

# Lingchi: Living and Learning While Black

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**Abstract:** The physical, mental, and emotional burden of societal pressures and expectations placed on me as a young Black child are unacceptable. It can be a struggle to develop a positive self-image without considering the extra strength it requires to overcome additional adversity such as racial oppression. The stereotypes I was exposed to as a young Black child made it difficult to imagine a world in which I could be myself. The stereotypes that reinforced the idea that Black children must conduct themselves as mature adults at a very young age to be respected are particularly harmful as they perpetuate White supremacy and elitism. The demands made by mainstream White society for Black children to comprehend and defend their personhood at such a young age is an unwarranted psychological burden that contributes to childhood trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder that will impact adult life.

**Keywords:** white fragility, white supremacy, intersectionality, social work

## Conscious Reflection on a Racialized Upbringing

The ancient Chinese torture tactic known as lingchi — which translates loosely to ‘slow slicing,’ ‘lingering death,’ or ‘death by a thousand cuts’ — was used as a method of execution from the seventh century up until 1905, when it was officially outlawed. As the name implies, lingchi was a drawn-out and brutal process.... Unlike most execution styles, which aim to kill sooner rather than later, the aim of lingchi was a long, slow punishment, intended to see how many cuts a person could withstand before dying, or simply losing consciousness. (Kuroski, 2018, para. 1-2)

As a mixed-race child raised in the southern United States, my upbringing was marred with cognitive dissonance, and thousands of cuts. My father, the grandson of a Klansman, and my mother, a direct descendent of enslaved Africans, were married in the late 1980s. Like so many others, they mistakenly believed that love and love alone would end racial hatred and bigotry. Incidentally, believing that passive actions will dismantle or repair the damages of racism aid in the reproduction of colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2014), White fragility (DiAngelo, 2018), other racially insensitive and mentally taxing White supremacist ideals. I believe that only the complete and truthful recounting of American history can propel us into a post-racial society.

Their marriage posed considerable challenges; at its onset, my father’s family did not believe in miscegenation. My mother’s family was not entirely supportive of their union either, fearing for her well-being. While neither of their families truly supported the marriage, their hesitations came from very different places. My paternal great-grandparents refused to meet my eldest sister until she was five years old. When reflecting on aspects of American history such as this, some White people defend individuals such as my great-grandfather, stating that they changed at the end of their lives. While this may be true, it does nothing to undo the pain and suffering felt by those persecuted all the years before they changed. White supremacists do not deserve to be

glorified or rewarded for treating their fellow man with basic human decency and respect after a lifetime of racial hatred. Growing up, my parents wanted to shield me and my siblings from the realities of racism, and often neglected to discuss race and race relations. They were unaware, like so many others, that ignoring a problem does not make it go away. I have always felt the harsh realities of racism. It is only now, as an adult, that I have the knowledge, understanding, and vocabulary to deeply and intelligibly reflect on my childhood experiences and social development.

### **Talking About Race and Racial Macro / Microaggressions**

My father failed to discuss race because he lacked the experience and expertise to discuss such topics with respect to my position as a Black individual. All the times I can recall discussing race with my father have revolved around me correcting his historical oversights and biased views. As a straight White male, my father was not taught nor required to think critically about race—White, Black, or otherwise. My mother discussed the trials and tribulations of Blackness, especially the implications of being Black in America. I distinctly remember her warning me not to wear my hood up after the murder of Trayvon Martin. I also remember her sitting me down to discuss how I should conduct myself in the presence of the police. The only time my mother failed to discuss a particular issue was to protect my innocence as a child. Her primary motivation was for me to remain unburdened by society's deep faults.

Isolated from society, I grew up on the outskirts of a town of approximately 170 people. The only social interaction I received growing up was from my extended family on both sides. I began public school after my parents divorced in December of 2006. I was often the only Black person in my classes. Some contained one or two people of Indigenous heritage. As I was often the first and only Black person of color (POC) that many teachers, parents, and students had ever met, I was subject to countless macro and “microaggressions” (Sue et al., 2007).

Growing up mixed in a sequestered all-White community taught me to view myself as White and, in essence, reject and disown my Blackness. I often straightened my hair, avoided conversations about race, and unknowingly oppressed and perpetuated White supremacist ideologies. If I conducted myself too carelessly, my White classmates would remind me of my Blackness and thus of my place in society. I was often told that I was “pretty for a Black girl” and that I was “not ghetto and loud like the rest of *them*.” Hearing comments such as this caused me a great deal of psychological distress. I wanted to defend myself and those like me, but if I were to speak out against such microaggressions, I would be typecast as another angry Black woman and subsequently diminished further. In my mind, it was better to be the “fun” and “non-threatening” version of myself. At some point in my adolescence, Blackness became “trendy,” elevating me from something others would rather forget existed to a token spokesperson. As a mixed-race woman, I appear as just the right amount of Black to be palpable and thus quasi-acceptable by White people. I became an excuse for racists. “My friend is Black” translates to “I can continue with my racially insensitive and psychologically damaging behaviors because of my proximity to Blackness.” In my experience, White people often only accepted Black people when required by law to do so or when Black people joined in on the racial degradation of their own community. The moment I began fighting for racial justice, I lost the support of some of my family and many of my so-called friends.

