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Review of Tim Wise's, *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son* (Brooklyn, N.Y., 2005).

by Marguerite Spencer

In a prose that is often egotistical and off-putting, Tim Wise examines race in America through the eyes of a white man in his book *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son*. He organizes his narrative-peppered memoir into discussions on white belonging and privilege, with which whites collaborate, as well as on white resistance to this privilege. Asked why whites would choose to relinquish their powerful caste, Wise exposes the pathology of whiteness, warning that it leaves whites in “grave danger” if not remedied (150).

Wise correctly acknowledges that being born in the United States and belonging to the white race means something (2). Although not well-off, he attributes his ability to pay for tuition at Tulane University and to arrive at doing widely acknowledged anti-racism work to his whiteness. His mother was able to take out a bank loan with her parents’ property as collateral – property purchased with money from a job off-limits to persons of color and in a neighborhood equally off-limits (12). Accumulating assets has historically been a white privilege. “I am where I am today,” Wise admits “because of being born white (13).” He asks his readers to spare the “I wasn’t around back then routine,” because neither was he.

Through a series of personal vignettes, Wise draws attention to the many other privileges that accrue to whites. His school experiences and activities, including school plays and debate competitions, were in content, style, and spaces meant for whites. Multi-culturalism meant exploring food and celebrations, not racial and ethnic bias. He mentions, but does not cite (one of his weaknesses – why not challenge his readers to read further?), fourteen studies showing that kids of color are disproportionately disciplined in comparison to whites, who break the rules just as often. In first grade, Wise was not paddled for disrupting milk break, but his black friend was. While his parents had the luxury to exempt him this form of discipline, his friend’s did not. Unless black children learn self-control at an early age, he argues, they risk future catastrophes (22). Wise links this to the cavalier ways in which white youth view law enforcement (37). As he grew older, he flaunted rules, selling fake IDs, drinking, and doing drugs at largely white parties – unbothered by the cops. At Tulane, the administration warned all students not to wander into largely black neighborhoods for safety’s sake, but did not warn them to stay away from the affluent Jefferson Parish, where the sheriff had instructed his deputies to stop all black males driving through, on suspicion of being up to no good. Whites were those in need of protection, not blacks (43).

Wise argues that whites rarely appear out of place. He naively touts how he never once felt afraid in the public housing projects in New Orleans where he worked as a community organizer (47). Whites are also not negatively associated with one another as are blacks when driving and Arabs after 9/11 (49). Moreover, the media, Wise notes, rarely present images of white violence that imply a collective conscience. After the terrorist attack, for example, David Duke and organized hate groups applauded the attacks, but their reaction remained off the TV screen. Instead, images of cheering Palestinians were aired (50). Because of their privilege, whites live in a totally different world than do people of color, although they pay an enormous cost to maintain it, including warped mindsets (58).

Wise argues that because race is so deeply entrenched in our national life, it is inevitable that whites collaborate in the maintenance of privilege (102). He briefly notes, as he does several times, the existence of institutional structures that complicate any closeness whites may have with persons of color. Wise attempts to explain structural racism using narratives. Here he tells the story of his anti-racist grandfather collaborating with racism by making a living in his store selling liquor to blacks (104). He also recounts a workshop in which a young mother realizes how her daughters' black friends might be lost through the racist arrangements in the school system (106). Albeit powerful in many instances, these accounts leave the reader without the tools to dismantle institutional racism.

To be fair to Wise does outline several means by which whites can choose to resist their privilege, a difficult task with few role models that may alienate friends and family (62). He advises that whites listen to nonwhites and let them define themselves and set the terms of the national "program" (64, 67). Making efforts to interact with persons of color is a beginning. Wise's parents consciously sent him to a preschool at a historically black college, which he argues better prepared him to speak out against racism later in life (68). Parents can model anti-racist behavior, as did Wise's mother, standing up to her own mother's racism (73). In an interesting, but overwrought, account of his "code switching", or use of "Black English" in school, Wise claims to have "lived" black withdrawal from academic pursuits, as his teachers began to write him off for his behavior. His mother responded by acting to remove one of the racist teachers from the school (77-79). Wise calls his readers to break the silence of the collaborator rather than live a predictable, pre-fabricated life (81). Finding white allies and learning about their contributions can help (83). Resistance takes work and practice, Wise argues, and the courage to risk being seen as a "crazy radical" (85). Convincing others of the reality of white privilege is like challenging a sickness that is damaging the minds and mentalities of whites. Would we refuse to offer treatment, Wise asks (87)? If whites challenge racial profiling in shopping centers, or racial tracking in schools, or racial discrimination in the workplace, writes Wise, we "raise the cost to other whites who might be engaging in those actions. We put them on notice that they may not get away with it and, at the very least, that not all whites will collaborate with them (93)."

In the end, it is not for blacks that Wise is fighting, but for whites; he seeks to save himself – and other whites with him – from this costly malaise (98). In this struggle, he

dares to compare himself to the Nicaraguan Ben Linder, who the Contras murdered for setting a good example, “prepared to die” for his principles and “unafraid to live” for them (155). Yet, what sacrifice does Wise call whites to make? Is redemption to be found in the struggle alone, as he suggests (154)? Wise comes up very short on prescription. Although he attends to structural and institutional racism from time to time, it appears that the salvation of which he speaks is predominantly one that occurs within a person, rather than one that requires a person to transform the sinful societal structures that support white privilege. Putting others on notice is a good first step, but how exactly does one refuse to cooperate and “throw the gears in reverse” (94)?

I am not certain Wise has learned the lesson he says he had after his anti-apartheid work at Tulane was shot down by a black Xavier University student who asked why he had done nothing about the apartheid in New Orleans, which secured his privileged position (. He still appears to be “choosing his battles” in a limited way, however popularized and well-received his message is. Wise works from an essentializing position of gendered white privilege that may overemphasize the harm to whites more than to nonwhites. The white readers for whom he writes the book may be left with a bad taste in their mouths. Whether from the vulgarity of Wise’s style, or from a heightened awareness of their privilege, whites await a more cleansing account of how to relinquish their power, not only for their own sakes, but for the sake of what is just and right.

Substantive Questions for Discussion:

1. When does talk of the pathology of whiteness become selfish rather than a redemptive?
2. Responding to my own criticism, what steps beyond recognition can whites take to dismantle white privilege?