



Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?: And Other Conversations About Race

Beverly Daniel Tatum

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The classic, bestselling book on the psychology of racism-now fully revised and updated

Walk into any racially mixed high school and you will see Black, White, and Latino youth clustered in their own groups. Is this self-segregation a problem to address or a coping strategy? Beverly Daniel Tatum, a renowned authority on the psychology of racism, argues that straight talk about our racial identities is essential if we are serious about enabling communication across racial and ethnic divides. These topics have only become more urgent as the national conversation about race is increasingly acrimonious. This fully revised edition is essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the dynamics of race in America.

"An unusually sensitive work about the racial barriers that still divide us in so many areas of life."- Jonathan Kozol

Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?: And Other Conversations About Race Details

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From Reader Review Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?: And Other Conversations About Race for online ebook

Cheryl Kuhl-paine says

White people: This is not a Racism 101 book. Don't read it if it's your first, second, or even third book on racism. It won't help you. You'll feel attacked and guilty, and write a self-centered, whiny review about how the author is so reverse-racist, and how there's only really one human race, and how you're really just tired of people talking about "privilege" and "racism" and blahblahblah...

If you're past that stage of indoctrinated colorblind racism, past the knee-jerk reactionary self-defensiveness that comes when someone points out that you unwittingly support and benefit from institutionalized oppression (and maybe you should DO something about it)... then this book is a worthwhile read.

The book talks about racial identity and its place in the formation of self-image. Unfortunately, Dr. Tatum speaks largely from experience as a psychologist, so don't expect a bevy of study citations backing up her observations. Nonetheless, she presents interesting food for thought. I suggest this book as a must-read for any serious anti-racist, especially whites.

Leslie says

This is just AWFUL. She attempts to redefine racism (if you're white, you're racist). Her racial identity theory may hit home (I'm biracial), but it is too narrow. Blacks do not have the monopoly on discrimination, identity issues, fitting in, etc. I'm tired of what is clearly and historically a *human* experience being claimed as a black experience. A rejection of education is not a result of discrimination, it's primarily a cultural choice. This "acting white" idea promotes a false dichotomy. A young, black child/teen does not have to throw off his ethnicity, unless his ethnic commitments are not good (like disrespect, violence, undervaluing of education, or resenting other races). But that's not becoming "white," that's becoming educated. Period.

Lauren says

Ahistorical, psychologically reductivist piece of crap. I knew as soon as she claimed that Cleopatra was black that I wasn't going to like this book - she continuously fails to recognize race and other identities in the proper context, has a weak understanding of race as a social construct, and uses silly anecdotes to get across every point without citing relevant theory (or citing it properly, anyway - I cringed at her use of bell hooks). She tops it off by inserting a section called "beyond black and white" that lumps a bunch of "other" racial categories together and quickly breezes through a few important historical points for each group she discusses. When we get to the section on mixed race children, she comes out with this:

"Though theorists have attempted to develop stage-models to describe biracial identity development, there is no clear consensus about which model best accounts for the variation in experience among this population."

AS IF THAT'S NOT TRUE OF EVERY CATEGORY OF PEOPLE SHE HAS ALREADY USED

PROBLEMATIC STAGE-MODELS TO DISCUSS. She relies far too heavily on psychology to explain everything else in the book--including the title question, "why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?" She focuses on the tendency of students to stick to their own because they wish to be understood, but provides the reader with no understanding of WHY race is a category of difference. No discussion of structural violence. Very little discussion of institutional racism. No understanding of identities outside race--made obvious when she conflates sex and gender in one chapter, making transphobic assumptions about boys who wish to grow up and become "Mommy." The only thing she explains decently enough is the simple fact that RACISM AND WHITE PRIVILEGE STILL EXIST--an obvious point that's been written about over and over again, in much more helpful ways.

My advice: stick to books about race and privilege that are written from anthropological and sociological perspectives. Psychological stage-models give absolutely no insight to the culture of racism and white privilege we live in.

Sps says

A useful read.

When advantaged people claim that since they aren't actively persecuting anyone, they aren't actually on the top of the hierarchy, I want to share Tatum's clear explanations and examples. E.g. "If a person of color is a victim of housing discrimination, the apartment that would otherwise have been rented to that person of color is still available for a White person. The White tenant is, knowingly or unknowingly, the beneficiary of racism, a system of advantage based on race. The unsuspecting tenant is not to blame for the prior discrimination, but she benefits from it anyway." (9)

"The view of oneself as an individual is very compatible with the dominant ideology of rugged individualism and the American myth of meritocracy. Understanding racism as a system of advantage that structurally benefits Whites and disadvantages people of color on the basis of group membership threatens not only beliefs about society but also beliefs about one's own life accomplishments." (103) Don't we all know somebody like this? Who can accept that blatant racism is wrong, but does not believe that a culture that systematically pushes some groups down could have had anything to do with his or her own personal ascent?

Since Tatum is a psychologist by training, the book is especially strong on the psychological reality of living with U.S. racism. She talks about stages of racial identity development that, especially among Black youth, sometimes lead to an oppositional, anti-education stance. "It is clear that an oppositional identity can interfere with academic achievement, and it may be tempting for educators to blame the adolescents themselves for their academic decline. However, the questions that educators and other concerned adults must ask are, How did academic achievement become defined as exclusively White behavior? What is it about the curriculum and the wider culture that reinforces the notion that academic excellence is an exclusively White domain?...an oppositional identity discouraging academic achievement is not inevitable even in a racist society." (64-65)

For Whites who begin to learn about racism, Tatum discusses how, because of the conflict with their self-image as a good, fair person, they often try to turn away from the responsibility of racial advantage. Some become frustrated and antagonistic in their retreat from shame. Some try "to escape Whiteness via people of color" (107) by having friends explain to them or vouch for them--which also places the burden of fighting racism back onto people of color. Wisely, Tatum suggests that "the resource which [a White person at that stage] needs most at this point are not people of color, but other Whites who are further along in the process

and can help show him [or her] the way." (107)

(On a side note, I really like that she uses White and Black *both* in capital letters, because the norm of having lower-case 'white' while all other ethnic/racial identities are set apart with capitals reinforces Whiteness as normal, invisible, assumed.)

