What He Learned to Think He Earned

> From the day I was born, I began to learn my lessons . . . we learned the dance that cripples the human spirit, step by step, we who were white . . . . These ceremonials in honor of white supremacy, performed from babyhood, slip from the conscious mind down deep into muscles and glands and become difficult to tear out. (Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream*)

This story offers an autobiographical counterstory examining different ways young white, middle-class children in the United States learn to accept and celebrate their place in a viciously unequal society. The story explores this process through the experiences of a young white student named Zack growing up in Cedar Grove and attending Cedar Grove Elementary.

The story focuses on what researchers call *white racial socialization* (Hagerman, 2018), *socialization practices* (Hughes et al., 2006), and *white habitus* (Bonilla-Silva, Goar, & Embrick, 2006). This counterstory attempts to pull back the curtain on how white children are socialized to accept and celebrate the status quo in a nation built on a racial caste system (Alexander, 2010). Two central metaphors appear throughout the story: The Covenant and an initiation. The Covenant represents a set of agreements most white Americans "sign" in exchange for the ongoing material, psychological, and emotional benefits of remaining silent and complicit in white supremacy and settler colonialism. Likewise, an initiation process involving conversation, curriculum, correction, and a criminal silence, socializes white youth to not question their position in society and to "sign" The Covenant like their parents years before.

Story

He didn't sign up for the initiation. It was necessary and in many ways required—a rite that would help everything make sense before he knew to think otherwise. It was planned, coordinated, and managed. When it was complete, it was like it never happened. It was normal, invisible, and ever-present. It began one colorful and crisp September morning and continued each September for years to come. As Zack entered the local elementary school for kindergarten, his initiation began, too. This initiation never made it on his schedule; no course, hour, or project dedicated to it. It was there, however, at all times and throughout all parts of his day.

On that particular September morning, Cedar Grove Elementary School was full of emotion with adults offering goodbyes to their children on their first day of school. Teachers waited eagerly, each smiling with warm reassurance. These teachers had undergone the same initiation some years ago complete with the same methods and messages (Harro, 2000). The smiles and comfort teachers offered was rooted in safety and well-being, both now and in the future. This was expected and appreciated by parents as it signaled reassurance, portending a place in society, social status, and one day the fulfillment of an American Dream. Zack's parents knew but thought little of how such opportunities were abundantly available in certain neighborhoods while scarce in others (Massey & Denton, 1993; Rury & Saatcioglu, 2011). All of this was of course lost on little Zack as he donned his favorite corduroys, grabbed his fireman-themed lunch box from his mom, and struggled with a backpack half his size.

The initiation Zack began that day serves a larger purpose: protecting The Covenant. Zack's parents, Aaron and Denice, signed The Covenant years before he was born. They first planned and dreamed about a life governed by The Covenant as far back as their joyful engagement. They planned and played by a set of rules—get *that kind of* job, buy a house in *one of those neighborhoods* outside the city, send their kids to *those schools*—that guaranteed a certain place for Zack and his

younger sister, Lisa.[1] They settled on the Cedar Grove neighborhood just west of the city. Aaron and Denice are among many white parents who choose to live suburban and segregated lives (Frankenburg et al., 2019; Lichter, Parisi, & Taquino, 2015).

Unlike other covenants, Aaron and Denice never formally signed this particular covenant. Instead, both assented to it through merely continuing the path they were set on by society. All they had to do was not object and they became signees entitled to full, lifetime benefits. They both first experienced the benefits and protections of a life governed by The Covenant as children. Again and again, they decided to honor its simple rules as they grew older. To not do so was not only disadvantageous but also a form of traitorship and treason (Ignatiev & Garvey, 2014).

But what exactly is The Covenant? Unlike the constitution which stated "All men were created equal" —a reality not true for Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color, as well as women and those without property, The Covenant rings as true as it is powerful. It reads:

1. I will use the advantages and protections of being white without acknowledging them or questioning them.
2. In all I do, I will maintain racial colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2003) while disconnecting the past from the present.
3. In all endeavors, I will assume individual merit and worth or a lack thereof.

