

**“WHITE AMERICA’S REDACTED MEMORY”**

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Not long ago, I received a letter from a prestigious university, requesting that I serve as an extramural or outsider reader to review the promotion file of another scholar seeking advancement to the level of distinguished professor. In academe, the work of all faculty is subjected regularly to evaluation and review. To move forward professionally one must submit a file, which documents the full scope of one’s publications, teaching evaluations, and entire service record to one’s professional association and to the university. That file, once complete, is sent around to others for their review and written assessment.

Accompanying the official letter requesting my help was a note from the university’s personnel office, explaining that because of important changes in the law, that the university could no longer guarantee that the identities of outside evaluators and the contents of our letters would be held in complete confidence. A candidate who is turned down for tenure or promotion for example may be given access to their personnel files “in redacted form.” The letter explained that, “redaction is defined as the removal of identifying information (including name, title, institutional affiliation, and relationship to the candidate) contained either at the top of the letterhead or within and below the signature block of the letter and evaluation.” Any details about your prior relationships to the person being reviewed could be placed “at the end of your letter but below the signature block. This brief statement will not be subject to redaction and will not be made available to the candidate,” the letter explained.

It suddenly hit me like a thunderbolt that white America’s pathetic failure to grapple seriously with race and racism could be partially explained as a kind of “redaction” of public memory and civic culture. Certain traumatic events involving race that the white mind has difficulty accepting – for example Nat Turner’s 1831 slave rebellion, the bravery and valor of the all-black 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts regiment during Civil war and the Tuskegee Airmen during World War II, the re-election of Marion Barry as Washington D.C.’s mayor, following his conviction for smoking crack cocaine, and the shocking results of the 1966 NCAA national basketball tournament – are too difficult for white people to accept and handle.

Racial circuits are overloaded. Even racial identity itself defaults. All that remains to save the day is what could be termed the prime racial prerogative that “whiteness” must by

definition be maintained at the pinnacle of America's social hierarchy. Anything less than genuine, authentic, "whiteness," which I usually call "white whiteness," will be insufficient to reset from the default mode. Uncomfortable and embarrassing racial experiences at odds with the prime prerogative are "redacted" from public memory and civic discourse.

Entire episodes of the U.S. experience suddenly can be obliterated from general public sensibility. Future textbooks consequently reflect not the actual, lived experience, but the selectively censored "truth" that serves the preservation of the prime racial prerogative. Whiteness is rectified as our principal civic virtue.

And what about African Americans and other people of color, one might ask? Like the personnel department's memo from that nameless university, our "identifying information" – most of our names, titles, institutional affiliations, experiences, accomplishments and aspirations – are redacted or blocked out. The whitest mind therefore becomes the one which is most heavily redacted. This helps to explain how the late South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond could have a half-black child out of wedlock yet campaign for president in 1948 on a white supremacist ticket.

This also helps us understand how Supreme Court Justice Thomas, while phenotypically black in physical appearance, has "redacted" every aspect of his black history and culture – thus becoming the "whitest" American today.

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