

**Ashleigh Inglis**  
**Re-Learning Whiteness**  
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Thanks to each of you who helped with my speech – Shaniece, Sandy, and especially to my dad.

Freshman fall of college was the time when I first realized that I am white. Of course, I had been conscious of my race before then, awkwardly checking the “white” box on college applications and my drivers’ license forms, but I had never really thought about it or felt it. That, in and of itself, is a privilege.

I’m from Nantucket, a small, mostly white island off the coast of Massachusetts, so I grew up under the impression that we live in a post-racial society where race does not matter at all. I thought I was supposed to pretend I did not know I was white or notice other people’s skin tones. I was confused about racism, unable to talk about race, and kept my own southern heritage concealed.

But that fall, my whiteness confronted me again and again, as the people around me talked about race. My entrywaymate invited me to join the Black Christian Fellowship and, for the first time in my life, I repeatedly found myself to be the only white person in the room. Other friends discussed being Asian, African, Latina. In the back of my head, a voice kept asking, why do they talk about race? Aren’t we supposed to be over this stuff?

Then a speaker for my class about education reform bluntly told me I was the wrong person to help him work with gangs in Dorchester because I am white and female. I had to confront the fact that although race is a societal construct, it is also real. Searching for answers to questions I was too afraid to voice aloud, I enrolled in four classes about race my freshman spring, and engaged in a confusing and painful endeavor to re-learn how to view the world.

As I acknowledged my whiteness, I began to hate it. How was I supposed to respond to knowing that I have so much privilege? I felt useless. Even my deep desire to be a teacher felt foolish. I began to wonder – am I just another white person presuming to know how to help those “less fortunate”?

At the end of my African American history class, a classmate recounted her rage upon visiting the plantation where her ancestors were enslaved, seeing the hovels they had been forced to inhabit, and noticing that a white family still occupied the Big House. Nauseous, I forced myself to raise my hand. I couldn’t keep it secret any longer – I came out to the class as the descendant of slaveowners.

The classroom seemed to close in on itself as I sifted through vivid memories of Somerset Place, one of the largest plantations in North Carolina and the home of some of

my ancestors. An austere, gilded portrait in the dining room that almost could have been my father. The intricate finery of the Big House juxtaposed with one-room slave houses that, over the centuries, housed over 850 enslaved people. My grandmother correcting the tour guide with even more details about which ancestors did what. Me wanting to vomit in the parking lot. I confessed my confusion and culpability to the class and began to understand catharsis.

Two years later, I do not feel ashamed of my whiteness any more. I understand that, as a white person, it is important for me to talk about race and racism – that the first step to dealing with privilege is acknowledging it. I can have productive conversations with my mentee about his experience as a black teenager. I can reassure a white male friend that his white maleness does not preclude him from usefulness as he goes through the same confusion I experienced. And I can stand here and talk about race with all of you.

I've been realizing, though, that I still can't quite deal with my heritage. Visiting my grandmother in North Carolina over J-term, I picked at my collard greens and grits, unable to respond to the habitual recounting of the family tree. Her house has been in our family for nine generations – for the past century, its inhabitants have been southern liberals who supported integration, but the legacy of the previous generations haunts me.

I will continue to grapple with my white privilege for the rest of my life. Peeling back layers of privilege hurts – but I need to redefine for myself what it means to be white, and learn how to be the positive, white antiracist person I want to be.