constructed in a hierarchical fashion with White behavior as the model of what is normal and ideal. Loren's comment reflects that he is either invisible or that when acknowledged, he is placed low within a white hierarchical structure of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Victor echoes Loren's sentiment when he says,

*Oh God, I hate being out of the city! Because I know who's out here. You all. Or at least I know who's in charge, even if there's other people out here. I know who's in charge.*

Victor feels the hierarchy of knowledge at work where his behavior, what he knows to be true, is suspect.

Although, no one whose primary racial identity is Native American is explicitly represented in TCOF, the invisibility of the Native American to the white man is made apparent when Victor challenges David C.'s claim that the world is wide open for everyone, that each man can stand on his own. Victor says,

*No, no! Each man does not stand on his own! Some men stand on other men and other women. Light-skinned men, men from Europe, stand on the heads and the hearts of men and women and children of color. That, is, of course, you also stand on the heads of white women. But, no, it's not a question of every man standing on his own ground. All of the ground, d\*\*\*ed near, of this planet has been taken from almost all of the people of color on this planet. You know, Australia was a Black continent. Africa was a Black continent, and if the people*

*themselves were not taken from Africa, then everything of value was taken from Africa, to the extent that that was possible. North America was a Red continent. South America was a Red continent. You are not standing on your own ground; you are standing on Red ground! And that's what it means to be white: to say that you're standing on your own ground and standing on somebody else's, and then mystify the whole process so it seems like you're not*

Victor is once again trying to point out that David C. has a mask—a mask of whiteness, a mask of privilege, a mask of domination—but because David C. can make it invisible (especially to himself), it seems like he does not have any masks.

A Native American perspective is powerfully depicted in the film *Smoke Signals*, although similar sentiments are conveyed in *TCOF*. The masked hierarchy of unequal knowledge is explicitly analyzed in *Smoke Signals* and is repeatedly unmasked. The lead actor in that film reminds us that to Native Americans, July 4th, Independence Day, does not mean freedom. It means murder and the subordination of native peoples. He offers different interpretations of the Native American experience in a White America and in so doing exposes the unequal hierarchy of knowledge that the individuals in *TCOF* convey.<sup>3</sup> Again, what the Native American takes as true is ignored or minimized. *Smoke Signals* tells of the Native Americans' distrust of contracts because few if any contracts with the white man are honored. Native American agreements mean little or nothing within a hierarchy of white knowledge creation. In *TCOF*, Hugh expresses the same sentiment. He says,

*What's different that's happened for us, and I am speaking as a people, borders on genocide, take-over, colonization. You know what happens to me when I pass a mission? You know, it's not the same thing that happens to every group that passes a mission. There's something different when I hear Father Junipero Serra, what do you think I think of?...It's chopping off hands. It's slavery. It, I mean, you know, that's what different. And it gets tiring to not have that difference known.*

Hugh's knowledge of what it means for a Latino man to pass a mission is invisible in the meaning scheme of a typical white man. The mask of power and privilege is created and maintained through the creation of a hierarchy of white knowledge that places the white interpretation, i.e., point of view, as a higher truth, if not the only truth.



Classism functions interdependently with racism and is a direct consequence of the unequal hierarchy of knowledge. Those at the bottom class of a hierarchy of knowledge that they themselves did not construct are blamed for the breakdown of the hierarchy when the valued knowledge gets challenged. For example, David C. claims to be frustrated that his daughters are having trouble getting into their first choice colleges. He blames it on people of color who are given minority points in the admission process. David C.'s privilege is challenged, yet the privilege is hidden within the hierarchy of knowledge and he blames those lower in the hierarchy. Yet, think about Hugh Vasquez' response:

*I am disturbed that anybody is not getting into college, including white women, including white men. I am disturbed that white men are out of jobs. However, what I get back most is pointing the finger at people of color and the women for taking the jobs and not at the corporate heads that are sending the factories to Mexico, to Indonesia etc., etc., to make more money.*

David C. wants to make the problem of racism and classism the problem of people of color. Hugh tries to direct David C.'s frustration to corporate economics, also at the top of the hierarchy rather than those people at the bottom who don't have the power to pose the kind of threat that worries David C.

