

# Forum on whiteness raises questions of power and political correctness

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On Wednesday night, over one hundred students at a panel discussion explored the meaning of whiteness. The discussion, mediated by Hewlett Grant Intern James Jhun, was part of the Hewlett Pluralism and Unity project in conjunction with the Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA). Held in Stokes Auditorium, it was the first in a series of panel discussions focusing on race. The next two discussions will be entitled "Issues with Black and White" and "Beyond Identity Politics."

According to the program for the discussion, the panel/forum series is designed to "allow both participants and audience the opportunity to address those issues that

are selectively ignored by mainstream discourses on race."

Wednesday's panel consisted of five Haverford students representing a variety of views and races. The panelists were Cristiana Baik '02, Jesse Ehrenfeld '00, Christian Far '00, Delaina Gumbs '00, and Abby Rosenheck '99. Jhun also credited Masipula Sithole '99, David Kanthor '99, and Michael Shieler '99 for helping to organize the event.

During the discussion, Jhun asked panel members questions and panel and audience members spoke. Panel members spoke about what is seen as "normal" at Haverford, and what it means to be a minority student here. Gumbs said she feels that the image of the upper middle class white student from New Jersey is seen as normative, while Baik said she is some-

times afraid to speak her opinions because she thinks no one will understand where she is coming from. Towards the end of the first half of the program, Jhun asked questions about how people viewed Quakerism, political correctness, and liberalism as being "white or not white."

Gumbs spoke about political correctness, saying that she feels she has the license to "say things that aren't politically correct" because political correctness "reconciles guilt, and I have none," she said. "I'm the one being oppressed, right? I'm supposed to be the one everyone feels sorry for."

In response to Jhun's question, "How does political correctness function in a white society," Far

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said, "No one wants to be considered racist. Once political correctness becomes mainstream, it's easy to bond to that."

After Jhun was finished speaking, Pedro Urquilla '00 added from the back of the auditorium, "It's easy for

Ehrenfeld agreed, saying that it seems like non-whites have legitimacy and authority when talking about race.

Continuing on the topic of political correctness, Jhun read a series of questions, one of which was "How is Quakerism seen as particularly white?"

Rich Biddulph '01 responded by saying that there is a "white culture, and that white culture breeds softness," which he explained to be fear. He said people use PC terms because they are scared, then elaborated to say people at Haverford use PC terms because "they don't want to piss off the Sons of Africa." (SoA is an all-

male, academic and social support network who have been active in demanding reforms in Haverford's OMA and in the racial makeup of the school as a

*Pedro Urquilla*

whole.)

Jhun supported Biddulph's statement by noting that "the points of power confine white people to their own defined sets of experience."

Another audience member spoke up about white power, saying people consider whiteness and white power to pertain to white people in the upper half of the economic scale, but all whites fit into this cat-

egory because of their skin color.

At that point, the group began to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of being white. Gumbs said, "Not talking in class is a white-girl thing to do. It's scary for my white girl friends to break out of the mold." She, on the other hand, said that people often look to her as a representative of all minorities, and it is impossible for her to blend in at Haverford because of her skin color. "Sometimes," she said, "I would do anything to be normalized."

Shipler added, "It takes people twice as long to see all the facets of individuality of students of color." Jeff Meyer '00 said, "Being white, for me, is like a get-out-of-jail-free card." Another audience member noted that one major advantage of being white is that a white person can

In terms of race at Haverford, a woman in the audience lamented that the only black female professor at Haverford is religion professor Tracy Hucks. Therefore, the woman commented that it is difficult for women of color at Haverford to find role models within the community.

The group took a five-minute break, and when the discussion resumed Jhun shared a few of his feelings about political correctness. He said, "Political correctness has become an emotional crutch. People should be called at they wish to be called. That [idea] has been lost." Shipler remarked, "It's politically incorrect to be too politically correct."

Ehrenfeld and Baik said after the forum that they feel that there are too few forums on race at Haverford, and both were surprised by how many

people attended Wednesday's discussion. Ehrenfeld said, "The large number of people who came [to the forum] shows that people are receptive." He added with a smile, "It's a hell of a lot more productive than talking about the Constitution."

**"IT'S EASY FOR A WHITE PERSON TO BE PC, BUT ONE HAS TO DECONSTRUCT ONE'S PRIVILEGE." HE ELABORATED BY SAYING, "IF YOU [WHITE STUDENTS] WALK INTO A STORE IN SUBURBAN SQUARE [A NEARBY SHOPPING CENTER], AND I WALK INTO THAT STORE, WATCH WHAT HAPPENS,"**

a white person to be PC, but one has to deconstruct one's privilege." He elaborated by saying, "If you [white students] walk into a store in Suburban Square [a nearby shopping center], and I walk into that store, watch what happens," indicating that store employees would be more apt to follow him around for fear that he might steal something because he is black.