By the end of the book I wished there were a few more concrete ideas how-to ideas on getting started as an active antiracist at whatever point in your life. I mean the step beyond self-education, because she does have good resources for that. On the other hand, I don't think that's what Dr. Tatum set out to do, nor does her book promise it, so perhaps I should just say I want her to write a how-to book as well.

Saxon says

As an important and foundational addition to the conversation of race in America in the last 10 years, Tatum's "Why Are All the Black Kids..." is a balanced mix of research, theory, and personal experiences that is easy to read and extremely accessible.

Tatum not only attempts to answer the question of her book but also touches on race issues beyond the black/white paradigm. Overall, Tatum constantly emphasizes the need for constant dialogue amongst not only white Americans with minorities but amongst white Americans themselves on the subject of race. In addition, Tatum spends a great deal of time dedicated to the development of individuals from birth all the way to college, giving detailed pointers on how to raise a "race-conscious" child. These sections almost work as a self-help book for parents and I would encourage any young/new parents to read Tatum's advice. The only aspect of "Why are all the Black Kids..." that feels unbalanced in Tatum's assessment of racism is the issue of desegregation. The book is essentially an examination of the current state of racism and how it has come to develop and the outcomes that we must deal with today. In doing so Tatum often speaks of the need for a support and foundational group of like people for young teen minorities. These chapters almost seem as if Tatum is setting up an argument that desegregation may be over emphasized in American schools. Unfortunately, she never really addresses or (perhaps recognizes) this issue fully. It is not until the post-script where it becomes apparent that Tatum does indeed support desegregation but thinks that within such an environment that it is important to allow and even establish communities where minorities can be surrounded by other minority individuals who possibly and probably share similar experiences. The post-script is probably the most passionate chapter of the book and I personally feel that the rest of the book could of been salted a bit with such personal reflections to better clarify some her thoughts and assessments. Nevertheless, this book is highly recommended for people passionate about issues of race or just passively interested.

Debs says

I had wanted to read this book since it came out in the late 1990s, because I had often wondered about this very question. I grew up in a Boston suburb that was part of the METCO program, a well-meaning but poorly executed way of integrating schools by bussing in African American students from Boston. I had some friends of color in high school, but thought of them as exceptions to the rule of the METCO kids, who I saw as an angry bunch who mainly kept to themselves AND always sat together in the cafeteria.

When I applied to college, I decided on Oberlin, a school I had chosen because of its tremendous left-leaning

sensibilities and its need blind admissions policy (now defunct - shame on you, Oberlin) and also because of its history at the forefront of civil rights: admitting people of color since its founding in 1833. But I found an extremely segregated campus on arrival. I hardly saw any people of color throughout my day-to-day existence at Oberlin. Going to college in the mid-1990s, at the height of political correctness, I thought that the best course of action was simply not to ask why. That my question might label me a racist or worse yet, an uninformed racist. I was told by my peers that I shouldn't enroll in African American studies classes, because there was always a long waiting list, and that if I wanted to learn about Black culture, I needed to educate myself and let the students of color have first crack at those classes. And, again, in my deep-seeded political correctness, tinged with guilt and fear, I knew only not to ask why.

When I went to Northwestern University to study American History on the graduate level, I was again surrounded by good meaning white folks like myself - and no people of color, save for my first year advisor (who soon left to go to NYU). I was also the only woman studying American history in my cohort. The rest of my peers, for the most part, were straight white men interested in studying race related issues of the 19th and 20th century. THAT I found totally bizarre.

At Northwestern, I did learn a great deal about the systematic inequities of our race-based society. I learned where and when different practices of institutionalized racism were founded in this country. I learned about "The Wages of Whiteness," how corporations and the government pit poor people against each other by devaluing African American culture and work ethic as a way to keep poor Whites and Blacks from working together against economic and political oppression. (I think my review of *Warmth of Other Suns* is a pretty good example of what I've learned...)

So, going in to *Why are All the Black Kids...*, I had the context for racism in this country and I had my own experiences to draw on. SO, why do all the Black kids sit together? I think Tatum provides a really good answer: Because racism is pervasive in America, and it's really hard to deal with, no matter who you are. All kids find groups of support, and it's easier to hang out with people who know where you're coming from.

One of the most recent forms that racism has taken in our culture is diabolical in its simplicity: liberals and conservatives alike celebrate the incredibly misguided notion that we are "beyond racism." That Martin Luther King Jr., Sesame Street and Affirmative Action have cauterized all the old wounds of slavery and inequality. That Barack Obama has ushered us in to a "post-racial" society. In other words, because people are allowed to sit anywhere on the bus and they're not rioting in the street, we're all color blind now. And so tales of overt racist behavior tend to shock White people, and tales of subtle racism are laughed off as people of color being overly sensitive or simple misunderstandings.

It's understandable to want to hang out with people who know the daily grind of racism rather than sit with people who don't. Tatum also does a fantastic job of discussing this same "phenomenon" in the corporate world - from the subtle yet measurable racist practices of hiring, to the every day effort it takes workers of color to change perceptions of fellow employees who may feel they were hired simply because they possess minority status.

Tatum talks about how racial identity is formed over a life time and how parents and teachers play a major role in creating a healthy and proud kid - one who understands that racism is a systematic form of inequality, but does not see himself as a victim or a perpetrator. She talks about how to be a change maker, about standing up and pointing out racist behavior when it occurs: stopping the silence. Although she wouldn't put it this way, Tatum like Paul Farmer does believe guilt is good WHEN it pushes you to do something about it.

So, the thinking and arguments behind the book are sound and interesting, and will make you think about times when you have seen racist behavior, when you have contributed to it, when you have been a victim of it. One of the most powerful stories she told had to do with asking people about their first memories of understanding racial differences:

The participants use such words as ANGER, CONFUSION, SURPRISE, SADNESS, EMBARRASSMENT. Notice that this list does not include such words as JOY, EXCITEMENT, DELIGHT. (p.32)

Working on turning racism around by realizing differences are a joy and not a sadness is indeed a life long process, but I believe a tangible goal. That being said, I think you could read the first 3 chapters and the last and skip the rest, as it gets pretty repetitive.