In addition, Victor challenges the claim that people of color cause racism when he states that the problem of racism is a white man's problem, as Loren refers to the majority of white CEOs. Victor says,

*And then we get cross-examined, and it's like, Well, maybe your problem is ba-ba-ba-ba-ba." And it's always, you know, racism gets looked at as a person of color's problem, and "it's not! You know, we're like on the receiving end of the problem, but we are not the problem...I walk in a world where Black people, where Latinos, where Asians, where Arabs, all these different people are experienced as problem people and that, "We're going to deal with the people of color problem." When I fact, racism is essentially a white problem.*

The mask of power hides the privilege that being white entails. It entails having the privilege to blame others.

*I think what it means to be white, Victor says, in part, is that you have the privilege of blaming people of color for their own victimization*

*under white supremacy. I've heard you say that to me. I've heard you say that to him; I've heard you say that to him; I've I heard you say that to him; I've heard you say it to every person of color in the room who challenged your perception of yourself in the world. That is part of what it means to be white.*

Racism's and classism's entwined natures are unmasked when the hierarchy of white knowledge is challenged by Victor and Loren.<sup>4</sup> Masking creates hierarchies of knowledge. Unmasking challenges invisible knowledge that is taken for granted and used against others.

### **Masks of Innocence**

In *TCOF*, David C.'s inability to understand what racism is prompts him to say, "*You block your progress...By allowing your attitude towards the white man to limit you.*" He wants to portray himself as innocent of racism, that racism is a problem of people of color. Patricia Limerick's work on Native American history, particularly her article, "Empire of Innocence," analyzes the role of innocence in white privilege.<sup>5</sup> A discussion of David C.'s attitude can be extended through Limerick's work. White Americans portray themselves historically as the victim of Native American aggressions and as upholders of moral values, all the while pursuing opportunity, fortune, property, and adventure. Whatever the misfortune that befalls the pioneers, their responsibilities in the losses are as innocent victims of poor weather, soil, and the federal government's weak control of Indians, among other things. Limerick's analysis of innocence points out that a position of innocence must be maintained in order to blame others for problems. As introduced in the first goal of this chapter, white Americans' problems become reinterpreted as the problems that other people impose upon them. A mask is created. The other people become the problem that needs to be solved. Blaming others and making them the problem comes from a sense of entitlement. If entitlement is masked, white people can claim their innocence from racism with an air of sincerity. They hide behind a mask of innocence and blame.

The combination of a sense of entitlement and impulse to blame helps us understand how David C. can feel innocent of racism. In particular he says,

*You give us a hard time for being white, and being American, and being in control. I've never felt "in control." I had vineyards and pear*

*orchard for many years, and I employed many of [pointing to Roberto] “your people,” if you wish to call them that.*

David C. has a real sense of powerlessness, as many individual whites do and yet the racial makeup of powerful institutions is white. David C.’s sense of powerlessness is connected to his sense of innocence. Innocence masks power in this case. David C. can remain in denial that racial problems involve him as a white man. He can maintain the belief that race problems are a minorities’ issue that gets in their way. Patricia Limerick’s insight is that by assigning responsibility elsewhere, we eliminate the need to consider our own involvement in the making of problems. Although David C. is not a villain, neither is he innocent.