Thus, to not honor The Covenant would be to forfeit advantages historically enshrined, or potentially worse, renounce these benefits as ill-gotten. Doing so would force Aaron and Denice to also confront the emotional and psychological weight of being beneficiaries of a deeply unequal society.[2] This option is

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1 The story points out the intersectional nature of marginalization (Crenshaw, 1991) by necessarily tying race to class. Issues like the degree of segregation white middle-class families typically choose to raise children in, school projects and activities requiring extra money, and the social capital gained through other experiences like museum or historical society visits, all showcase connections between race and class in this story.

2 White American families hands down what Coates (2017) calls the "bloody heirloom." This heirloom overflows with ill-gotten advantages gained through genocidal dispossession, enslavement, brutal looting, and legal protections. Using moments from my own childhood, this work reckons with how white Americans come to accept and prize this heirloom. I expose

theoretically possible but seldom invoked, held in place by what can only be described as a distinctive spell. Some call it a dream (Coates, 2014) while others call it a "conspiracy of silence" (Wing Sue, 2015). However one describes it, its potency remains undeniable.

This potency is not without effort or ceaseless control. Cracks in the conspiracy and doubts about the dream arise and must be managed. Some are managed predictably through schooling, segregation, the media, and policing while others arise less predictably and are addressed through silence or sharp correction (Fanon, 2008). The initiation Zack entered into was made necessary as soon as his parents assented to The Covenant. This initiation paves the way and makes the Covenant a formality for most.

Back at school, three weeks into the year came the much-anticipated picture day for Zack and his classmates. Thus far a colorblind story, the Cedar Grove kindergarten composite photo revealed a not-so-subtle truth: The Covenant was not open to most. The other 21 students looked like, and largely enjoyed the same class status as, Zack and his family: white and middle income. Managing this potential crack was simple and preordained: a segregated neighborhood full of smiling white families was the norm and all young Zack knew. Tree-lined streets and plentiful parks surrounded young Zack with hues of vibrant green only matched by the ubiquitous whiteness of Cedar Grove residents. He never thought to question why this was or what led to it because it was all he knew.

As Zack advanced to first and then second grade, other powerful and innate controls supported The Covenant. Around this time, a physical and rhythmic force was one of the first measures of his initiation. With choreographed pageantry, Zack and his classmates learned, practiced, and performed "America The Beautiful" for the school community and adoring parents. Subtle and joyful, this initiation was not what many expect when they envision an admission rite. Perhaps this is what gives it some of its power? Regardless, Zack and his classmates sang with a reverent passion:

O beautiful for spacious skies,

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moments from my own childhood in an attempt to provide a counterstory that challenges the lie of post-racial American exceptionalism.

For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties
Above the fruited plain!
America! America!
God shed His grace on thee
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea!

Zack couldn't help but love the decorations, colors, and sounds as each grade performed a different song. Parents looked on with cameras, cherishing the moment. Without anyone saying it directly, Zack gathered that America was something remarkable and special—a country better than others and blessed with his God's preordained grace. Could America do any wrong? Absolutely not! The feeling was unshakable. Zack, his classmates, teachers, and parents were upbeat and proud to live in the land of the free and the home of the brave. Who lived on the land and called it home for thousands of years previously and what happened to them were questions for the following year.

Zack's initiation relied heavily on curriculum to address these questions as well as others. While he didn't realize it, his curriculum was shaped by owing-class white interests and was itself a "racial text" (Castenell & Pinar, 1993) as opposed to a curriculum aimed at awareness of inequality or societal change (Banks, 1991). Third grade brought with it a unit on Indigenous communities. Each table group was responsible for researching and creating a model depicting a different Native nation or tribe to display around the classroom. Studying the past excited Zack as he learned about the Nez Perce and their simple but adventurous ways. He felt a subtle pride in comparison and remembered seeing something about these figures of the past when his parents took him to the Oregon Historical Society the previous summer. Zack could see why Native groups were no longer around as his teacher explained that the culture and religion of white American settlers were more advanced and less violent (Keenan, 2019). As teachers looked on and praised the work, colonization was reduced to "cool!" and Turtle Island to a toy. Zack skipped around the room exploring peers' projects while consuming a history utterly silent on the imperialism, white

supremacy, and pursuit of material gain at the foundation of U.S. policies toward Indigenous nations (Brayboy, 2006).[3]