Siri says

Think you're not racist? THINK AGAIN. Hahaha sorry had to write that bc I felt like it was a catchy phrase to get you to read this review. ANYWAY... this gets 5 stars for content, not writing, but the content is soooooo valuable that it deserves a 5-star rating so everyone will read it. At times it might get a little pedantic, BUT if you can put your uber-white, privileged, upper-middle-class ego aside for the duration of this book, you will learn a LOT about WHY THE HECK all the black people DO sit together in the cafeteria! Best metaphor for race attitudes I have heard thus far is from this book: Racism is a MOVING walkway (think like in an airport) AND UNLESS we turn around and walk the other way or get off, we are BENEFITTING from a racist society, a society built upon a thick foundation of racism that is woven into the fabric of our everyday life. Just sitting there on this walkway and abstaining from overtly racist actions does not help anything. Even though it can be repetitive or preachy READ IT ANYWAY. you'll learn something :)

Kenghis Khan says

All in all it was a worthy read. It articulated a lot of ideas I've been having about how white Americans just don't notice race. It also provided a plausible account about why black adolescents seek out the friendship of other blacks. Tatum also sought to provide concrete solutions.

But the book had some serious short-comings. For instance, Tatum's quantitative evidence for the persistence of racism is ambiguous. She sites a study that notes that black ethnicity or hispanic origin is the single greatest predictor of socio-economic well being. This is reasonable. Although we can agree that genetics is probably not part of the equation, Tatum pays mere lip service to other hypotheses such as cultural differences. Instead, she uses this to argue that it is evidence for systemic, institutionalized racism. I don't necessarily disagree with Tatum's conclusion, only that she fails to rule out other hypotheses. Another problematic case of discussing statistics is when Tatum gives a statistic that about 40 some percent of white college juniors say their social group involves members of other ethnicities. What is not said is to which ethnic groups these friends belong. Indeed, it is reasonable that in many college campuses in America (especially the elite schools on the East and West Coasts as well as the Midwest and New South), such cross-racial friendships that whites have are almost certainly Asians and perhaps Hispanics, but probably not blacks. And that is assuming the respondents are honest - as Tatum notes, whites frequently underestimate their own racism. A Honduran lab partner or Jewish student might qualify as a friend "from a different ethnic group". That she fails to analyze this statistic in greater depth, or quote a result of a rather vague study, at best suggests Tatum is, in spite of her efforts, naive about the extent of black-white segregation, and at worse is selectively using the empirical evidence. This makes her argument come across as highly selective.

Indeed, the author's selections of quotes by whites seem to belie her claim that whites, too, have a role in the anti-racist struggle. She seems to quote the most egregious, nonsensical diatribe of white people short of interviewing a neo-Nazi.

Moreover, although she acknowledges that bigotry exists in communities of color, she persists in painting people of color in the role of victim, empowered or not. This blindness, if it can be called that, extends to her other passages. She entirely neglects the fact that whites in majority-minority communities tend to be among the most virulent racists. No doubt her analysis would have been more interesting (and believable) had she analyzed how white students behave in schools that are overwhelmingly black. That a proposed scholar of identity development fails to explore, much less even mention, this rather under-studied demographic (whites who grow up in predominantly non-white neighborhood) makes one wonder about if the author is interested in identity development per se or in the experience of blacks in America.

Tatum's black-white focus is increasingly obsolete. Tatum suggests as much when she has a chapter on "racism beyond black and white." But here again Tatum rather unconvincingly tries to force the experience of other ethnic groups to align with the experience of blacks. For instance, she repeatedly emphasizes how Native Americans and Hispanics, like blacks, been forced to deal with the American mainstream. There is a kernel of truth to this view, but this analysis fails completely when she ignores it when it comes to Asian Americans, most of whom came, and continue to come, to America by choice.

Another problem with Tatum's analysis of "other races" is her disingenuous conflation of (mostly East Asians) with Pacific Islanders. From issues as diverse as child mortality to college degrees, the two groups have starkly different demographics. That Taylor persists in lumping them in "Asian Pacific Americans" betrays, in spite of her cursory discussion, a superficial understanding of this group of Americans.

Perhaps no where else is Tatum's failure to go beyond the black-white divide more clearly illustrated than her cursory treatment of the experience of Americans of middle eastern descent. Arab Americans have a scant two paragraphs (in the context of being "Asian American"), whilst Jews are subsumed as white. Of course, in a book written before 2001 this is to some extent understandable. But in light of the fact that both groups have assimilated so well, Tatum's cursory treatment of them also suggests, once again, that Tatum projects her own experiences as a black American unfairly onto the experience of other groups. Tatum avoids examples of overwhelmingly successful assimilation (also experienced to a lesser degree by South Asian, white Hispanic, and Japanese Americans) like the plague throughout her book. Clearly this makes the work incredibly "black-centric".

As a multiracial person, I found Tatum's discussion of multi-racial families artificial. I am simply unconvinced she understands the complexity of the problem. For instance, only in passing is reference made to black children teasing mixed race children for their wavy hair or non-African features. Although I have repeated problems with her reference to the empirical literature throughout the book, by the time she gets around to discussing the empirical literature on the problems of mixed-race Americans, I am disinclined to trust her summary of the empirical literature that mixed-race children turn out generally fine. Worse, Tatum's focus on the offspring of black-white relationships is unjustified. Tatum herself should recognize the reason for this - namely, the one drop rule. As Barack Obama's experience illustrates, offspring of black-white couples are black first and foremost. As such, their experience with the sort of racism pervasive in society is only marginally different from that of lighter skinned blacks. A really interesting examination would have been the offspring of white-Asian, white-Pacific Islander, or white-Amerindians, because both groups have offspring that really are neither white nor Asian/Pacific/Amerindian. Disappointingly, and unsurprisingly, Tatum largely ignores such cases.

Finally, Tatum fails to confront the central reasons why racism persists - namely, class society. She does seem somewhat more cognizant of gender and sexual orientation issues. But perhaps because Tatum herself is an academic bureaucrat of middle-class extraction, she is blind to the central role of poverty and capitalism in perpetuating racism. Either that, or she is astute enough to understand that complaining about race is acceptable within bourgeois discourse, but complaining about capitalism is not. I suspect the latter is the case.

contrary evidence, not when abetted with the most friendly evidence. Regrettably, Tatum's important message about the persistence of institutionalized racism is muddled by her having chosen the latter course.

