

Dear  
White  
America

**LETTER TO A NEW MINORITY**



**TIM WISE**

# Dear *White America*

Letter to a New Minority

Tim Wise



CITY LIGHTS BOOKS

San Francisco

Copyright © 2012 by Tim Wise

All Rights Reserved.

Cover design: Pollen

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wise, Tim J.

Dear white America : letter to a new minority / Tim Wise.

p. cm. — (City Lights Open Media)

ISBN 978-0-87286-521-1 (pbk.)

1. Whites—Race identity—United States—History.
2. Whites—United States—Attitudes—History.
3. Social status—United States—History.
4. Minorities—United States—History.
5. Multiculturalism—United States—History. I. Title.

E184.A1W573 2012

305.809—dc23

2011034672

City Lights Books are published at the City Lights Bookstore,  
261 Columbus Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94133.

[www.citylights.com](http://www.citylights.com)

## NOTE TO THE READER

Believe me, I know there is something more than a little pretentious about penning a letter to what amounts to roughly 200 million people.

To begin, I realize that only a tiny fraction of that number will ever read it or learn of its existence. Of those, a disproportionate percentage will be persons who likely hold views similar to my own. Such is the nature of ideological polemic. It tends to find readership amongst those already predisposed to agree with the bulk of its contents, thereby missing the vast throngs of others who could perhaps benefit from those contents but will studiously avoid them precisely because they can tell—perhaps from the title or the jacket blurbs, or because they are already familiar with the author—that they won't likely agree with much of what lies inside.

I also recognize that by aiming said polemic at a group as vast and diverse as “white America,” I will likely be accused of overreach. After all, how can one speak at once to 200 million people called white in this

nation, who lead lives that vary based on geography, class status, gender, sexuality, religious affiliation, political ideology, and any number of other identity categories? Doesn't such an effort overgeneralize about white people, suggesting that there are things they all need to think about, are not thinking about now, and on which I am qualified to lecture?

Perhaps. But despite these caveats, I believe this effort to be a valuable one. First, even if most who read this letter are already of a progressive, liberal or left orientation, the contents may still be of assistance in conversations with others of decidedly different persuasions. We all have people in our lives with whom it can be difficult to talk about political matters, and especially when those matters touch on the always explosive topic of race, as this volume does. If my words may in some way strengthen your own, and allow you to more confidently discuss racial subjects with those difficult co-workers, relatives, neighbors, or friends, all the better. Sometimes efforts such as this are aimed less at those one seeks to "convert" than at those with whom one already sojourns in general agreement, but who need reinforcement for the struggle. Not to mention, those who make up the so-called "choir" are often not singing on key, certainly not nearly so much as they believe themselves to be. As a lifelong Southerner who has been around my fair

share of choirs, I can say without fear of contradiction that choirs need practice.

Likewise, although I know there is great diversity among those of us called white, I also know that to be white, regardless of the many additional identities we may possess, *means something*. It matters, and has always mattered, throughout our nation's history. Despite our differences, there are certain aspects of the white American experience that are broadly similar. As I argued in my memoir, *White Like Me*, although we are—as with snowflakes—all different, we also must admit that (as with snowflakes) there are some general consistencies in our life trajectories that bind us together. We know snowflakes, after all, when we see them, and can make some statements about their experiences that are likely to be pretty close to the mark, regardless of whatever individual differences may exist between them: so too with persons defined as members of the same so-called race.

I also know that any time one takes aim at white folks over the subject of racism, as I do herein, one runs the risk of being accused of “hating” white people. It's a refrain that has been directed at me for years by those who find it difficult to differentiate between a critique of white racism and institutional white supremacy on the one hand, and of white people, as *people*, on the other. But there is a difference between

these things. There have always been white people who have fought white racism and white supremacy as an institutional force, and there have always been people of color, for that matter, who have collaborated with it. This critique is less about people and more about mindsets; it is less about white people and more about *whiteness* as a social and institutional force—a social category created for the purpose of enshrining a racially divided polity. To condemn the latter is not to condemn the former.