While Zack's initiation had done its job intellectually by justifying American exceptionalism and the genocide of Indigenous peoples, fourth grade brought this home in a new way. Fourth grade was an important year for students at Cedar Grove because the Spring of fourth grade brought with it the Oregon Trail reenactment. Physically and symbolically adding to his initiation, Zack eagerly looked forward to Oregon Trail week as Winter turned to Spring. His parents joined in the initiation as they outfitted Zack with a cowboy hat and boots and his Red Flyer wagon with a canopy to serve as a wagon.

In groups of three, students traveled around the track circling the Cedar Grove field. They progressed through different obstacles and earned rewards for how quickly they conquered the challenges. After the adventure, Zack and others were given "land" as their reward based on how well they had performed challenges on the trail. The sense of adventure and competition gripped Zack as he set out with his group to claim as much land as possible, his fourth-grade self coursing with an excitement and entitlement shared by previous generations of white male settlers. Again, he learned not just intellectually but physically and emotionally what it meant to be superior while simultaneously claiming and justifying his position. "How great is it to be a pioneer?" he thought to himself. "How lucky am I to be an American!" he contemplated as he filled with pride.

Conclusion

This piece invites reflection and action by pulling back the curtain on the social learning of white youth specifically and the social practices of white Americans more generally. We see the lessons Zack learns through three school experiences: a school assembly singing *America the Beautiful*, a class project on Native

3 *Cultural racism* directed at Indigenous peoples and the *naturalization* of racism are present throughout this story (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). Cultural racism is present in the way differences between white, European settlers and Indigenous nations and tribes are presented in schools as well as the characterization of Indigenous nations as only existing in the past; naturalization occurs through rituals and activities that exalt the status of the United States generally and settler colonialism and manifest destiny specifically. Lonetree (2012) explores similar themes in relation to museums.

nations and tribes, and a class activity recreating the Oregon Trail.

This story draws attention to how common ideas about racism and colonization are intimately linked to current material resources and conditions. The lessons Zack learns through schooling play an important role in justifying the dispossession of Native lands and vast racial inequality. Specifically, this story attempts to explicate ideological justifications for existing material arrangements and helps show why there are so few questions from white families about processes that continue to further racial inequality. This socialization is terribly powerful. It hides history. It precludes questions of justice. And it does this while celebrating histories stained with blood, violence, and unbridled inequality.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) addresses this morally corrupt socialization by directly challenging dominant ideology. Calling out dominant ideology is required because of the messages students like Zack receive through schooling. Such ideas, summarize Solorzano and Yosso (2000), "camouflage the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in U.S. society" (p. 41). This piece challenges dominant ideology through revealing ways that dominant ideology is created and passed down from one generation to the next. By making the camouflage visible, this story pulls back the curtain on dominant ideology, calling it out as artificial, far-from-objective, and created to benefit a few at the expense of many. The questions that follow build on the story and are offered as potential prompts for reflection and action.

Application Questions

1. This story compares the process of white racial socialization to an initiation. In what ways is this true? In what ways might this be limited?
    a. For white readers, what did your initiation include? What specific messages, images, texts, comments, and rituals were part of your upbringing? How so?
    b. For BIPOC readers, what messages, images, texts, comments, and rituals do you find most common, harmful, or insidious? Why?

2. Three rules are provided as part of The Covenant that upholds white supremacy and settler colonialism in the United States. Which of these stood out to you as particularly true or relevant? What rule might you add to this list?
    a. For white readers, what forms did these rules take for you throughout your childhood? How were these rules taught and modeled for you? Be specific.
    b. For white readers, what specific histories of advantage and oppression come to mind based on your ancestry? What specific histories do you want to learn more about as they relate to your family and ancestry?
    c. For BIPOC readers, what does/would it look like for white people to break with this covenant? What do you wish more white people understood about this covenant?

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