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STUDENTS FOR THE ABOLITION OF WHITENESS: CHICAGO

By Sophia Kelley, Rob Schuwerk, ----, and James Kao

ONE of the few programs absolutely mandatory for first-year students during orientation week at the University of Chicago is the annual security forum. A Chicago police officer speaks about the dangerous aspects of living in Hyde Park. Freshmen are told that living in the gray city is nothing at all like living in the suburbs. They are told never to speak to strangers, to cross the street when a stranger approaches, and never to make eye contact with a stranger because "eye contact in Hyde Park is a form of aggression." Even before their first class meets, freshmen at the University of Chicago are taught not only to avoid strangers, but to form a connection in their minds between black persons and strangers. All this occurs because, for the University of Chicago, black persons and strangers amount to the same thing: crime.

Our time at the University of Chicago has made us keenly aware of what it means to avoid "strangers." The Chicago police officer could have made his message much more explicit if he had simply told us to avoid black persons whenever we walk around Hyde Park. But because we failed to heed this officer's words, we were able to befriend certain "strangers" in Hyde Park. Instead of crossing the streets, we can chat with Cici, a member of Hyde Park's poor, and we can exchange handshakes and smiles with Maude, a streetwise vendor on 57th Street. Our resistance to the University's theory that black persons may be understood as criminals has been a primary force behind the formation of Students for the Abolition of Whiteness (SAW).

Chalkings on campus sidewalks announcing the first meeting of SAW generated much confusion and misunderstanding. We were bombarded with questions regarding the name of our new organization. Everyone asked, "What does Students for the Abolition of Whiteness mean?" We chose this name because we wanted to be provocative and because we recognized a need to examine the reasons why our name would create such a stir. Our name reflects our understanding of how race functions in America and our desire to create a new racial discourse, where the often-ignored category of whiteness may be critically examined. Our plea for abolition signifies our rejection of the current racial discourse in America, which focuses on the equality of races.

Most responses to SAW on campus illustrate the problem. "The Maroon," a campus newspaper, printed an editorial accusing SAW of "snake oil rhetoric"

with no compelling approach to racial discrimination. A campus news group accused SAW of being a hate group out to kill white persons. Others attempted to defend an undefined, indeterminate white culture. These responses were attempts to reduce our dialogue on whiteness to the standard American discourse on race, a discourse that seeks racial equality while preserving racial distinction. They indicate the impoverished nature of the present racial discourse.

WHO WE ARE. SAW was founded by four persons. We believe that we are four diverse individuals. Because Sophia and Rob both have white skin, and because ---- and James have brown and yellow skin, respectively, our individual and collective affinities are often compromised. Forms for the government, college applications, and standardized tests always group Sophia and Rob together. While ---- and James are directed to distinct categories (i.e. Asian/Pacific Islander or Indian Subcontinent), they are both understood to be, and treated as, Asians.

Identifying Rob as white overlooks his interest in Korean culture. For the past two years, he has been an active member of the Korean Drum Troupe on campus. Labeling Sophia as white fails to recognize her interest in Polish culture. She is, in fact, fluent in Polish. Identifying ---- and James as Asian assumes that their parents are also Asian. However, calling the ----s and the Kaos all Asian does not adequately represent the different cultures of ---- and his family and of James and his family. ----'s parents speak Tamil much better than ----, and James's parents speak Mandarin much better than James. And ---- and James both speak English much better than their parents. Moreover, James's family immigrated from China while ----'s family immigrated from India. On top of that, both ---- and James find that there is not always an affinity among Asians.

Our questioning of racial categories has led us to see their unfortunate consequences, which, in our view, can only be overcome by completely abandoning racial categorization.

SAW MEETINGS. Given the importance of "crime" in defining race in America, it is no surprise that our weekly meetings almost always involve some amount of discussion concerning crime in the Hyde Park area. Faculty, graduate and undergraduate students, and persons from the Hyde Park community regularly attend our meetings. Not all are necessarily in tune with our ideas. For example, many students who have heard about our efforts to open up the University of Chicago nighttime buses to all community members have come to voice their disbelief at what they understand to be appalling motives. These students cite economic and safety issues to justify their position against open ridership on the campus buses.

Other persons are baffled by our insistence that black persons in Hyde Park are unjustly criminalized. They cite numerous examples of crimes committed by black persons in Hyde Park. Many of these persons refer to the communities surrounding Hyde Park such as Woodlawn and Garfield. They provide personal accounts of abuses they suffered when they accidentally wound up in these neighborhoods either by getting off a bus too early or simply by wandering carelessly. Black persons in these neighborhoods, they say, don't like it when they see a white person. They relate stories about how

black persons tell them, "This is not your neighborhood, white girl." These persons readily admit that skin color has no bearing on disposition for crime. Nonetheless, they feel these incidents justify their wariness of black persons in Hyde Park.

