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Black and White Photo Project

By Debbie Lerman

The project emerges

The idea for the black & white photo project occurred to me several years ago, when I realized my young kids (then around 7 and 5) had no words for, and no emotional baggage around, racial differences. They were in a relatively integrated school (Project Learn School) in a relatively integrated neighborhood (Mt. Airy, Philadelphia) and they didn't call people "black" or "white," because we didn't use those words at home or at school. They just described what people looked like, using "brown-skinned" or "light-skinned" when they wanted to make that distinction.

So I thought: Wouldn't it be nice if we all looked at each other with that kind of innocence? Yet, of course, we as grownups already have black and white ingrained in our culture and psyches as racial descriptors, with all the associated historical pain. But what if we could see black and white, instead of as conflicted opposites, as perfect complements and reflections of one another?

When a very dear and wonderful art teacher at Project Learn saw the project for the first time she said: "This could heal the world!"

I wish!

On a slightly less lofty scale, my hope for all of us who participate in the black and white project is perhaps to experience a shift in perception – an enhanced ability to see ourselves in each other and the "other" in ourselves.



Figure 1.

The project evolves

Recently, I made a [YouTube video](#) that showcases some of the black and white photos, along with excerpts from Obama's speech on race, which he gave when he was running for president.



Figure 2.

So far I've had overwhelmingly positive responses to the black and white photo project from participants and from people who have seen the photographs.

However, Martha, one of my very best friends, who is a professor of English and who specializes in African American history and literature, doesn't like the project. She says it "reifies the racial binary." I think what she means is that it treats race as a black and white issue, instead of recognizing the endless shades of colors in between, and it reinforces the way people see race, instead of subverting it.

I respect Martha's views very much, so her criticism stings. Am I being racially insensitive here? Is this project helping to perpetuate stereotypical black-white dichotomies instead of healing them?

I've thought a lot about it, and even though I can see where a superficial glance at the pictures might lead to Martha's conclusion, I believe that if you look at the project more carefully, and approach it as a utopian artistic vision rather than an attempt at realistically depicting racial issues, you may come to a different understanding.

First, in this black and white project, you can't separate the medium from the message. In fact, the medium is a large part of the message: Black and white photography is all about how black and white work together to create an aesthetic whole. It's about a unified whole being more than just the sum of its contrasting parts. This is why using black and white photography to create a utopian vision of black and white in a racial context is so appealing to me.



Figure 3.

And second, humor and surprise are essential aspects of the black and white project. Many of the scenarios in the photos have a twist:

something you wouldn't necessarily expect to see in black or in white, like black spaghetti or a white eggplant. Once again, this removes the photos and scenarios they depict from the realm of "how we're stuck in our perception of race as either black and or white," shifting focus to the artistic/idealistic realm of "How I wish we could perceive black and white as two colors that complement each other perfectly."

Does this project cover all people of all races? No. It's a symbolic attempt to visualize a superficial manifestation of racial difference (i.e., skin color) as a desirable aesthetic element, using visual beauty and harmony to attempt to transcend historical racial rifts and prejudices.



Figure 4.

Would this project look different if I were a black artist? Probably. As a white person, I bring a whole bunch of guilt and self-consciousness to any discussion of race. I think white people – whether our ancestors were actually slave owners or not – need to actively and constantly strive to rectify the heinous crimes of slavery and the undercurrent of racism that has marred our public discourse and institutions, as well as our private interpersonal relations, ever since.

Bottom line: I think we have to talk about race, make art about race, and deal with race as a crucial issue in our lives. If this project can contribute to the discussion even a little bit; if it can jar even a few people out of their racist thought habits or their “post-racial” misperceptions; if it helps black and white people and everyone else who cares about these issues get even a little bit closer to mutual trust, respect and understanding; it will be worth it.

The project and politics

Several years ago, when Obama was running for President, lots of people thought the black and white project would be perfect for his campaign. Then he gave his famous speech on race, in April 2008, in response to criticism leveled at his pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright.

I think it's a great speech. It's a powerful demonstration not just of Obama's fantastic oratory talents, but also of his willingness to tackle difficult issues head-on, and to call things as he sees them.



Figure 5.

