

## BIOLOGY

**BIOLOGICAL RACIST:** One who is expressing the idea that the races are meaningfully different in their biology and that these differences create a hierarchy of value.

**BIOLOGICAL ANTIRACIST:** One who is expressing the idea that the races are meaningfully the same in their biology and there are no genetic racial differences.

I CANNOT RECALL HER name. So very odd. I can recite the names of my Black fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade teachers. But the name of my White third-grade teacher is lost in my memory like the names of so many racist White people over the years who interrupted my peace with their sirens. Forgetting her may have been a coping mechanism. People of color sometimes cope with abuse from individual Whites by hiding those individuals behind the generalized banner of Whiteness. "She acted that way," we say, "because she is White."

But generalizing the behavior of racist White individuals to all White people is as perilous as generalizing the individual faults of people of color to entire races. "He acted that way because he is Black. She acted that way because she is Asian." We often see and remember the race and not the individual. This is racist categorizing, this stuffing of our experiences with individuals into color-marked racial closets. An antiracist treats and remembers individuals as individuals. "She acted that way," we should say, "because she is racist."

I know that now, but that knowledge won't bring back the

specific memory of that teacher. My parents do not remember her name, either. All we remember is what she did.

My third-grade class was mostly made up of Black kids, with a handful of Asian and Latinx kids. Three White kids—two girls and a boy—kept to themselves and sat toward the front of the class. I sat toward the back near the door, where I could see everything. I could see when the White teacher overlooked raised non-White hands and called on White hands. I could see her punish non-White students for something she didn't punish White students for doing.

This was not a problem specific to my school or my childhood—it's a problem that cuts from private to public schools and through time. During the 2013–14 academic year, Black students were four times more likely than White students to be suspended from public schools, according to Department of Education data.

Back in my third-grade class, the unfair punishments and overlooking did not seem to bother the other Black students, so I did not let them bother me. But one day, before Christmas break in 1990, it became unavoidable.

A tiny and quiet girl—tinier and quieter than me—sat on the other side of the back of the room. The teacher asked a question and I saw her slowly raise her dark-skinned hand, which was a rare occurrence. Her shyness, or something else, generally kept her mouth closed and arm down. But something roused her today. I smiled as I saw her small hand rising for the teacher's attention.

The teacher looked at her, looked away, and instead called on a White hand as soon as it was raised. As the Black girl's arm came down, I could see her head going down. As I saw her head going down, I could see her spirits going down. I turned and looked up at the teacher, who, of course, was not looking at me. She was too busy engaging a favored White child to notice what was happening in the back row—neither my fury nor the sadness of the girl registered for her.

Scholars call what I saw a "microaggression," a term coined by

eminent Harvard psychiatrist Chester Pierce in 1970. Pierce employed the term to describe the constant verbal and nonverbal abuse racist White people unleash on Black people wherever we go, day after day. A White woman grabs her purse when a Black person sits next to her. The seat next to a Black person stays empty on a crowded bus. A White woman calls the cops at the sight of Black people barbecuing in the park. White people telling us that our firmness is anger or that our practiced talents are natural. Mistaking us for the only other Black person around. Calling the cops on our children for selling lemonade on the street. Butchering Ebonics for sport. Assuming we are the help. Assuming the help isn't brilliant. Asking us questions about the entire Black race. Not giving us the benefit of the doubt. Calling the cops on us for running down the street.

As an African American, Pierce suffered from and witnessed this sort of everyday abuse. He identified these individual abuses as microaggressions to distinguish from the macroaggressions of racist violence and policies.

Since 1970, the concept of microaggressions has expanded to apply to interpersonal abuses against all marginalized groups, not just Black people. In the last decade, the term has become popular in social-justice spaces through the defining work of psychologist Derald Wing Sue. He defines microaggressions as "brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership."