The coupling of innocence and blame is analyzed as well, in, Haunani-Kay Trask’s article, “From a Native Daughter.” The innocence/blaming phenomenon is more of a reflection of the white man’s view of himself than it is the identification of a problem with “the other.” Until the following realization occurred to her, she thought she was inferior to White people. She says,

*Suddenly, the entire sweep of our written history was clear to me, I was reading the West’s view of itself through the degradation of my own past. When historians wrote that the king owned the land and the common people were bound to it, they were saying that ownership was the only way human beings in their world could relate to the land, and in that relationship, some one person had to control both the land and the interaction between humans...And when they wrote that we [Hawaiians] were racist because we preferred our own ways to theirs, they meant that their culture needed to dominate other cultures.<sup>6</sup>*

Innocence requires the degradation of the other. The sense of degradation is frequently passed on to the other. Loren, in TCOF, has this sense when he reflects on other people seeing him as a potential killer. He says,

*You watch the news. Who do you see being taken away in handcuffs all the time? It’s somebody that looks like you, somebody that could be you. You’re always under suspicion, so at times you do wonder if it is you.*

Loren does not know what stories to believe—those of the white man’s portrayal of the Black man or his own sense of himself. This

sense of degradation is taken on by people of color and can become a form of internalized racism. People of color and any systematically oppressed people are prone to adopt the dominating group's view of themselves. White innocence allows for the degradation of others and a sense of self-degradation.

White innocence reinforces people of color's belief that other people of color are also the problem. Loren says,

*Certain Asian people have reacted toward me and that really hurt me because I felt they took their cues from white people...a lot of Black people may equate lighter skin with more privilege.*

And as Roberto and David L. concur, Victor actually details how innocence and degradation support internalized and interracial oppression:

*...Whether you are in the Black community or other people of color communities, if you are lighter, there is often less trust, often, and more of, "Well, you might use that light skin that you have to get more goodies out of white folks." ...I can do stuff that my mom can't do; my mom is significantly darker than I am. I have had an easier time putting white folks at ease because, say, I'm not Loren's complexion and that can create static between me and Loren because—*

This particular phenomenon is also addressed directly in the film when David Lee says,

*I think we are comparing each other based on white people—we're not white enough, and therefore we chastise or criticize each for not being like the white model. I think that's, that's why I call it internalized racism, because I don't think that I, in a vacuum, am racist against Blacks, but because I come from a white context that Blacks are not like whites and therefore I should be against Blacks; or Asians are not like whites, therefore I criticize Asians for not being like whites.*

White innocence confuses them about each other.

The link between the impulse to blame and the condemnation of people of color and indigenous people that Patricia Limmerick and Haunani-Kay Trask highlight creates the kind of doubt that Loren manifests about himself, the competitive tension between Victor and Loren regarding lightness and darkness of skin color, and distrust

among themselves, to the degree that they are successful approaching and acquiring white privilege.

Victor identifies the subtle nature of the mask of innocence when he says,

*...Because most of the lethal, toxic, deadly racism that African American people experience and that other people of color experience in this country does not come from them [white supremacists]. It comes from moral, fair-minded people who believe that they are lovers of justice, "church-goers," people who experience themselves as decent, and actually very nice folks, and it is there that I find my fear.*

It is the individual who portrays him/herself as the most innocent—the missionary in Limerick's work, the people of God, the creator of morals—who are insidiously dangerous. They hide behind a mask of innocence that occurs as the consequence of a hierarchy of knowledge that portrays "the other" as in need of salvation.

Blatant hatred is one form of racism—Neo-Nazis/Klan. But, racism (power and privilege) also hides behind a mask of innocence and is more difficult to detect and change. David C.'s form of racism is difficult to articulate. Yutaka says,

*It's this insidious thing that you deal with daily. Every day. I go to a professional workshop, "Oh! Don't I know you? I met you at the last one"...every f\*\*\*ing time, if not once, several times...we all look alike, right?... And this is this continual thing, continual [looking to David C.]... I took your comment out of naiveté earlier when you said, "You don't look Japanese. I'm not sure what you look like....this happens. It's in the air that you breathe.*

It is only tangible in the sense that Yutaka and David Lee feel invisible, left out, and shut out.

Yet, Roberto reminds us that unmasking racism is the goal. "I mean, talking about [racism] helps. Bringing it out into the light helps. It loses some of its mystery, some of its power." The mask of innocence offers no inlet to the problem of racism. The unmasking of innocence creates a tension that forces an outlet and a healing.