But not everyone sees the speech the way I do. In the *New York Times* recently, I read a [review of a book by Harvard Law Professor Randall Kennedy](#), called *The Persistence of the Color Line: Racial Politics and the Obama Presidency*. I was struck by Kennedy's criticism of Obama's race speech, as presented by the reviewer:

The messianic glow that surrounded Obama's candidacy — Kennedy and others call it “Obamamania” — precluded closer scrutiny of his pronouncements, especially those having to do with race. The widely held notion that the now-famous race speech, “A More Perfect Union,” ranked with the Gettysburg Address or “I Have a Dream” strikes Kennedy as delusional. The speech, he writes, was little more than a carefully calibrated

attempt to defuse the public relations crisis precipitated by the Wright affair. [See *details re Wright's sermon and more, below*]. Far from frank, it understated the extent of the country's racial divisions and sought to blame blacks and whites equally for them, when in fact, Kennedy writes, "black America and white America are not equally culpable. White America enslaved and Jim Crowed black America (*not* the other way around)." The speech was in keeping with the candidate's wildly successful race strategy, which involved making white voters feel better about themselves whenever possible.

Quite a critique! I agree that the speech was brilliantly crafted to defuse the public relations crisis that erupted when the national media publicized parts of Wright's sermons, in which he made comments like, "God damn America for treating our citizens as less than human." Personally, I don't see much wrong with a black pastor railing against racial injustice in this country, but many people considered this type of rhetoric incendiary.



Figure 6.

However, I disagree that Obama's speech blames blacks and whites equally for our racial divisions. It does not let either side off the hook in terms of taking responsibility for trying to heal those divisions. But attributing some responsibility to both black and white communities for trying to heal the divisions is not equivalent to ascribing equal blame to both sides for creating those divisions.

Reading the entire speech, it's very clear to me that Obama is presenting the racial division issue from the point of view of a black person who understands and even identifies with Reverend Wright's passionate, righteous anger, although he disagrees with some of the more extreme statements made in the heat of that passion. Obama also spends a large part of the speech discussing how the black community has come to be what it is today – mostly as a perpetuation of the legacy of slavery and racial discrimination, for which whites are entirely to blame.

Obama also asks both communities to work on understanding where the other is coming from. Arguably, it's not fair to ask both sides to work toward "a more perfect union" when the sorry state of that union was caused by historical atrocities, prejudice and discrimination practiced by just one of the sides. I agree that white people should take on much more responsibility than many have up to now for healing racial rifts and ensuring social justice in this country. Maybe Obama should have highlighted that even more. But I do agree that to heal racial wounds will take efforts from both sides.

Am I just a deluded white person who was lulled into feeling better about myself by Obama's speech? I hope not. To me, the speech was a call to action – a call to pay attention to all types of injustice in our society and work to overcome them.



Figure 7.

Does focusing on injustices that are not uniquely perpetrated against blacks, but that disproportionately affect the black community (e.g., educational and socioeconomic disparities) serve to lull whites into complacency about egregious racial injustices? You could argue that.

But I believe that the vision Obama expresses in his speech, of both black and white communities striving toward a more perfect union, is like the idealistic vision in my black and white project: It's not a representation of how things are; it's a description of how we wish things could be – all of us together striving toward social justice for all.

Is it a “realistic” vision? Maybe not at this point in our history. But I believe, like Obama, that it's a vision worth striving toward.

Read the [transcript](#) of Obama's race speech.

The project and education

Friends who are teachers and school principals have told me that the black and white project resonates particularly strongly with children. Kids enjoy the strangeness and the humor of things like black spaghetti, and they also connect with the underlying themes.



Figure 8.

One wonderful art teacher who was working in an all-black public school in Philadelphia, where each class had just one hour of art a week, put up a calendar of the black and white project in a corner of the art room over the sink. She didn't actually point it out to the kids, but they started noticing it and commenting on it when they washed their hands. Soon, kids were coming into the art room asking, “Where's that calendar?” and heading over to take a look.

After looking through the photos, one student said: “We need more white kids in this school.” Everyone agreed.

Another friend of mine is a principal in a mostly white school in a wealthy New York suburb. He's excited about possibly having an assembly for his students to view and discuss the black and white project.

I would love to use the black and white project to stimulate discussions in schools about race, art, art and race, and all the feelings that the photos evoke. Any and all ideas are most welcome as to what type of program would work best and how to present it.

Debbie Lerman is a freelance writer and photographer living in Philadelphia.

Learn more about the black and white project on my blog:
www.blackandwhiteproject.org

View more of my photography at
www.DebbieLermanPhoto.com

[View the black and white project YouTube video](#)



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