I don't think it's coincidental that the term "microaggression" emerged in popularity during the so-called post-racial era that some people assumed we'd entered with the election of the first Black president. The word "racism" went out of fashion in the liberal haze of racial progress—Obama's political brand—and conservatives started to treat racism as the equivalent to the N-word, a vicious pejorative rather than a descriptive term. With the word itself becoming radioactive to some, passé to others, some well-meaning Americans started consciously and perhaps unconsciously looking for other terms to identify racism. "Microaggression" became part of a whole vocabulary of old and new

words—like “cultural wars” and “stereotype” and “implicit bias” and “economic anxiety” and “tribalism”—that made it easier to talk about or around the R-word.

I do not use “microaggression” anymore. I detest the post-racial platform that supported its sudden popularity. I detest its component parts—“micro” and “aggression.” A persistent daily low hum of racist abuse is not minor. I use the term “abuse” because aggression is not as exacting a term. Abuse accurately describes the action and its effects on people: distress, anger, worry, depression, anxiety, pain, fatigue, and suicide.

What other people call racial microaggressions I call racist abuse. And I call the zero-tolerance policies preventing and punishing these abusers what they are: antiracist. Only racists shy away from the R-word—racism is steeped in denial.

BACK IN THE classroom, I needed some time to think about the racist abuse I saw. I watched my dejected classmate with her head down when we all began the walk through the long hall that led to the adjoining chapel, where we were to have our weekly service. Her sadness did not seem to let up. My fury did not, either.

The chapel had a postmodern design but was simple inside: a small pulpit and dozens of rows of brown pews, with a cross looming over it all from the back wall. When the morning service ended, the teacher began motioning my classmates out. I didn't move. I sat at the edge of the pew and stared at the teacher as she approached.

“Ibram, time to go,” she said pleasantly.

“I'm not going anywhere!” I faintly replied, and looked straight ahead at the cross.

“What?”

I looked up at her, eyes wide and burning: “I'm not going anywhere!”

“No! You need to leave, right now.”

Looking back, I wonder, if I had been one of her White kids would she have asked me: “What's wrong?” Would she have

wondered if I was hurting? I wonder. I wonder if her racist ideas chalked up my resistance to my Blackness and therefore categorized it as misbehavior, not distress. With racist teachers, misbehaving kids of color do not receive inquiry and empathy and legitimacy. We receive orders and punishments and "no excuses," as if we are adults. The Black child is ill-treated like an adult, and the Black adult is ill-treated like a child.

My classmates were nearly out of the chapel. An observant handfull stopped near the door, gazing and speculating.irate and perplexed at this disruption, the teacher tried again to command me. She failed again. She grabbed my shoulder.

"Don't touch me!" I yelled.

"I'm calling the principal," she said, turning toward the exit.

"I don't care! Call her! Call her right now," I shouted, looking straight ahead as she walked away behind me. I felt a single tear falling from each eye.

It was chapel-quiet now. I wiped my eyes. I started rehearsing what I was going to tell the principal. When she came, she offered more commands that she thought could move me. She learned her lesson like her predecessor. I was not going to move until I recited my first dissertation on racism, until I had a chance to defend our Blackness.

OUR BLACKNESS. I am Black. I looked at the girl's dark skin and saw my skin color. Saw her kinky hair, split down the middle in cornrows held by barrettes, and saw my kinky hair, my small Afro. Saw her broad nose and saw my nose. Saw her thicker lips and saw my lips. Heard her talk and heard the way I talk. I did not see a mirage. We were the same. Those three favored White kids—they were different to my eight-year-old racial understanding. Their whiter skin color, straighter hair, skinnier noses and lips, their different way of speaking, even the way they wore their uniforms—all marked a different species to me. The difference was not skin deep.

No one taught me that these differences were meaningless to

our underlying humanity—the essence of biological antiracism. Adults had in so many ways taught me that these superficial differences signified different forms of humanity—the essence of biological racism.