## Masks of Ignorance

Yutaka helps bring out the relationships between ignorance and racism when he says,

*It was dusk, it was dark. [There was] this whole group of Black people there going home and I was having this anxiety, this tension. I said, “Why am I so, you know, what’s this big deal?” Then I started to relax and I said, “These people are just going home from work, just like me. They’re all waiting at the bus stop.” And as soon as I opened my eyes and scanned, and sort of like released myself from all this fear.*

Yutaka’s admission reveals how ignorance, and in this case the adoption of white supremacist knowledge by a person of color, creates fear and in turn creates and reinforces a mask of ignorance behind which white people like David C. as well as other people of color can hide.

Yet the mask of ignorance worn by white supremacy is a different mask than the mask of ignorance worn by people of color. The mask of ignorance worn by people of color involves an internalization of supremacist knowledge that creates a fear and discomfort that is familiar, awkward, and self-referential, while the mask of ignorance worn by white people involves a fear that has little self-referential knowledge. Exposing David C.’s mask of ignorance is one of the most critical and poignant moments of unmasking. David C. is unable to understand much of what the other members of the group describe to him as the consequences of racism in their lives that they carry with them everywhere. His ignorance begins in, although it extends beyond, the initial conversation about all the men’s self-defined ethnicity, specifically Roberto’s comment,

*American is not the United States. America is the entire continent. But we think here, or Americans her think, that America means just this country...the people that I come from, have been sort of robbed of that term. We’re not Americans, even though we are!*

David C. responds,

*So I see an attitude expressed by Yutaka and by Roberto that says, “How can I be an American? I can’t and so I won’t. I’m going to cling to my heritage.”*

In addition to acknowledging that this remark reflects a mask of innocence that makes “the other” the problem, this remark identifies David C.’s mask of ignorance as well. The mask’s power becomes all the more pervasive as each participant explains fruitlessly to him the consequences in their lives being a person of color. Finally, Mun Wah makes the crucial inquiry to David C. as to what it means if the men’s stories are true. What does it mean if the men’s stories are true? If the men’s stories are true, David C. can no longer hold onto his ignorance. He has to accept that the stories are true and not “unfounded” as he refers to them all along. David C.’s humanity emerges when he acknowledges the truth of the stories and admits that a sense of horribleness is exposed. David C. experiences the truth of their pain. His fears then become grounded in a self referenced acknowledgement of the felt truth of another person’s experience.

With a mask of ignorance he does not allow himself to see his relationship to others. Racism prevents a meaningful ethical relationship among different people. David C. asks Mun Wah to accept that some white men do not understand the difference between themselves and people of color. Earlier David C. is puzzled as to why all the men of color don’t just refer to themselves as human rather than “of a certain ethnicity.” The relationality that David C. wants to establish at this point is not a meaningful relation. It is a relation that ignores the significance of the difference between white people and people of color. It is a relation that ignores the privilege that being white affords white people, which people of color cannot achieve. Victor’s initial attempt to expose David C.’s mask is an attempt to speak of the false relationship that David C. wants to establish.

*And I’m not saying that you could never get it, I mean that you need to step outside of your skin...like you haven’t gotten in proximity to Black people, as you say, because you don’t have to...And there’s a way in which American and white and human become synonyms. “Why can’t we just treat each other as human beings?” To me, when I hear that from a white person, it means, “Why can’t we all just pretend to be white people? I’ll pretend you’re a white person and then you can pretend to be white.”*

Victor is explaining that David C.’s relationship with people of color is that they need to be like David C.—white—and like what he likes. Then they can be in proximity with each other and all get along and be human together.

Racism masks a necessary ethical relationship among people of color and white people that is based on white people understanding themselves better. The only thing that Victor asks of David C., when his masks becomes apparent and begins to fall away as he offers to be of some help, is for “a sense of fairness...and sense of an awareness about this invisible protection and invisible privilege that you have.” David C.’s mask of ignorance is removed. That horribleness is David C.’s first sense of what racism is. His masks of innocence as well as ignorance are marred. Victor says that from there, he can work with David C.