Emma Deplores Goodreads Censorship says

3.5 stars

This is an informative book about the racial aspect of identity development. I am giving it a mild recommendation because I did not find it life-changing. But despite being a book about social issues published in 1997 (with an updated edition in 2003), it has maintained relevance. It is primarily geared toward parents and teachers, with a focus on child and adolescent identity development: how to raise non-white children in the U.S. with a healthy sense of themselves, and how to raise white children to speak out against racism. Because of the smattering of angry reviews, it's also worth pointing out that the book is geared toward those who acknowledge that racism is an existing problem that affects people of color, and would like to improve their understanding or learn to do more about it.

Beverly Tatum is a college professor and administrator with a background in psychology and extensive experience teaching workshops about race, and also a black woman who's put careful thought into teaching her sons about race. The book has a detached, somewhat scholarly tone, though it remains accessible and readable. The author compiles several theoretical models for racial identity development and illustrates them with examples from students, workshop participants, and her own life. In general I found the information she provides helpful, not earth-shattering for someone relatively familiar with social justice issues, but not too basic either.

The book does mostly focus on black and white, though the author makes an effort to expand from that. There are 10-page sections about Hispanic, Native American, and Asian-American identity, which are more substantial than I expected based on their brevity, but lack space to do more than summarize these groups' experience with American government and society, and flag some key issues relevant to grade school teachers. Unsurprisingly, the portion of the book dealing with African-American identity is the richest. It's useful – and probably necessary – for teachers and others to understand what kids are experiencing.

In writing about white people, the author is familiar with common racial attitudes, and explains them in terms of a growth model even though many people get stuck somewhere along the way (the same of course can be said for black people): from not having to think about race, to blaming minorities for their situation, to white guilt, to hopefully speaking out against racism in a productive way. Her analysis of the reasons white people are afraid to speak out seems dated to me (suggesting that fear of ostracism from other white people is a major factor, while de-emphasizing fear of putting one's foot in one's mouth because white people aren't taught to talk about race). But otherwise the book's analysis of race relations feels contemporary.

The author's conception of a positive white racial identity is also incomplete, though as a black person, this isn't really her job. She believes (and I have doubts about this) that positive change requires white people having a strong, positive racial identity of their own: including whiteness as a major part of their self-conception without being racist. But as far as she gets in envisioning what that looks like is suggesting that white people look to other white people who have fought racism, and build anti-racist identities. The problem is that opposing racism is a social position, not an identity, and most people are not activists who build their lives around their opinions. Ultimately it's for white people to determine what white identity looks like, though, so I can't fault the author for failing to do so.

At any rate, this book is informative and the actual text is only just over 200 pages, so it's worth a read if

you're interested in the subject. It isn't a book that inspired any strong reaction in me, but I feel a bit more knowledgeable for having read it.

Zanna says

I have learned that a sincere, though imperfect attempt to interrupt the oppression of others is usually better than no attempt at all

This is a really useful book for white people as it lays out the 101 on how racism works and is full of advice for would-be allies. Tatum explains how and why white people often fail to be good listeners and to do useful ally work, and how we could do better, with very generous empathy. She explains things that white people can get away with ignoring and so often forget or fail to realise:

Whether one succumbs to the devaluing pressures of the dominant culture or successfully resists them, the fact is that dealing with oppressive systems from the underside is physically and psychologically taxing

White folks don't want to be called out for racism, but living in a racist culture is like being in 'smog' – you can't help breathing it in and being affected by it, so if as a white person you want to do something about racism, you had better start by becoming aware of the racial messages around you and how you're responding to them.

It's not my fault, but I am responsible

I especially enjoyed reading how the author tries to help her own sons navigate and resist this culture effectively. She recalls talking to them as young children and as young adults, and discusses the effects of various strategies other parents might adopt on the identity processes of children. Anything technical (this is a psychology book) is broken down for easy understanding and she goes over a wide range of scenarios, including brief explanations of the specific oppressions of Native/Indian, Asian and Latin@ communities in the USA and how these affect people at different ages and stages as she does with black and white people (pointing out that the latter rarely realise that they *have* a racial identity). She points out that whites need to develop a positive racial identity; this can be done by learning about historical white anti-racists. This interesting idea doesn't feel quite right to me, but I'll keep thinking about it. More important that white people feeling good about ourselves is people of colour being able to access histories in which they are protagonists rather than passive victims, and, Tatum explains how she makes sure to mention how oppressed racialised people have always **resisted** slavery, colonisation and so on.

Tatum's discussion of affirmative action is really helpful I think. She explains the different ways of implementing it and how they fail or succeed as well as the need for such measures. A brilliant suggestion she includes is for the hiring organisation to set diversity goals and look for people who can help them to reach those goals not so much by being black/female/gay etc but by bringing their experience in Race/Gender/Sexuality etc Studies and similar. Naturally, black/female/gay etc candidates are more likely to have such experience and are therefore more likely to get the posts but white/male/straight people could improve their chances only by doing such studies, which would at least improve the culture overall and (eventually) reduce the need for affirmative action programs since black lesbians would just get hired and promoted anyway :-)

Paige says

I'm giving this one five stars, mostly because I think just about everyone should read it.

I was already familiar with many of the concepts and ideas put forth in this book (thanks, Tumblr), so I'm not sure how it would come across to people running into these issues for the very first time. I found Beverly Daniel Tatum's tone to be straightforward, friendly, and sensitive. The book was smoothly written, she doesn't often get bogged down, and she covers a lot of ground. I learned some new stuff, and she lists resources where you can learn even more. I love "further reading," "recommended reading," and "resource" sections of books.

I can offer a couple criticisms/critiques. First, I don't know how helpful the development stage models were. I've already forgotten them. When I took a group discussion class, there were stage models to memorize and although I see that they do have some kind of limited use, I just didn't see a lot of value in learning about them. To the author's credit, they are not really a sticking point in the book. They are unobtrusive and even when she is illustrating them with examples and case studies, the "stage model" factor kind of melts into the background. Minor quibble. Second, although she cites a lot of sources, and although anyone with the awareness can see racism in mainstream American culture, one thing she could have done in the very beginning is drop some solid data on readers, a) for clarity's sake, and b) so people can't claim that "racism is over, these are just anecdotes." It would just make it a more solid argument to lead with that information. In the epilogue, which was written after the book was first published, she does mention where one can find the "statistical evidence," but I still think a better place for it is in the very front of the book.