At any given SAW meeting, one is sure to find at least one person from the various campus journals sitting in the corner of our room taking notes. While most of the articles and editorials about our group have been negative, we welcome the publicity. We have found that these articles and editorials have given us a good way to engage in a public dialogue about how whiteness functions in Hyde Park specifically and America as a whole.

POWER OF WHITENESS. We wish to emphasize the distinction that is contained in the choice of whiteness over race. Our understanding of whiteness includes two key points: first, whiteness is characterized by an absence of the participatory activities and practices that constitute what we traditionally consider an ethnic or cultural identity; second, the absence of these activities and practices allows us to recognize the defining feature of whiteness, that is, its power to determine the racial discourse in America. Through the exercise of this power, whiteness stakes out a realm of privilege for itself whereby its members have the freedom to not think about race. To speak of abolishing race involves the assumption that it is the idea of race that produces inequalities between racial groups. We maintain that whiteness not only produces these inequalities but the entire discursive field in which race is situated. To speak of abolishing whiteness does not constitute a partial solution to one of the problems posed by race; rather, it strikes at the very base of a racial edifice of power in America.

When the confusions and misunderstandings have been cleared away, we are still asked one question: How can you abolish whiteness? We want to make the phrase "race is historically constructed" a little more meaningful by bringing white space to common consciousness. We understand white spaces as those instances where a white world view is invoked. Examples include stereotyping the south side of Chicago as a place where one doesn't go, acceptance of SAT scores as representative of "universal merit," believing redlining to be a legitimate banking policy, etc. These attitudes represent certain issues which allow race to continue to play a central role in American society. Collectively, they assert a white worldview from a seemingly objective perspective. Such a representation whitewashes the historical development of whites and whiteness and subverts the historical subjectivity inherent in all cultural, historical, social, and political forms.

Simply pointing out these issues in our weekly SAW meetings, however, is not enough. We assert that persons must take an active role through collective organization in groups such as SAW and New Abolitionist Students (our sister group at the University of Texas) as well as through their daily interaction with whiteness in order for whiteness to be questioned. Persons cannot simply disagree with the white worldview. They must reveal its subjectivity and oppressive nature. Whiteness, in order to survive, must be reproduced in local events. Whites can and will exist passively as whites as long as they refuse to overthrow

the label. Thus, thinking that one is not white will not do the trick.

Race and racial thinking will exist as long as race is understood as an ontological category. That is, we believe that race is not a category to which we are chained by birth. Only when participation in whiteness is understood as an active choice can we begin the real work of eliminating racial injustices. Abolishing whiteness is the only real way to translate the politics of race into the politics of class, because it is only through dissolving the historically situated birthrights of American history that we can come to a fair, honest discussion of class and other issues of fairness.

Abolishing whiteness means making whiteness a conscious choice. It means giving those who consider themselves to be liberal a new language for talking about themselves as human beings instead of as whites. It means actively contesting white spaces and white privilege by raising the stakes for those who wish to cling to whiteness. It means eliminating the necessary categories for the existence and perpetuation of racial abuses.

ATTACKING WHITE SPACE. This said, there is often much hesitation on the part of the audience. Attacking "white space" is a confusing and complicated issue. It often means being argumentative in situations where one never was before. This process is not painless. To make this final leap of faith, people need to believe that racial categories stigmatize. They need to see whiteness as a tragedy facing all Americans. Fundamentally, this is a question of identity. Oftentimes, when people lament the hopelessness of ending racialism (a belief in the existence of race), they cite the impossibility of changing skin color or facial features. We acknowledge the existence of physical differences among people, but believe that these differences become significant only in a society that uses them to grant privileges to certain classes and oppress others. It is this application of significance to physical differences that we contest.

The basic goal of all SAW activities is to open up a new racial dialogue in the community and to focus this dialogue on the role of whiteness. SAW is currently a registered student organization at the University of Chicago. This permits us to receive funds from the university. We conduct meetings every Thursday evening in which these issues are discussed in an open forum. We have been engaged in a dialogue with the editorial staff of the Maroon on issues of race and the ideas behind SAW. For the next academic quarter we are putting together a panel discussion in which faculty members will present various ideas about racial issues. We plan to designate one week in the upcoming quarter "Abolish Whiteness Week" and to use a series of workshops, films, and discussions to introduce our ideas of the destructive role of whiteness and white identity in history. We also seek to host a debate between visiting scholars on the role of whiteness in American history and its future place in our society. Since we are in our beginning stages as an organization, we plan to examine the relevant issues through both traditional and experimental means.