I rarely discussed race-related incidents or their impact as I and many others saw this as the “norm.” As I got older, I outright refused to have these discussions with people as they were not discussions but attempts to gaslight or belittle me into racial submission. As John Henrik Clarke once said, “I only debate with my equals; all others I teach” (Dykes, 2020, 0.12). I am not sure if I will ever fully understand the impact those transgressions had and will have on my emotional well-being as they are innumerable and continuous. I struggled to find my place in the world, and now I struggle to create a place for me in the world.

### **Elementary and High School**

In sixth grade, I moved to a bigger community—but I was still in a predominantly White and infamously redlined community. For the first time, I had the pleasure of learning with a Black classmate. While the experience did validate my feelings about racial conceptualization, it did present more questions. Why are Black students expected to be friends or know other Black students? Why is ‘Black’ something people whisper? What did it even mean to be Black? Why are Black students expected to know and understand race better than White students even though we have similar educational backgrounds? Every time a class would discuss slavery, Martin Luther King, Jr., or something of the like, my classmates would turn to look at me as if I had somehow been there. I still cannot quite place the looks on their faces. Pity? Guilt? Fear?

As I got older, I began to educate myself outside of the classroom. I have lived my life as an avid reader, and that alone has saved me in so many ways. Based on what the public school system taught me about Blackness, I would have never discovered self-love. Reading often provided me with a sense of escape, freedom, and knowledge. The public education system provided nothing conducive for racial enlightenment. By the time I was a junior in high school, my knowledge of Black history and race in general often exceeded that of my teachers. Because those around me were painfully undereducated about these issues, I often felt belittled by them. During the summer leading up to my senior year, my high school underwent a mascot change. The previous mascot had been a notorious symbol of racial hatred and “southern pride.” During this transition, I heard students and parents alike argue in favor of keeping the old offensive mascot. At one point, there was a KKK rally in the parking lot, complete with a noose in support of the “rich cultural history” my school upheld. I felt unsafe at my school, and I began to truly understand the value of an education. At this time, I did not know how to advocate for myself, much less those who looked like me. Who would I even advocate to? The very system in which I had been placed was designed against me. I learned to lower my voice and to know my place as it were.

Colin Kaepernick began kneeling for the National Anthem to protest police brutality during my high school basketball career. I remember my straight White male basketball coach pulling the team aside for a huddle before a home game to tell us that we would *not* be kneeling in solidarity. In true White supremacist fashion, he made it a point to tell us that while he “respects our right to protest, as members of his team, we would not disrespect the military or veterans.” Of course, I wondered about the Black men and women who had honorably served the country only to be killed by the police. However, I feared being ostracized, so I bit my tongue, looked the other way, and bottled it up inside.

Like most other children of color, I grew up very quickly due to a myriad of factors: one of them

being the over sexualization of the female body, another being the ever-present danger posed by the White authority. Young girls, especially young Black girls, are often made out to be “hoochies,” and “jezebels” for simply being. Black girls are often blamed for sexual assaults or presumed to be “asking for it.” This blatant disregard for Black girls dates to the antebellum slave era: an era in which Black women were not women, but property, unable to assume any level of body autonomy. At a young age, society began to reinforce the idea that Black girls were not girls but mini women. As a child, I skipped to adolescence because I was Black and needed to learn to control myself, lest I be seen as a threat. As an adolescent, I skipped to adulthood because the White male world saw me as a grown woman. My female White peers were envious of the treatment, not recognizing the behavior as objectifying or as grooming. How was I supposed to advocate for myself in a system that was not designed to protect me?

The mental exhaustion of constantly having to fearlessly call out anti-Blackness and White supremacy, coupled with the constant berating of the “but I’m not racist” racists, made very little time to enjoy being a child. I have always felt personally responsible for educating people about race because I have felt the brute force effects of their ignorance. I was forced to defend my personhood, my intelligence, my worthiness, my beauty—and my mother’s, and her mother’s, and her mother’s mother, all the way back to Africa. The treatment I faced as a young Black girl unbalanced my life. On the one hand, I was ugly and uneducated. On the other hand, I was an evil, sophisticated mastermind. Either way I could not fit the mold society had picked out for me.

White parents, teachers, and politicians shield White children from the harshness of reality at the expense of Black children. These uneducated, undereducated, or miseducated children grow up to believe in a false narrative. They will inevitably inflict harm by failing to understand the history of our nation. It is not the responsibility of the oppressed to educate the oppressor, just as it is not the responsibility of a child to educate an adult. Whiteness is taught to be assumed as correct, innocent, or angelic, whereas Blackness is taught to be assumed as wrong, criminal, unintelligent, or demonic. The undue burden placed on individuals who are non-White breeds disaster for both sides. I grew up afraid and angry, while my classmates just grew up. Unburdened by the knowledge of these ideas and atrocities, my White classmates did not need to reflect on society in the same manner I did. Unable to understand why I felt the way I felt, White people often tried to dismiss my emotional state as unfounded.