Indeed, I find it ironic that one would assume issuing a critique of white racism and privilege was tantamount to hating whites. After all, to make such a claim suggests a dangerous and disturbing equation whereby, in effect, to love white people would require compliance with—if not a tacit *endorsement* of—white racism and privilege. But surely that is not what those who confuse my words with racial hatred would wish to suggest, is it? So no, I do not hate white people. I hate neither myself nor my wife, my two daughters, my parents, my best friend, his wife, their child or the elderly lady across the street, all of whom are white. It is out of a belief that white folks can and must do better—a belief that springs from a place of hopefulness, compassion, and even love—that I offer these thoughts.

And please note, this letter is not merely an outwardly directed missive, intended to scold others

for their shortcomings where race is concerned. Throughout the letter I will often use the words “we” and “us” when referring to whites, because I know that many of these failings are mine too. Even those of us who have chosen the path of antiracist allyship, and who “get it” in many ways, still make mistakes regularly, fall into old patterns and inadvertently collaborate with the injustices we oppose. This letter is as much a self-reminder as anything else.

Additionally, although this letter is addressed to my fellow white Americans, my intention is for it to be of interest to all, including persons of color. For years, black and brown folks have told me that they needed to know what white folks were saying about race when people of color weren’t around; further, they’ve asked for insights into the way white folks are thinking about race, which they often believe can best be provided by a well-placed insider, someone who speaks the language and knows the handshake, so to speak. Herein I try to offer some of those insights, and I hope they will prove instructive.

Because this volume is presented as a letter, I have opted to forego a traditional footnote style for the text. Inserting numerical notes in the body of the narrative might have proved distracting for readers, making the volume feel more like an academic work than a conversational letter. But because it is important to

provide sources for various data claims and news references, I have included a notes section at the end of the text. There, you will find sources provided, with reference to the page number and passage to which the source refers.

## Dear White America,

I have to confess to a longstanding fantasy, the fulfillment of which I resist, partly because of its impracticality, but also (and mostly) out of a general distaste for inviting violence upon my person. It typically comes to mind about the same time every year—at the very moment, in fact, that I find myself typing out these words—as cities and towns across the United States gear up for their respective Fourth of July celebrations, replete with fireworks, hot dogs, and lots of red, white and blue banners and flags assaulting the visual landscape from sea to shining sea.

In the fantasy, it's incredibly hot out, even as the daytime sun recedes, soon to give way to the darkening skies that will serve as the canvas for a colorful explosion of incendiary art: the end product of two unstoppable forces—American self-love and Chinese manufacturing—brought together in an audacious display of grandiosity.

As Lee Greenwood's "Proud to Be an American" blares from a sound system loaded onto the back of a

truck and the yearly Independence Day parade begins, I bide my time. Then, just as the first procession of Boy Scouts passes, I turn to the man standing next to me, the one with the big “God Bless the USA” button on his hat, and ask: “Why can’t you just get over it? I mean, why do you insist on living in the past? That whole ‘breaking away from the British’ thing was like more than 200 years ago. Isn’t it time to *move on*?”

Then, before my stunned and increasingly belligerent target can manage to slug me for my apparent apostasy on this, the holiest of all national holidays, I break into a flat-out sprint, hurtling down the block. He gives chase, of course, but having consumed one too many pieces of Mom’s apple pie, he becomes winded, ultimately giving up, shaking his fists and calling me names, before getting back to the orgy of Americanism in which he had been engaged prior to my arrival.

Please know that I’m not a sadistic type. I don’t actually seek to cause distress, be it physical or emotional, to anyone, even to the kind of person who truly believes, against all visual evidence to the contrary, that the colors Betsy Ross sewed into that flag so long ago make for an acceptable wardrobe palette. It’s just that every now and then I remember how quick so many of us are to use a similar line, and I feel as though we should perhaps be required to

consider how it feels: all that judgmental arrogance and dismissiveness.