Biological racists are segregationists. Biological racism rests on two ideas: that the races are meaningfully different in their biology and that these differences create a hierarchy of value. I grew up believing the first idea of biological racial difference. I grew up disbelieving the second idea of biological racial hierarchy, which conflicted with the biblical creation story I'd learned through religious study, in which all humans descend from Adam and Eve. It also conflicted with the secular creed I'd been taught, the American creation story that "all men are created equal."

My acceptance of biological racial distinction and rejection of biological racial hierarchy was like accepting water and rejecting its wetness. But that is precisely what I learned to do, what so many of us have learned to do in our dueling racial consciousness.

Biological racial difference is one of those widely held racist beliefs that few people realize they hold—nor do they realize that those beliefs are rooted in racist ideas. I grew up hearing about how Black people had "more natural physical ability," as half of respondents replied in a 1991 survey. How "Black blood" differed from "White blood." How "one drop of Negro blood makes a Negro" and "puts out the light of intellect," as wrote Thomas Dixon in *The Leopard's Spots* (1902). How Black people have natural gifts of improvisation. How "if blacks have certain inherited abilities, such as improvisational decision making, that could explain why they predominate in certain fields such as jazz, rap, and basketball, and not in other fields, such as classical music, chess, and astronomy," suggested Dinesh D'Souza in his 1995 book with the laughably dishonest title *The End of Racism*. How Black women had naturally large buttocks and Black men had naturally large penises. How the "increase of rape of white women" stems from the "large size of the negro's penis" and their "birthright" of "sexual madness and excess," as a doctor wrote in a 1903 issue of *Medicine*.

How Black people are biologically distinct because of slavery. At the 1988 American Heart Association conference, a Black hypertension researcher said African Americans had higher hypertension rates because only those able to retain high levels of salt survived consuming the salt water of the Atlantic Ocean during the Middle Passage. "I've bounced this off a number of colleagues and . . . it seems certainly plausible," Clarence Grim told swooning reporters. Plausibility became proof, and the slavery/hypertension thesis received the red carpet in the cardiovascular community in the 1990s. Grim did not arrive at the thesis in his research lab. It came to him as he read *Roots* by Alex Haley. Who needs scientific proof when a biological racial distinction can be imagined by reading fiction? By reading the Bible?

THE SAME BIBLE that taught me that all humans descended from the first pair also argued for immutable human difference, the result of a divine curse. "The people who were scattered over the earth came from Noah's three sons," according to the story of the biblical Great Flood in the ninth chapter of Genesis. Noah planted a vineyard, drank some of its wine, and fell asleep, naked and drunk, in his tent. Ham saw his father's nakedness and alerted his brothers. Shem and Japheth refused to look at Noah's nakedness, walked backward into his tent, and covered him. When Noah awoke, he learned that Ham, the father of Canaan, had viewed him in all his nakedness. "May a curse be put on Canaan," Noah raged. "May Canaan be the slave of Shem."

Who are the cursed descendants of Canaan? In 1578, English travel writer George Best provided an answer that, not coincidentally, justified expanding European enslavement of African people. God willed that Ham's son and "all his posteritie after him should be so blacke and loathsome," Best writes, "that it might remain a spectacle of disobedience to all the worlde."

Racist power at once made biological racial distinction and biological racial hierarchy the components of biological racism. This curse theory lived prominently on the justifying lips of slave-

holders until Black chattel slavery died in Christian countries in the nineteenth century. Proof did not matter when biological racial difference could be created by misreading the Bible.

But science can also be misread. After Christopher Columbus discovered a people unmentioned in the Bible, speculations arose about Native Americans and soon about Africans descending from "a different Adam." But Christian Europe regarded polygenesis—the theory that the races are separate species with distinct creations—as heresy. When Isaac La Peyrère released *Men Before Adam* in 1655, Parisian authorities threw him in prison and burned his books. But powerful slaveholders in places like Barbados "preferred" the proslavery belief that there existed a "race of Men, not derivable from Adam" over "the Curse of Ham."