### **Historically White Supremacist University**

I was 18 years old and attending a university by the time I had my first Black professor. I wish I could say it was for a class that did not pertain to race. As much as I enjoyed being taught by someone who saw me and understood what I was going through, it pained me to see the blatant disrespect my teacher was subjected to at the hands of White students. Never in my life have I seen White male doctorate holders addressed in such a manner by their students. Although I attended a historically White supremacist university and thus the population was predominantly White, I met more Black people than ever before. I was still often one of the few, if not the only, Black person in my classes. In my first semester, I had a White male professor allow his students to maintain the belief that White privilege was a myth. During my junior year, one of my professors told my 25+ classmates of mostly White men that Black men in inner cities were lazy

and prone to criminality, along with a list of other racially degrading statements and sentiments. Openly comparing the Black community to the Asian American community, he claimed that Black people were lazy because other racial minorities have been successful. I asked him if he had ever heard of the “bootstrap myth” (Wilson, 1986, p. 23) or of the “triangulation of race” (Kim, 1999, p. 106), to which he replied “no.” I then asked him if he had heard of Kimberle Crenshaw, to which he again replied, “no.”

This classroom experience was so traumatic for me that after the full course of events, I filed a formal grievance with the university and forcefully withdrew from the class. Upon hearing my complaint, the university investigated my claim; however, it ruled that no punishable wrongdoing had occurred. The response was underwhelming. One staff member told me that I should prepare for such dispositions and reactions from my co-workers and bosses in the future.

Although I have four years of supervised study and two years of unsupervised research on this issue, as well as 20 years of personal lived experiences, uneducated White people refuse to hear me on this topic. White supremacy allows mediocrity to live as greatness. The critiques of Whiteness and White ideals are so foreign to White people themselves that some believe that mentioning race, calling out racism, and/or holding people accountable for their actions and statements is racist. The psychological wage of Whiteness is the burden of educating White people about Whiteness.

A neighbor once told me she did not believe in systemic racism and then later in the very same conversation proceeded to mention how her father had a friend named “n-word Joe.” As I was visibly disturbed by the usage of such language, she launched into a speech about words only being words, the n-word not being offensive to her, and even going so far as to say that she would not care if I called her a “cracker.”

When recounting racist incidents, it is common for White people to assume the innocence of my perpetrator and question or deny my experience. They claim such-and-such was not racist or was racist by accident, and therefore excusable. The blatant refusal to make amends and impart radical changes in behavior and thinking has allowed racism and anti-Blackness to permeate our society. Even now, as I write this, I wonder about the reactions of my family. Will they hear me? Will they examine their behavior, or will they demonize me and double down on their refusal to see the world through someone else’s eyes?

### **Solution**

That is my story, and I have every right to tell it. If reading what I have to say upsets you, imagine how I feel having lived it. Every day that I wake up, I wake up Black. I wake up every day with 400 years’ worth of societal mistreatment to wade through and fight against. I cannot, I will not “get over it” or “calm down about it.” For far too long Black people, myself included, have been pushed aside, pushed down, and pushed away. I will no longer satiate the desire that others have to feel comfortable about my abuse and oppression. I am not allowed to speak out against racism without someone trying to sweeten the blow. I am tired of White people telling me how I should feel about being Black, who I should forgive, how, and when. I am required through expectation to teach non-Black Americans about the history of OUR country while

simultaneously holding their hands. Until White America sees racism, anti-Blackness, and White supremacy as a problem to be solved by White people, we will not have reconciliation. For too long, the oppressed have been forced to bend to the will of the oppressor.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

The persistent abuses of Black children and youth for generations will require active work to overcome. Social work by proxy is an extension of White supremacist ideologies. Social workers hold special power in our society, as they have the power to make or break families. We must ask ourselves who founded these institutions and why? What is the ideal family model? What does mental health look like for those with no escape? How can help be delivered to underrepresented communities? Who will decide these answers? Who will enforce them?

Racism is a deep social issue within American society that will require individuals in positions of power to understand the critical dynamics at play in 21st century American society. We must all unlearn and relearn the concepts that we have been collectively taught regarding healthy parenting and communicating styles.

Social workers, like every human being on this planet, have an obligation to show up fully for those around them, especially those in pain. How do we show up for young Black people? We must educate ourselves to the point that our ignorance no longer physiologically damages our youth on a national scale. Racism is salient in American society and affects every corner of the country. No job, household, or life is untouched by its ugly hand. We owe it to our communities to not look away. We must roll up our sleeves and hold space for tough conversations. We must not be afraid to be ostracized for the innocent.

### **Conclusion**

White people must unlearn and relearn the concepts that they have been taught regarding race and race construction. Whiteness holds built-in privilege. That privilege encompasses the ability to simply read and learn about the issues others experience first-hand. If, as a child, I was expected to be able to critically think about and articulate ideas involving race, adults should be able to do that now. White social workers have a greater burden placed upon them than the average White American. The power and influence social workers hold over communities of color cannot be taken lightly. If we are not a part of the solution, we are a part of the problem.

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