The destruction of the hierarchy of knowledge has occurred through the unmasking of innocence and ignorance. Now the role of power in the creation, and maintenance, of the hierarchy of knowledge needs to be analyzed to show the strength of white privilege.

### **Structures of Power**

Power lies within and surrounds all our interactions. It creates and maintains the masks of innocence and masks of ignorance we have been dealing with in this chapter. Power does not come from one source, but survives as a web of interactions all working simultaneously. Michel Foucault’s work on this ubiquitous dynamic of power allows us to think of power as always already somewhere at work. He distinguishes between “power over” and “power relations” as a way to expand how we think about power’s activities in creating and maintaining masks.<sup>7</sup>

We are most familiar with “power over” relationships. They are apparent in hierarchical structures. Legal rights for some and the absence of legal rights for others, selective laws, and individual and group state control form hierarchical powers. These forms of power exert power over selected individuals and groups of people. However, as obvious as these forms are, when people accept the nature of knowledge as both hierarchical and unequal, as we have discussed earlier, the “power over” dynamic becomes normalized and consequently less visible. Victor articulates the instances of “power over” in all historical colonizations of native peoples as well as when he states that the police place limits on where he can go and what he can do. Roberto and Hugh’s reflections of people with gun racks highlight the dynamic of power over. Loren says the world is like “shark-infested waters,” and Hugh relays,



*Driving through Ukiah, a big pickup was behind me with this gun rack on the back. You know, I was nervous, and I've never been hurt by somebody on the freeway with a gun rack, you know. That's never happened to me, but the fear is still there, the fear is still there. Because I know it can happen. I know it can happen, because it has happened, not to me, but to people who look just like me, or who don't look just like me.*

Even Gordon, who is White, knows of that form of “power over:”

*I've got the fear...I used to do a workshop, in this area, a little further east from here called “The Male Experience,” and I had seven shotgun holes through the sign that I had out on the road...*

“Power over” dynamics work in forms that intimidate in ways that are most familiar to us.

Power in the form of “power relations” is subtle and invisible. The manifestations of power relations are measured only by our reactions to ourselves and others. We see power relations in Yutaka's and David L.'s senses of invisibility. David L. says, “*When I stand in line at a counter to be served, to buy something, and the white person who comes after me gets served first, it's not done on purpose. It's because the person doesn't see me. I'm invisible to that white person, to the clerk. You see? I'm invisible. That happens to me.*” Power's ubiquitous nature is revealed through these comments.<sup>8</sup>

“Power relations” and “power over” dynamics are both normalizing processes. Power relations are reflected in Gordon's side conversation with David C. Gordon says,

*What a person of color, what a Latino does with a Black man, or any of that doesn't seem any bit the same to me, and I don't even term it racism...They have little or no power...it's a system that we consciously and unconsciously use to keep people of color down...I've got the power. I've got the privilege.*

Gordon, an apologetic white man, says that he is a racist and that he has been working at unlearning that since 1976. Unlearning racism for Gordon is in an unmasking process that involves recognizing, over time, the subtle forms of power that he has and that he displays. Gordon admits that he is aware of the effectiveness of his white privilege in both subtle and obvious ways. David C. notices neither form

of power because he feels that he does not have any power over anyone even as a white man, as he hides behind a mask of ignorance and he is not sensitive enough to his reflections of himself and others to notice the more subtle forms of power relations. His repeated reference to the people of color feeling fear as “unfounded” mark his lack of the sensitivity needed to recognize power relations.