Polygenesis became a source of intellectual debate throughout the Age of Enlightenment. The debate climaxed in the 1770s, during the first transatlantic antislavery movement. In 1776, Thomas Jefferson came down on the side of monogenesis. But over the next few decades, polygenesis came to rule racial thought in the United States through scholars like Samuel Morton and Louis Agassiz, prompting biologist Charles Darwin to write in the opening pages of *The Origin of Species* in 1859, "The view which most naturalists entertain, and which I formerly entertained—namely, that each species has been independently created—is erroneous." He offered a theory of natural selection that was soon used as another method to biologically distinguish and rank the races.

The naturally selected White race was winning the struggle, was evolving, was headed toward perfection, according to social Darwinists. The only three outcomes available for the "weaker" races were extinction, slavery, or assimilation, explained the social Darwinist who founded American sociology. "Many fear the first possibility for the Indians," Albion Small co-wrote in 1894; "the second fate is often predicted for the negroes; while the third is anticipated for the Chinese and other Eastern peoples."

The transatlantic eugenics movement, powered by Darwin's half cousin Francis Galton, aimed to speed up natural selection

with policies encouraging reproduction among those with superior genes and re-enslaving or killing their genetic inferiors. Global outrage after the genocidal eugenics-driven policies of Nazi Germany in the mid-twentieth century led to the marginalization of biological racism within academic thought for the first time in four hundred years. Biological racism—curse theory, polygenesis, and eugenics—had held strong for that long. And yet marginalization in academic thought did not mean marginalization in common thought, including the kind of common thinking that surrounded me as a child.

SCIENTISTS AND APPLAUSE accompanied the president of the United States as he walked into the East Room of the White House on June 26, 2000. Bill Clinton took his position behind a podium in the middle of two screens featuring this headline: DECODING THE BOOK OF LIFE / A MILESTONE FOR HUMANITY. Geneticists had started decoding the book of life in 1990, the same year I identified myself in that book as Black.

After thanking politicians and scientists from around the world, Clinton harkened back two hundred years, to the day Thomas Jefferson “spread out a magnificent map” of the continental United States “in this room, on this floor.”

“Today, the world is joining us here in the East Room to behold a map of even greater significance,” Clinton announced. “We are here to celebrate the completion of the first survey of the entire human genome. Without a doubt, this is the most important, most wondrous map ever produced by humankind.” When scientists finished drawing the map of “our miraculous genetic code,” when they stepped back and looked at the map, one of the “great truths” they saw was “that in genetic terms, all human beings, regardless of race, are more than 99.9 percent the same,” Clinton declared. “What that means is that modern science has confirmed what we first learned from ancient faiths. The most important fact of life on this Earth is our common humanity.”

No one told me the defining investigation in modern human

history was unfolding behind the racial wars of the 1990s. It was arguably one of the most important scientific announcements ever made by a sitting head of state—perhaps as important to humans as landing on the moon—but the news of our fundamental equality was quickly overtaken by more-familiar arguments.

“Scientists planning the next phase of the human genome project are being forced to confront a treacherous issue: the genetic differences between human races,” science writer Nicholas Wade reported in *The New York Times* not long after Clinton’s announcement. In his 2014 bestseller, *A Troublesome Inheritance*, Wade made the case that “there is a genetic component to human social behavior.” This connecting of biology to behavior is the cradle of biological racism—it leads to biological ranking of the races and the supposition that the biology of certain races yields superior behavioral traits, like intelligence.

But there is no such thing as racial ancestry. Ethnic ancestry does exist. Camara Jones, a prominent medical researcher of health disparities, explained it this way to bioethics scholar Dorothy Roberts: “People are born with ancestry that comes from their parents but are assigned a race.” People from the same ethnic groups that are native to certain geographic regions typically share the same genetic profile. Geneticists call them “populations.” When geneticists compare these ethnic populations, they find there is more genetic diversity between populations within Africa than between Africa and the rest of the world. Ethnic groups in Western Africa are more genetically similar to ethnic groups in Western Europe than to ethnic groups in Eastern Africa. Race is a genetic mirage.