I think one of this book's big strengths, though, is that a lot of (white) people will be able to read this book without feeling too triggered or defensive. When I was first introduced to some of these concepts, it was a rough ride, because unlike Ms. Tatum, not everyone is willing to hold your hand through it (and understandably so). I think when most white people see the anger of POCs, they feel threatened and as a result just disengage and become disconnected. But because this book isn't angry and is actually quite sensitive to white feelings, it shouldn't have that problem. It's accessible, interesting, and engaging. And I found it to be insightful and accurate.

Melanie Russo says

As a caucasian mother of an adopted african american son...this book was a MUST READ. It teaches us how to have effective and constructive conversations about race. Recent generations of caucasians have taught their young children to avoid using race to describe other people. Unfortunately, all this does is create a society frightened to discuss race. Without effective communication on this topic, we will never achieve true peace and equality among different races and cultures.

Scott Rhee says

The title of Beverly Daniel Tatum's book, "Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?", is a question that probably crosses the minds of most, if not all, people who observe a high school lunch period, but it often goes unasked at the risk of sounding "racially insensitive" or "racist".

Tatum's book helps to provide one theoretical answer to the question; an answer that is logical and intuitive

but one that is, unfortunately, fraught with controversy. To some, Tatum's book is a significant and eye-opening addition to the national dialogue on race and racism. To others, the book may seem like more of the same "all white people are racist" claptrap that adds nothing to the conversation but negative feeling and finger-pointing.

A quick scan of fellow Goodreads reviews is rather telling. While for the most part reviews tend to be positive, with many in the four-or five-star range, more than a few appear with one- or two- star ratings that lambaste Tatum for being "reverse racist" or attempting to "instill White Guilt". Most, if not all, negative reviews tend to be from white people: an observation, mind you, NOT a statistic. I did not read all 300-plus reviews, so keep that in mind.

I've never actually understood what "reverse racism" is. I don't believe that black people can actually be "racist", assuming one defines "racist" as: someone who believes that their own particular race is superior to all others, who has a distinct advantage, based on race, in terms of access and opportunity, and who either knowingly or unknowingly perpetuates and endorses such race-based advantages.

That definition is my own, by the way. It's actually not too far from Tatum's definition that she uses in her book (which I'll get to later). Here's the definition of "racism" as it appears on Dictionary.com: "(n) 1. a belief or doctrine that inherent differences among the various human racial groups determine cultural or individual achievement, usually involving the idea that one's own race is superior and has the right to dominate others or that a particular racial group is inferior to the others. 2. a policy, system of government, etc., based upon or fostering such a doctrine; discrimination. 3. hatred or intolerance of another race or other races."

I suppose one could argue that, based on the dictionary.com definition, it is possible for black people to be racist against white people, if they exhibit "hatred or intolerance of" white people.

Tatum would argue---and she does, soundly---that hatred and intolerance alone does not make one racist. She argues that, too often, people tend to define racism simplistically as basic racial prejudice. Certainly, there are black people who are prejudiced against white people, and while this may make them assholes, it doesn't necessarily make them racist. Because a major element of the definition is the position of political power one holds in society.

For centuries and until recently, black people did not hold ANY political power in society. ALL power was in the hands of white people. Even today in what many consider more-enlightened times, black people still have only a limited political power. To many disgruntled white people who think black people have a lot of---and in some cases more---power than whites in society, that perception is due to the fact that black people DO have more power than they have ever had in this country, historically, but it is still not equivalent to the power that white people possess. Some power is, of course, better than none. To some disgruntled white people (especially those who could be defined as "white supremacists"), however, ANY power given to black people is TOO MUCH power.

Tatum's definition of "racism" is actually a definition proposed by sociologist David Wellman in his book "Portraits of White Racism": racism is a "system of advantage based on race."

So, according to Tatum's definition, blacks can't be racist "because they do not systematically benefit from racism. And equally important, there is no systematic cultural and institutional support or sanction for the racial bigotry of people of color. (p.10)"

Tatum adds, "This definition of racism is useful because it allows us to see that racism, like other forms of oppression, is not only a personal ideology based on racial prejudice, but a system involving cultural messages and institutional policies and practices as well as the beliefs and actions of individuals. In the

context of the United States, this system clearly operates to the advantage of Whites and to the disadvantage of people of color. (p.7)”

She is referring to the idea of ‘White privilege’, something that many white people will deny even exists. It’s understandable why white people deny it, according to Tatum, since it goes against the notion that anyone in this country can succeed through hard work and determination: a lie that is ingrained in all of us from an early age.

She writes, “Understanding racism as a system of advantage based on race is antithetical to traditional notions of an American meritocracy. For those who have internalized this myth, this definition generates considerable discomfort. It is more comfortable simply to think of racism as a particular form of prejudice. Notions of power or privilege do not have to be addressed when our understanding of racism is constructed in that way. (p.9)”

This, of course, still doesn’t answer the titular question. This merely defines the terms. To get to an understanding of why those black kids are sitting together in the cafeteria, one must look at the concept of identity.

A Whole Bunch of -isms

The observer in the lunch room will typically see the same form of segregation among Asian kids, Hispanic kids, Jewish kids, Muslim kids, rich kids, poor kids, and homosexual kids. Not that there isn’t the occasional cross-over in which one sees a table of mixed kids having fun and seemingly color-blind. It’s certainly not a shock to see real diversity in schools, especially in the United States of the 21st century. It is, however, also not a shock to see kids segregate themselves based on race, gender, religion, socio-economic status, or sexual preference. Why would this be shocking to people? Intuitively, doesn’t it make sense that we are all attracted to people with similar life experiences and interests?

Obviously, there is more to it than that, but Tatum is less worried about the black (or white, Asian, Hispanic, Jewish, Muslim, rich, poor, homosexual) kids sitting together in the cafeteria than she is that that seemingly self-imposed segregation will continue on into their adult lives.

Tatum doesn’t necessarily see a problem with the lunch-room segregation. It may not be ideal, but we aren’t living in an ideal society either. There are major inequalities going on within it, and according to Tatum---a clinical psychologist---that lunch-room segregation is a somewhat normal psychological response to the inequalities. It’s part of a normal process of racial identity development.