David L. attempts to give a name to power relations so David C. does become more aware of its existence when he says,

*When Victor was telling about you being asleep, not being conscious of your privilege and taking it for granted, it was revealed to me that that is true when you refer to us as “you coloreds”... I find that as a very demeaning term. I find it alienating. And I’ve heard it in the context of referring to people of color in a negative fashion.*

David C. is unaware of his power: “How would you like me to address you?” David L. tried to make the forms of “power over” and “power relations” even more obvious:

*Well not as “you anything.” Not “you people,” not “you coloreds,” not “you Asians,” not “you Blacks,” not “you Latinos.” [You could say] “people of color”...talk about “non-whites”...When you say “you,” it’s alienating. “You bastards,” “you pigs,” “you low-lives,” “you no-good people,” “you people of color.” That’s how it feels.*

The subtle forms of power relations come across in the seemingly innocuous use by David C. of words in relation to people of color. Yet, the terms are loaded with meaning that is apparent to the people the words are directed towards. David C. has to be sensitive to what the terms mean to people of color in order to understand the form of power relations that he exhibits.

When David C. tries to reassure Victor that the information shared among the men will not be misused, David C. does not understand that Victor’s fear of David C.’s power is real. David C. says,

*You think maybe I would take this information and use it to incite racism. Not so. It’s an unfounded fear, Victor.*

He remains unaware of the pervasiveness of other forms of power, i.e., power relations that allow him to disregard how another person feels. “With all due respect,” Victor says, aware of the power relations at work, but also aware of David C.’s inability to sense it,

*I want to affirm that my fear is not unfounded. It's based on personal and collective history...And, while it may or may not bear out in my relationship, or our relationships with you, its foundation is as sound as the raising and setting of the sun.*

Using the most concrete of analogies, Victor insists to David C. that his feelings are real. Victor wants David C. to get that power has a role in creating and maintaining the fear feeling.

The men in *TCOF* are certainly not unique in their experiences with power simply because they are men. Women are especially sensitive to both forms of power given a history of unequal gender relations with men. Yet, women of color also share experiences with men of color with regards to white supremacy. Margaret Montoya, a Latina woman writer, although not pictured in *TCOF*, recognizes the relationships that bound masks of power in ways that Roberto and Hugh have, as Latinos. Her personal struggle not to deny her race while she is being trained as a white lawyer are comparable to the struggles that the men in *TCOF* express with regards to their efforts to affirm their race under the veil of white privilege. She tells stories of herself as a first year law student at Harvard Law School. These stories help to unmask the complexity of power. She vividly describes what is not said and what is missing from legal case studies, thus exposing power relations.

The mask of power is evident in the normalizing behavior of white law professors and their expectations of their students. “Looking at his notes on the table, the professor asked with annoyance whether I had ever seen a bond. My voice quivering, I answered that I had not. His head shot up in surprise. He focused on who I was; I waited, unmasked.<sup>9</sup> Montoya feels as if her bicultural mask slipped during the interaction with her law professor. However, simultaneously, her story unmasks the professor’s white privilege masked as normal behavior. He thinks it surprising that someone could not have heard of a legal tender called a bond. Montoya’s personal narrative focuses on important points of the power of resistance that is also part of the dynamics of power over and power relations.

Montoya acknowledges creating masks of her own. She writes and speaks in both Spanish and English to create a racial and cultural identity that grants her power to resist white normalizing behavior of power relations. She uses the power of masking that comes with the use of a language other than English to do this. She knows that mask-

ing is a strategy in unequal knowledge hierarchies, and she uses it as a minority strategy. She demonstrates how masking can be used as an overt minority strategy to create power in response to the dynamic of power relations as well as to resist the subordinating forces of power over situations. And, the use of Spanish helps to resist the subordinating forces of a power over dynamic by enabling Latinos and Latinas to interpret and navigate the white world.

Victor, in *TCOF*, is also aware of the dangers of navigating the white world when he acknowledges his nervousness while discussing internalized racism among people of color.

*It feels very strange to me to have white men bearing witness to this conversation...I feel like I want a higher level of trust between me and you [looking to Gordon] or me and you [looking to David. C.] before I do that...I am really fearful that you'll listen and nod your heads and say, "Uh huh, they're just as racist as we are!"*

He is aware the power relations are always and already present and come into play all the time. He also knows that the masks of power used as a minority strategy against other people of color are of a different kind than the masks of power by white folks.