As the conversation turned to notions of white privilege, many students pointed out that being white in an all-white setting means that one can avoid thinking about race. However, Gumbs and Jhun also pointed out that white people can feel the need to censor themselves, especially when discussing race, therefore disempowering themselves.

Rosenheck responded that she feels that respect is a Quaker value, and that people often think being silent about racial issues is a form of respect; however, she noted, silence and avoiding difficult subjects is definitely not a Quaker value.

Jhun then asked a question that drew a number of diverse responses: "Is the notion of a 'white race' an oxymoron?" One audience member said that whites don't have a race; one is only white "by process of elimination." Another audience member expressed the notion that being white means one can trace one's ancestry to some European country, while black Americans usually only know that they had ancestors in Africa.

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*Delaina Gumbs*

automatically consider everyone else to be "the others."

# To those who would marginalize minority views

*Editor's note: The author of this letter, James Jhun, is the moderator of several panel discussions being held at Haverford this semester on the topic of critical perspectives concerning race. The first, a forum on whiteness, was reported on in the April 13 Bi-College News, and the second, entitled "Issues with Black and White" was held last week. The following is Mr. Jhun's reaction to the most recent discussion.*

Dear Editor,

This whole little "race game" is whack. The conversation last week can only be described as "Exactly... what Haverford Needed." So many have come up to me to tell me, (in very "Supportive Christian Brethren" manner, may I add) that the conversation was the best conversation on race that Haverford has ever had.

That makes me so incredibly sad. Not that that conversation wasn't great. It was nearly Springer-esque in its grandiose "Circus of Confession." But it is most definitely *not* what Haverford needed. At least not in the way you think you needed it. It's what you all wanted. What you fantasized about having: The catharsis that confession brings. The addiction created by the repression of the "evil" in all of us. In short, those of you who deeply believed in the rhetoric are nothing more than guilt junkies. Except in this version of the game, both sides deal and take it.

You all wanted so bad for people to "get real" that you literally performed it right out of an episode of the 1994 Real World with Puck, Pedro and that Girl from San Diego.

Who's a racist?

You're a racist!

you can do something about it...

Ugh... Sooo cliché, and yet sooo "real."

I'm not saying that "you can't do anything about your racism." What I'm saying is that you are living and reliving a fantasy here at Haverford centered around a preconceived vision of the "perfect" racism, one that is polar, and binary, and oppositional in its fundamental composition. One that belongs to Nazis, and Klan members, and Serbs. What about whites, and Asians, and blacks, and Jews, and Latinos, and women, and men, and athletes, and biology majors, and Chevy drivers, and people who call their mother every week? That's obviously not what makes a racist...

The problem isn't that you have this diametric polar vision of the world, but it's that this time, you did it all over me and those who are truly marginalized by this kind of "discourse" (i.e., weak word for conversation). People who I like and like to listen to. I'm talking about the way Hayan and Emily (who were *on* the panel, okay?), spoke maybe *twice*. And each time were ignored or perhaps considered for precisely one half of a second (enough to say, "Hmm... Yeah."). Never even mind what the woman who didn't attend Tri-Co said, or any of the other alienated individuals who didn't speak, or didn't attend out of sheer cynicism. I doubt you know what they had to say, can't even imagine what their point was, because ultimately, they don't matter to the "discourse." (Thank you, if you did remember.) I'm not talking just about the exclusion from being allowed to speak. I'm talking about the exclusion from being listened to. In the "discourse," (i.e., Haverford's Official Dialogue Medium of Choice), the

because obviously what the majority needs is what *everyone* needs. Why is it never about "us?"

Always me or them! Never "you," is it? But that's just it, I can't even *blame* you because it isn't really your fault. It isn't white individuals' faults, black individuals' faults, Latino/a individuals', Asian/Pacific Islanders', multiple raced individuals' and everyone who I fail to address here because it's ultimately not an individual fault. Immediately, it is *our* fault, the fault of the Haverford "We."

The whole notion that there is no "I" in "We" has planted itself deeply and immovably in the souls of all students here, whether you love it, feel savagely oppressed by it, or are indifferent to it. Many of you don't even really want an "I" because it's so safe to be "We." That would be fine, if it didn't walk all over the individualities of every student who doesn't believe in that. Those students who want to be an "I," who came to Haverford to discover who "I" is. Meaning: people who came to grow a little bit.

Here, the socially enforced, and rhetorically clinicized formulation of "We," through Customs, through Tri-Co, through the signing of the Honor Code, through the fundamental preexistence of that mentality from the whole construction of your black-white, privileged-underprivileged, men-women, gay-straight, rich-poor childhoods. As a result, in this festering cauldron of human vileness, you battle each other, like the blind sewage fish of the coastal-runoff estuaries. As a result, there has developed a need for all the "I" in "We" to be catalogued (Cross the line if...), pointed out (This gay friend I have...), criminalized (That guy