The concept of “identity” is the formation of one’s “self” and typically based on those things that distinguish us from everyone else, our “otherness”. According to Tatum, there are seven common categories of “otherness”, or the basis upon which we define ourselves: race or ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, and physical or mental ability.

For each of these categories, there is a group that predominates over another, based occasionally on population numbers (Homosexuals, for example, comprise roughly 10% of the population) or, sometimes, arbitrarily based on traditional or historical precepts (A majority of Americans, for example, still consider this a “Christian” nation).

The Dominant group is the group that tends to set the rules and limitations for the Subordinate group. According to Tatum, “the dominant group holds the power and authority in society relative to the subordinates and determines how the power and authority may be acceptably used. Whether it is reflected in

determining who gets the best jobs, whose history will be taught in school, or whose relationships will be validated by society, the dominant group has the greatest influence in determining the structure of the society. (p. 23)”

Subordinates are labelled subordinate for a variety of reasons; again, often based primarily on arbitrary traditional or historical precepts or residual notions of “defectiveness” stemming from these historical precepts. For example, women are still occasionally referred to as “the weaker sex” and the behaviors and attitudes of some men tend to reflect this. Blacks have, historically, been treated as having an inferior intelligence to Whites, and, indeed, some “social scientists”, even today, try to argue that low IQ scores and high school drop-out rates are indicative of their racial inferiority. In many states, homosexuals are still having to fight for basic marital rights under the law.

Dominants, because they are the ones who set the rules and limitations for the subordinate groups, do not often like to think about--if they are even aware of--social inequality. Some white people, for example, deny that such a thing as white privilege even exists. I have even heard some white people refer to a “post-racist” society, as if this is a real thing and that we are actually living in one.

Owing to the relationship between dominants and subordinates, dominants often do not (and are not required to) understand the life experience of the subordinates, whereas the subordinates are usually forced to, and therefore have a very profound, understanding of the life experience of dominants simply as a way to assimilate and survive within the dominant-led society.

Subordinates who are more successful than their dominant counterparts are considered anomalies. Subordinates who stray from the dominant-created rules and limitations are considered deviant. These are the ones often referred to as “uppity”.

As one can see, every category of otherness experiences its own form of a system of advantage and disadvantage, an “-ism”. Women still experience sexism. Homosexuals still experience heterosexism. Jews still experience anti-semitism. People of all ages experience ageism.

The formation of an identity for those in each of the seven categories of otherness is a process of dealing with that otherness.

We all start out, as children, living an identity-less existence. Very little thought or feeling is given to a sense of otherness because we simply don’t experience much of a sense of otherness. Our life experience and our realm of exploration is extremely limited.

At some point, though, our “otherness” is called out for us. To most people, especially those in a subordinate group, this is an event in which we are forced to face our otherness. Denial is, unfortunately, not an option, but occasionally rejection, or feelings of anger and frustration, do happen. Little girls sometimes want to be like their daddy. Homosexual kids want to have “normal” sexual attraction like their heterosexual friends. Black kids sometimes resent the color of their skin and long to have white skin.

Eventually, most kids in subordinate groups---after a period of struggling with the fact of their otherness---come to a peace with their identity as a member in the subordinate group. Some kids focus all of their attention and efforts into the subordinate group. This is the period in their identity formation in which black kids sit together at the lunch table. For them, it is a period in which they are exploring and learning to appreciate the facets of their subordinate group. There is a sense of camaraderie.

There is nothing wrong with this phase in the process of identity, according to Tatum, but it is definitely not the stage one should remain in.

At some point, a person must unlearn the stereotypes and negative views held by the dominants about the subordinates and come to a positive sense of self. After more exploration, one ultimately comes to a place of security. There is an establishment of a sense of place in society.

The final step in the identity formation process is transcendence, going beyond race (or gender, religion, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, etc.) to a kind of “color-blindness” of dominant-subordinate culture. Very few people actually ever reach this stage.

A Testimonial

I have always been a bit confused about my racial identity. It’s never really been a problem, and---other than a few instances in which I have experienced true racism---it has always been somewhat beneficial.

My father is Korean. He came to this country in 1965 and became a citizen, after having fallen in love with the country and, later, my mother.

My mother is white.

Based on one of those arbitrary traditional precepts, my race is determined by the information given on my birth certificate. In this country, your race is what your father’s race is. Therefore, I am---and always will be---Asian/Pacific Islander.

By some strange twist of fate (and genetics), I did not inherit a lot of Asian features from my father. Besides my jet-black hair and a slightly aquiline Asian-looking nose and cheek bones, I look pretty Caucasian. In fact, people who are meeting me for the first time, if they are blunt or brave, will occasionally comment about my ethnicity. I usually have them guess. I have been told that I look Mexican, Native American, or Italian. Very rarely do they guess Asian.

My confusion has always stemmed from my frustration as to what to call myself. When filling out forms, I check the box next to Asian/Pacific Islander, unless there is an “other” box. Sometimes there is “mixed race”. On rare occasions, there is simply an empty line to fill in. Jokingly, I sometimes write “human”.

But one’s race is nothing to joke about. I’ve learned this from instances in which I have made (admittedly racist) jokes about Asians in public. I have occasionally gotten nasty stares and, in some cases, angry comments about how racially insensitive or racist I am. (Interestingly enough, most of these responses are from white people.) I tend to forget sometimes that I don’t look Asian.

I don’t consider myself white, though, and I never really have. And I know that this may seem like a slight or a denial of my mother, but it’s not. It’s simply a reaction to a fact of my genetics and to an arbitrary tradition of recognizing one’s race based on your father’s race, which is, of course, sexist in its own right.

So, I have a somewhat unique perspective on race and racism. Not so unique, of course, as I am aware that I am one of probably several million people of mixed births, each of us probably dealing with our own racial confusion in our own way.

My point is, race is still a major issue in this country. Racism is still rampant. It’s not so in-your-face and overt as it may have been 50 years ago, but it’s still there. It’s subtle, and in some cases, that’s what makes it worse.

I do not sympathize with those white people who make the claim that Tatum is trying to “instill White guilt”. Tatum is not instilling anything that probably wasn’t already there to begin with. She’s merely making some

white people deal with it.