*It's not the same thing though. Because what we do to each other pushes us down and lifts you up, and what you do to us, or what white folks do to us, pushes us down and pushes you up.*

White folks' masks of power boost them higher on the hierarchy. People of colors' masks of power prevent them from slipping further down the hierarchy.

The emblematic identification of Americans of Asian descent as a model minority exemplifies the difference in the significance in the use of masks of power by people of color and masks of power by White people. When Victor says,

*...the "model minority," you know, what a set-up! It's like, "Why can't you people be more like those people? And then you wouldn't have the problems that you have!"*

he demonstrates how Asian Americans "cannot win by winning." The use of the label by people of color does not provide them with the advantages that the whites' use of the label does. Whites still use the label as a mask of power to keep Asian Americans down when, in

spite of the implied compliment, Asian Americans are accused of being a threat to whites' advancements. The use of the mask of power pushes down Asian Americans and lifts whites up. And the label, while appearing to be complimentary to one minority group, actually uses that group as a pawn to instigate racial antagonisms between Asian American and Black Americans. As Victor suggests, the masks of power among people of color keeps all of them down while pushing up whites. White folks' masks of power boost them higher on the hierarchy. A person of color's masks of power are a set-up that push whites up because of the internal self-destructive dynamic among people of color. Victor is fearful that without further trust, David C. will only focus on the self destructive dynamic among people of color and not focus on how White masks of power, power relations in particular, create this dynamic among people of color.

The white mask of power is engaged when successes and failures are judged while comparing racial groups by racial category. When whites attribute successes and failures, they do so by individual category. As Frank Wu, in his book *Yellow* suggests, the label of the model minority is a "strategic myth," just as Victor suggests, and in so doing Wu states, "It [racism] identifies that the differences between racial groups are more significant than either the similarities between racial groups or the differences within them. It makes race the main feature of an individual as well as the leading division among people."<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

The unmasking of white privilege is painful. Roberto says, "*Stretch out your arms and takeahold of the cloth with both hands. The cure for the pain is in the pain. Good and bad are mixed. If you do not have both, you do not belong with us.*" Racism is no more a problem of people of color than the solutions are. It is necessary to unmask white privilege frequently in order to expose the sense of responsibility that those in power must take to further human relations.

Masks of innocence cover and hide the necessary pain that those in power must feel in order to take responsibility for intentional as well as unintentional acts of privilege. And coupling a mask of innocence with good intentions is not enough to get the job done. David C.'s good intentions do not enable him to empathize with another human being. He has to be unmasked in order for him to make a person of color's experience of racism real.

Likewise, masks of ignorance disable a person in a position of power and privilege from beginning to get at the information needed to foster empathy and consequent changes in him/herself even before the pain of the other is attended to. A white person has to be willing to listen to people of color initially, even if he cannot yet hear the significance of what they are saying. David C.'s mask of ignorance shifted as early as his willingness to ask questions begins. His questions are naïve at best, but at least he asks them. He may not want to hear or like what he hears, all of which requires further removal of the mask of ignorance, but over time he is willing to face himself, his past, and his ignorance in order to unmask further. He begins to take responsibility for racism even when he isn't aware of his direct involvement with it when he acknowledges that the feelings he hears from others are real. Their experiences cannot be denied. They may be regrettable, but they are none-the-less real.

White privilege is not isolated to America. It is brought here by white people from other countries and thrives. We, however, can begin to make small changes here since we are able to unmask privilege. This makes our responsibility to continue work here and elsewhere all the more necessary.