Segregationists like Nicholas Wade figure if humans are 99.9 percent genetically alike, then they must be 0.1 percent distinct. And this distinction must be racial. And that 0.1 percent of racial distinction has grown exponentially over the millennia. And it is their job to search heaven and earth for these exponentially distinct races.

Assimilationists have accepted a different job, which has been in the works for decades. “What should we be teaching inside

our churches and beyond their four walls?" Christian fundamentalist Ken Ham, the co-author of *One Race One Blood*, asked in an op-ed in 2017. "For one, point out the common ground of both evolutionists and creationists: the mapping of the human genome concluded that there is only one race, the human race."

Singular-race makers push for the end of categorizing and identifying by race. They wag their fingers at people like me identifying as Black—but the unfortunate truth is that their well-meaning post-racial strategy makes no sense in our racist world. Race is a mirage but one that humanity has organized itself around in very real ways. Imagining away the existence of races in a racist world is as conserving and harmful as imagining away classes in a capitalistic world—it allows the ruling races and classes to keep on ruling.

Assimilationists believe in the post-racial myth that talking about race constitutes racism, or that if we stop identifying by race, then racism will miraculously go away. They fail to realize that if we stop using racial categories, then we will not be able to identify racial inequity. If we cannot identify racial inequity, then we will not be able to identify racist policies. If we cannot identify racist policies, then we cannot challenge racist policies. If we cannot challenge racist policies, then racist power's final solution will be achieved: a world of inequity none of us can see, let alone resist. Terminating racial categories is potentially the last, not the first, step in the antiracist struggle.

The segregationist sees six biologically distinct races. The assimilationist sees one biological human race. But there is another way of looking, through the lens of biological antiracism. To be antiracist is to recognize the reality of biological equality, that skin color is as meaningless to our underlying humanity as the clothes we wear over that skin. To be antiracist is to recognize there is no such thing as White blood or Black diseases or natural Latinx athleticism. To be antiracist is to also recognize the living, breathing reality of this racial mirage, which makes our skin colors more meaningful than our individuality. To be antiracist is to focus on

ending the racism that shapes the mirages, not to ignore the mirages that shape peoples' lives.

THE PRINCIPAL FINALLY sat down next to me. Maybe she suddenly saw me not as the misbehaving Black boy but as a boy, a student under her care, with a problem. Maybe not. In any case, I was allowed to speak. I defended my dissertation. I did not use terms like "racist abuse" and "racist ideas." I used terms like "fair" and "unfair," "sad" and "happy." She listened and surprised me with questions. My one-boy sit-in ended after she heard me out and agreed to talk to that teacher.

I expected to be punished when the principal summoned Ma that afternoon. After describing what happened, the principal told her my behavior was prohibited at the school. Ma did not say it would never happen again, as the principal expected. Ma told her she would have to speak to me.

"If you are going to protest, then you're going to have to deal with the consequences," Ma said that night, as she would on future nights after my demonstrations.

"Okay," I replied. But no consequences came this time. And the teacher eased up on the non-White students.

Third grade ended it. My parents took me out of that school. One year was enough. They looked for a Christian private school that better validated my racial identity. They found the Black teaching staff at St. Joseph's Parish Day School, an Episcopalian school closer to our home in Queens Village, where I attended fourth, fifth, and sixth grades.

For seventh grade and the yearlong comedy show that kept my eighth-grade classroom filled with laughs and hurt feelings, I transferred to a private Lutheran school around the corner from St. Joseph's. Almost all my Black eighth-grade classmates were jokesters. Almost everyone got joked on for something. But one joke stung more than others.