I absolutely do not agree with those white people who accuse her of being a “reverse racist”. I’m not saying that there aren’t idiots out there who throw around the word “racist” at any perceived slight or disagreement. These are the people who claim that if you don’t like President Obama you are racist, or if you hated the latest Chris Rock movie you are racist, or that all white cops are racist assholes. Tatum is not one of these people. She is merely attempting to answer a commonly asked question among students, educators, and parents. For the most part, she does an excellent job with her response, and it’s one with which I happen to agree.

Toe says

Completely awful. Tatum's book is thinly disguised racist propaganda devoid of actual statistics or legitimate quantification of the state of race relations in modern America. Worse than that, it does great harm to the ongoing struggle of race relations by crying wolf, mucking up the lines of communication, and creating resentment where none would otherwise exist.

Because she won't or can't point to empirical evidence of racism, such as earnings per unit of time worked when adjusted for education and occupation, Tatum must fall back on anecdotes that are supposedly damning. Two examples will suffice.

First, she asked a white college girl what her ethnicity was, to which the girl responded, "I don't know, normal." Admittedly, it's an awkward answer, but it comes from a young woman put on the spot to answer an awkward question. Tatum takes this short, impromptu answer and runs with it. She decides that this one girl represents what all white people think, that white equals normal. Our entire society conforms to white thought patterns, values, language, etc. White people don't have to confront their racial identities, Tatum says, because society will automatically conform to and provide advantages for them for the duration of their lives. White people are born into a world of privilege where opportunities are handed to them and minimal effort is required. Whatever they think and whoever they are is normal. Minorities, by contrast, must constantly confront their racial identity because behind every shadow lurks white prejudice and hatred just waiting for a chance to destroy their valiant efforts. All this deduced from one teenaged girl's three-second response.

Second, Tatum references a supposed pervasive racism in the mass media. One example she cites? The Disney movie *The Lion King*. You see, the hyena trio of Shenzi, Banzai, and Ed are portrayed as "ethnically specific," evil, and stupid. The voices of those characters are provided by Whoopi Goldberg, Cheech Marin, and Jim Cummings. And, of course, Whoopi Goldberg is black while Cheech Marin is Latino. So, Tatum says, the voices of some of the evil characters in a Disney animated movie are provided by minorities. Additionally, the noble characters like Mufasa and Simba are drawn in lighter shades of brown than the evil characters like Scar, who has a black mane. Voila, racism. I sincerely wish I was kidding. Let's take this silliness apart for fun and for sanity.

1. It's an animated movie. Adults rarely know who supplies the voices, and virtually no children will be aware of who supplies the voices. In the mind of a child, the cartoons have their own voices. No one is thinking about the skin color of the person providing the voice, which can't be seen because it's a cartoon, let alone any underlying social or racial strife that such a person's skin color may represent.

2. Even on her own facts this example completely fails. Why? Because the most noble and powerful character in the entire film, Mufasa, is voiced by James Earl Jones, a black man! The wisest character,

Rafiki, is voiced by Robert Guillaume, another black man. And the most evil character in the film, the villain Scar, is voiced by Jeremy Irons, a white man! Jim Cummings, who voices Ed, is also white, and Ed is borderline retarded in the film. The hyenas do not portray ethnically specific voices or language at all. If anything, this would be a case of the media portraying blacks as noble and whites as villainous. But it's an animated movie with zero humans ever shown, and nobody but Tatum would try to read racial animosity into the film.

3. The cartoon's color palette sets the mood for the viewer and has nothing to do with the skin color of human beings. People tend to feel happier when the sun is out and when a room is well lit. Hence the comment, "It's a nice day." Conversely, people tend to feel gloomier on darker days and in darker rooms because there is less light. But this is a statement about visibility and photons as they relate to human moods and emotions, not a statement about the dark and light shades of human skin pigment. Tatum makes too much of the fact that Scar's mane is black by pointing it out even briefly. We also frequently see Scar in a cave or in the shadow of a mountain or the shadow of a pit. The artists tried to set an ominous tone by making Scar's surroundings dark and making Scar fit in with his surroundings. Should Tatum refer to caves, mountains, and pits as racist constructs too because they block sunlight and some people may fear them?

4. Tatum suggests that hyenas, who in her mind represent ethnic minorities, moving in led to a decline in the community. "There goes the neighborhood," she said, insinuating that white people believe minorities will ruin neighborhoods. What Tatum (or Tatum) doesn't realize is that The Lion King is based on Hamlet, by Shakespeare. The neighborhood in Hamlet was ruined because of Claudius's murder of his brother, not because of ethnic minorities absent from the play. ("Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.") Moreover, I hate going down this path, but Tatum forcibly takes us there: Detroit, Baltimore, Compton, Fuller Park, Port-au-Prince, Caracas, San Pedro Sula, and on it goes. The crime and poverty in all these cities is because of white people? Come off it.

5. What would happen if the voices of the hyenas were supplied by white people? That would leave James Earl Jones, Niketa Calame, and Robert Guillaume as the few remaining characters voiced by black people. Would Tatum then be outraged that this film set in Africa was voiced by so many whiteys? Is that unforgivable cultural appropriation? Thus, one of the biggest problems with Tatum is revealed: you lose no matter what you do. You can try with all sincerity to be aware of your own prejudice and work against any you may have but still fail and be condemned a racist. Evidence, facts, and intent are unimportant to and ignored by Tatum. Could one blame the many honest people for just giving up entirely?

6. If you can find racism in The Lion King, you can find it anywhere. Does anyone really believe that this animated movie is evidence for racism? I feel embarrassed for and annoyed by Tatum for making such a claim. The Lion King is one of the best pieces of art humanity has ever created. It covers family, fate, love, loss, and harmony. It is fun, funny, has great music, and contains important life lessons. Tatum could never produce anything remotely approaching its greatness, so instead she lobs petty, unsupported criticisms against it. What a pitiful existence her own paranoia has created to not be able to enjoy the Lion King.