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## NOTES

1. Assignment: Panel Discussion. This assignment incorporates the authors of articles and their works, the characters and concepts from films, and the individuals in *The Color of Fear*. In this chapter, we have discussed and explored different aspects of the social construction of knowledge, specifically how masks of power, innocence, and ignorance provide the ingredients for white privilege. Use the conceptual tools of masking and the discussions of unmasking race to examine the content and visual images presented in *The Color of Fear* by doing the following:

- a. Work in groups, using the collective recall of the group. Piece together and analyze what you saw in the film. Together, your group will write the transcript of a hypothetical broadcast panel discussion for which participants have come together to analyze *The Color of Fear*. The program includes a moderator/interviewer who will ask questions, keep panelists on track, ask for clarification, etc. Each member of your group will assume the persona of one (or more) of the individuals in *The Color of Fear*. The moderator will have the option of bringing up statements made by participants in *The Color of Fear* to stimulate discussion and ask other follow up questions.
- b. The program will start with an opening question, “Why is it important to unmask whiteness in order to deal with issues of race?” Assume that each author has seen the film *The Color of Fear* and has met the participants informally before this forum. Panelists can use direct quotes from their published work and in most instances interpret and further clarify their statements for the listening and viewing audience. While each of you is responsible for at least one participant in the discussion, the group as a whole is responsible for the finished project, which should read like a panel discussion and not like a sequence of independent quotes.

2. See Jane Tompkins, “Indians: Textualism, Morality, and the Problem of History” in *Ways of Reading* eds. Bartholomae and Petrosky (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2002) to further understand how whiteness constructs knowledge. Jane Tompkins analyzes how a person’s point of view directs what is taken as fact and, consequently, what is considered knowledge. Her article traces the phenomenon in three steps:

- a. How the point of view of explorers and the writers of their histories, in denying the existence of other human beings in an area of exploration, places themselves in the position of *creators of knowledge*;
- b. How when explorers and the writers of their histories did not make natives invisible, they nevertheless placed them within a *hierarchy of knowledge*;
- c. How in distinguishing the behaviors of other people as inferior to their own behaviors, explorers and the writers of their histories created the cultural perception that they were superior and consequently, the *placement in the hierarchy was not valued equally*.

3. Film: *Smoke Signals*. The following questions about *Smoke Signals* can be used in conjunction with Jane Tompkins' article with regards to how different perspectives construct different knowledge, to help us understand how differently valued knowledge becomes normalized and invisible:

- How is the telling of *history* from the Native American perspective being reconstructed in this film? (Think about the way Native Americans are supposed to walk and talk.)
- Is there knowledge that is being portrayed in the film that has been previously ignored or pushed aside in the name of assimilation? Could we call this a “hierarchy of knowledge?”
- What are the stories that *Building the Fire* offers? Are they different forms of knowledge? Are they different ways of knowing?
- How is the hierarchy of white knowledge challenged in this film? Is the hierarchy broken? (Think about Victor's conversation with Kathy, on the bus.)
- Should we also be thinking about hierarchy of knowledge broken down by class, not just culture/race in this film? What does it mean to have a hierarchy of “class knowledge?”
- Should we start thinking about hierarchy of knowledge with other analytic categories? Is there gendered knowledge in the film?

4. Film: *Liliqulanai*, a PBS film from the series *The American Experience*. Depicts the history of the annexation of Hawaii. The film emphasizes the construction of a hierarchy of knowledge that reinforces the denial of indigenous knowledge. Examples include the forced formation of a written language, the taking of land, and the perception of the body as sinful.

5. Patricia Nelson Limerick, “Empire of Innocence,” reprinted in *Ways of Reading: A Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: Norton, 1987).

6. Haunani-Kay Trask, “From a Native Daughter,” in *Rereading America*, eds. Colombo, Cullen & Lisle (Boston: Bedford of St. Martins Press, 1995).

7. Michel Foucault, “On Power,” in *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, ed. Lawrence Kritzman, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Routledge, 1988).

8. Haunani-Kay Trask's realization that colonialist criticisms of natives are actually reflections of the colonists' own values and not who she is marks the subtle forms of power relations.

9. Margaret Montoya, “Mascaras, Trenzas, y Grenas: Un/Masking the self while Un/Braiding Latina stories and legal discourse,” *Harvard Women's Journal*, vol. 17 (1994).

10. Frank Wu, “The Model Minority: Asian American ‘success’ as a race relations failure” in *Yellow* (New York: Basic Books/Perseus Books, 2002).



