

See Me Fully

By P. Nasib Whitt

Editor's Note: This chapter is about the impact of race—challenges and opportunities with a focus on Cleveland, Ohio.

Here am I. Over here. Can't you see me? I am right here. No. Right here! Look at me for who I am, appreciate me for what I offer. See me, don't fear. Don't be frightened by my strong posture, yours is equally strong. Don't judge me based on the media, your privilege and your blinded ego. Don't choose to see past me by saying you're color blind. Don't choose to overlook me because you see and fear my talent.

Do this: Wake up, see beyond your own sense of self, and stop playing possum until the doors close and your true bias is echoed in the chambers, the halls, the family dining room table. Remember me. Appreciate me, because I appreciate you. See me fully because I see you fully. Yes, we both have biased standards that have been instilled in us by a mirage called culture where generations have oppressed the true nature of being human; it's called being humane. So be more humane, be a humanitarian and love beyond your oppression, but love your self first so that you can love others. You will not lose your power.

Where is your Mother Teresa, your moral compass? Your twisted history continues every day. In your walk, in your world, the media ensures you know, you never forget, that I am of color and you, of privilege. We see it everywhere—in newspaper photographs, movies, the Oscarssowhite, yet, you believe in rights, freedom and prosperity for all. You may not see it, but your political stance and moral compass point to the power that sustains your privilege. You don't know it, but you drank the Kool-Aid.

From the book, *A Race Anthology: Dispatches and Artifacts from a Segregated City*. Eds. D. Moulthrop and R. Washington. Cleveland, OH: The City Club of Cleveland and GTK Press, 2016, pp. 243-248. Used with the author's permission for the NW Diversity Learning Series, Session 5, September 26, 2018.

The drink builds on the blind eye of oppression rooted in historical policies—red lines through places that were neighborhoods and now aren't, federal public housing infrastructure that started with good intentions, the suburbs created by whiteness, for whiteness, the myth of integration.

There is no way up. There is no way out.

Yet once again, I ask the question: Do you see me? Do you see me as I am? Do you see the disproportionate numbers of people that look like me who are behind bars? Do you see the disproportionate numbers of people who look like me who won't finish high school? I stand for them. Do you see the talented tenth? I stand for them. Do you see W.E.B. DuBois? I stand for him. Do you see the indigenous people of this North American landscape, I stand for them. Do you see your white peer or any person of privilege who stands for me and see me fully, I stand for him and her. Together we stand for each other and together we can see each other fully.

Now! Do you see the endangered species that has been systemically stripped of pride, stripped of the ability to thrive, stripped, almost, of even the means to survive? Do you see the policies that keep them there? The same policies that keep you in your privilege? If not, then ask yourself why you still say and believe "If I can do it then so can you." Yet, walk into any room where people of color are so few or seem to be the help and not the contributor. You simply assume that it is normal. Look at my history and yours. One country, our collective history and two paths in this great America.

Why am I so expendable to you? You do not see me, nor desire my rise or value my difference. Why can't we talk about our struggle together? Our great history is tragic yet over time, hundreds of years, our collective triumph can change the world with courageous and trusting people like you and me. Why do we have to be concerned about dying for humanity?

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Why can't we collectively see the great and good and not the difference and fear? Man, we are so brainwashed and driven by saving our own lives and our own wealth and for a too many of us, it's our lives that build your wealth.

And why is it that we and others should not live next door to a population that is dark once it hits that threshold around 30 percent, tipping what seems to be the quality of life. How did we get to this space? Better yet, why do you see me as the darkness that does not shine when all light shines from darkness? We both share and sustain the great pride of our country. But why does this pride stop us from following the model of South Africa's truth and reconciliation? Is it fear, that my gain threatens your privilege? It doesn't. Is it because the word *Africa* frightens you so much? It shouldn't. I hope it's not because of money. Without progress, our American tradition will implode, not only in the space of race but in the very thing that has driven us for centuries: economics and your complacent comfort.

This I say: Your fear of me taking my power back and doing you harm is only a projection of the current context into which you place me. Let's not perpetuate this any further.

Many Americans will be thankful for having a friend and neighbor that does not look like them but draw a line if their daughters or sons want to date someone that different. It is not tradition, we say. I am different. Tell me something: Why do you get power over me onto me and her and that little boy and girl over there? I see my potential; now do you see my potential and our opportunity together. Do see our shared love and opportunity serving both your current privilege and a new privilege, a privilege for all? That opportunity creates a better you, me, community, nation. That is the collective opportunity: All of us thriving, not just you, not just the individual ego that moves so many of us to neglect others. I know, it's easy to blame this on others, not knowing, a blind spot. I don't get to make that choice. Each day is defined by the

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complexion of my skin. I walk in difference surrounded by white space. My abstract color and fearless voice may lead to death. It is beyond where I am allowed to go, do and say. Yet your work, your presence is honored and placed on a pedestal while a collective mass of people like me in this country and others continue to be systemically less than human and that place is sustained by the value of negligent opportunity that translates into poor schools, service jobs and low end economic opportunity. Your disinvestment and mirage of generational intentions do not have humanity as its goal.

Did you read *The New Jim Crow*? Pause and reflect and ask yourself, what happens to all the newly constructed prisons if they delivered rehabilitation services? Why not build a more humane and equitable opportunity for human capital and social development?

You're willing to support me if I meet your standard of normal. A clean shaved face, a college degree and your own affinity to who I represent based on a white males' image and life experience. It's funny! Now that hip hop is liked by all, I can pull in the parking garage without too many looks. I am and we are to be grateful for change. How do we change? I have read that polio was eradicated. It was a threat to all and swift action managed the issue quickly. Why don't we treat this racial oppression like polio and create a vaccine that leverages our schools, our government, all our community for the greater cause of creating a more humane America that will create a more humane global influence? Not one that is rooted in a mirror that reflects neighborhood privilege based on subjective taxes but one that serves all and sees the value of all rooted in humanity and not simply economic privilege.

Once again, I am over here. Do you value me and see me whole, remember me? I like power, too. Yet, when we speak with the same vocal strength or see the same vision with the same sense of ownership, you get uncomfortable. Suddenly, we are painted as ungrateful, angry,

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strong black males that need to be checked or checked out.

I see and appreciate your difference, but not your displacement of power to keep me bound, to keep my neighbor bound, to keep my leadership bound, to keep my city bound, to keep my country bound to your power and privilege. I believe in me and I have to believe in you too. I see you, just be courageous and look beyond what you take for granted and have assumed about me for generations. See me.

Peter Nashib Whitt founded Enlightenment Consultant Group, LLC, as a catalyst for transformation. He strives to support leaders manage tensions through an integrative approach and strategies at the individual, team, organization and community levels. His work centers on leadership. He has worked with diverse leaders in urban neighborhoods to leaders in philanthropy and government organizations. Peter serves on the Community Relations Board for the City of Cleveland. He provides leadership as chair of the Race Relations committee.