7. Did I mention it's an animated movie? I'm completely shocked that this topic is even being discussed in a world with real issues confronting us. This brief statement in her book disqualifies her from meaningfully opining on anything else. She forfeited her ability to get me to care about her thoughts on any topic. *Piss off, lady, you're embarrassing yourself.*

Whew, I feel better. Continuing. Tatum, convinced of overwhelming white racism in modern America provides us with...one underdeveloped girl's dimwitted response and The Lion King. I'll let you decide how convincing such arguments are and their likely impact upon people of good faith striving to address actual problems.

mean something like "a system of advantage based on skin color." Apparently, white people hold most of the wealth in America, and they use it to their advantage. It's unclear whether Tatum means to say that whites are racist because they have wealth or their racism is precisely what generates their wealth. She seems to think both. In her redefinition of racism, it is no longer about prejudice held against people because of their skin color or even specific acts. Rather, it is about an entire system that reflects itself in disparate success. Reality itself is so pervaded with racism that examples or evidence are not needed. As long as there are ethnic differences in wealth and income, there is white racism.

Never mind little things like differences in education, marital status, parental status, work hours, time spent reading, age demographics, spending habits, or any of the other factors that influence individual and group incomes. Never mind that some subsets of the population, notably certain groups of Asian-Americans, have higher per capita incomes and educational levels than white Americans. Nope, forget all that. Whites are just racist, and in Tatum's definition ONLY whites can be racist. And striving for a color blind society is not good enough; whites must be actively anti-racist (i.e., support affirmative action and presumably reparations and all other attempts to confiscate and distribute wealth) in order to not be racist. Tatum argues that all whites are inherently racist, there is no escape, and the only morally acceptable choice is to sacrifice everything in an attempt to equalize everything.

In mucking up the language that everyone uses by redefining known terms like racism, Tatum generates needless confusion and avoids asking relevant questions. Not only is the book filled with specious reasoning and sloppy writing, this type of language tampering defeats the purpose of communicating ideas. I suspect this is somewhat intentional. If people could easily discern the claims Tatum actually makes, which I tried to outline above, they would laugh her off. And they should, if only the ideas weren't so damaging.

I submit simply that this type of nonsense further divides our country. It is so ludicrous it is hardly worth addressing. Nonetheless, Dinesh D'Souza took the time to address it thoroughly in "The End of Racism," a much better, albeit denser, look at the issue that I highly recommend everyone read. Not that it should matter in a colorblind society where people's ideas are accepted or rejected on the basis of merit instead of the color of the author's skin, but D'Souza is a minority. He was born in India and, therefore, is not privy to the white systemic racism Tatum insists plagues all minorities. I would be very curious to see how she would respond to the arguments put forth by D'Souza (or Thomas Sowell, another black author who has written about these topics) but I'm not waiting around for her to address them.

I approached this book with an open mind, genuinely interested in learning about how blacks see the world and ready to alter my perception of reality. What I saw was racism of the worst kind, just in a different color.

***Update: So after my conversation with Christina in the comments section below, I wanted to see what other people thought of this book. The following Amazon review by Harry Wang was too good not to share. Wang writes:

"That's okay, Junior, we're just going to put the Lion King away for a little while (puts DVD in trash as kid cries, screaming). There, see? He's just going to sleep. Now let's go sit over here and talk about why mommy put the Lion King to sleep (kid still screaming). See, honey, the Lion King is a movie that is made by bad, evil people. Even though the Lion King is cute and the cartoons are nice to look at, the people who drew the animals want to do VERY BAD things to you. They want you to HATE yourself, and you know what? These people are EVERYWHERE WE LOOK. They aren't just in the Lion King, they're on your school bus, in your classroom, and in the cafeteria. They might even be your teacher. They might even be people who call you their friend and say you're pretty. Even when they say you're pretty, they're just saying those things to make themselves feel good. What they're really trying to say is that they HATE you and they want to HURT you!! (kid screams again, now scarred for life) Now let's talk about how Mulan says bad things about Asian people, how The Incredibles reinforces stereotypes of female inferiority, about how Buzz Lightyear destabilizes the corporate-controlled capitalist economy that subjugates the Black race, and how Finding _____

Nemo is homophobic. And don't worry, mommy will tell you about these big words after you eat your bean pie, child. Power to the people!!"

Bonnie says

I was angry pretty much the entire time I was reading this, until the last two chapters about races other than black people, and biracial kids, respectively. I want to have a list of both pros and cons, but I might not have been able to see past the red to find any insights in this book. So on with the cons!

1) By chapter 3, it becomes evident that the author views the black kids sitting at the cafeteria as a POSITIVE thing. This makes the book, not about ending voluntary racial segregation, as I originally thought based on the title, but about "having the courage" as a black person to sit at "the black table." Based on the author's defined stages of racial identity, if you're black and you're NOT sitting with other black kids, you just haven't accepted your racial identity yet. God forbid you connect better with someone who isn't your race. This carries into my next point.

2) This book comes dangerously close to encouraging and supporting segregation. She talks about how important it is for blacks to be together without whites, and vice versa, otherwise black kids will start failing in school...? I did over-simplify on that, but chapter 4 still touts the benefits of a separate black space. Separate but equal, right?

3) Something that disgusted me in Chapter 5 is when the author states proudly that she doesn't remember the name of a single white person at her college. How many years is that, of all the people passing around you, you care about them so little that you can't even remember a name, and that's a good thing? God I hope I'm never that narrow-minded that I would disdain someone based on a race they can't help being.

4) Something that might have been relevant when the book came out is, in Chapter 8, she talks about Hispanic kids in high school being discouraged from speaking Spanish, and even of some kids getting detention for being caught speaking Spanish in their free time at school. My high school in south Georgia had a sizable Hispanic population. They mostly kept to themselves but were not hostile toward other students. Spanish is now considered an asset, and someone fluent in a second language is often well-repected. I remember being pressured to study Spanish instead of French in high school because it was more relevant to the area in which I lived. Which, admittedly, it was. But I've been required to study Spanish in school since being taught days of the week and colors in kindergarten. So maybe this book is a little dated in that regard. I'm not saying there isn't discrimination against hispanics. Of course there is. Just saying maybe the example was a little extreme and not the norm.

This book does not seek to end racism, or racial discrimination, or even to allow the white majority to understand black Americans, because according to her, they never will. All the author asks of the white people reading this book is that they keep their distance from black people while simultaneously keeping other white people from making racist jokes in front of them. This, in my opinion, is a pretty low bar. Surely we can hope for better than that.