This is, after all, the common response that so many of our people offer whenever someone of color dares to mention the less than celebratory aspects of our national history: you know, like some of the parts involving *them*; especially the parts concerning the multiple centuries of human trafficking and racial subordination to which they were subjected, and from which we benefited, at least in relative terms. Indeed, whenever someone deigns to mention any of those matters—like the national legacy of enslavement, Indian genocide and imperialistic land grabs—the rebuttal to which we so often retreat is as automatic as it is enraging: “Oh, that was a long time ago, get over it,” or “Stop living in the past,” or “At some point, we just have to move on.”

In other words, the past is the past, and we shouldn't dwell on it. Unless of course we *should* and indeed insist on doing so, as with the above-referenced Independence Day spectacle, or as many used to do with their cries of “Remember the Alamo” or “Remember Pearl Harbor.” Both of those refrains, after all, took as their jumping-off point the rather obvious notion that the past does matter and should be remembered—a logic that apparently vanishes like early morning fog on a hot day when applied to the historical moments

we'd rather forget. Not because they are any less historic, it should be noted, but merely because they are considerably less *convenient*.

Oh, and not to put too fine a point on it, but when millions of us have apparently chosen to affiliate ourselves with a political movement known as the Tea Party, which group's public rallies prominently feature some among us clothed in Revolutionary War costumes, wearing powdered wigs and carrying muskets, we are really in no position to lecture *anyone* about the importance of living in the present and getting past the past. All the less so when the rallying cry of that bunch appears to be that they seek to "take their country back." *Back*, after all, is a directional reference that points by definition to the past, so we ought to understand when some insist we should examine that past in its entirety, and not just the parts that many of us would rather remember.

Truth is, we love living in the past when it venerates this nation and makes us feel good. If the past allows us to reside in an idealized, mythical place, from which we can look down upon the rest of humanity as besotted inferiors who are no doubt jealous of our national greatness and our freedoms (*that*, of course, is why they hate us and why some attack us), then the past is the perfect companion: an old friend or lover, or at least a well-worn and reassuring shoe.

If, on the other hand, some among us insist that the past is more than that—if we point out that the past is also one of brutality, and that this brutality, especially as regards race, has mightily skewed the distribution of wealth and opportunity even to this day—then the past becomes a trifle, a pimple on the ass of *now*, an unwelcome reminder that although the emperor may wear clothes, the clothes he wears betray a shape he had rather hoped to conceal. No, no: the past, in those cases, is to be forgotten.

Vast numbers of us, it appears, would prefer to hermetically seal the past away in some memory vault, only peering inside on those occasions when it suits us and supports the cause of uncritical nationalism to which so many of us find ourselves imperviously wedded. But to treat the past this way is to engage in a fundamentally dishonest enterprise, one that, in the long run (as we'll see), is dangerous. Unless we grapple with the past in its fullness—and come to appreciate the impact of that past on our present moment—we will find it increasingly difficult to move into the future a productive, confident and even remotely democratic republic.



But before we go any further, I realize that many of you reading this letter may not be comfortable being

addressed in the collective sense—as *white America*. While we are quite used to referring to black folks and other people of color in terms of their group identity, we insist on referring to ourselves individually, almost as if to suggest that we lacked a racial identity, or that if we possess one, it contains no relevance to our lives. “I’m not *white*,” some of you may say, “I’m just an *American*.” Those are easy words to mouth when you’ve always been able to take your Americanness, your citizenship and your belonging for granted. Or better still, some say, “I’m not white, I’m just Bill,” or “Suzie” or “Tom” or “Mary” or whatever one’s name might be.

And yet, though we may prefer to deny it, I know that there *is* such a thing as white America. I know it because I am white myself, and have lived a life that has been intensely racialized. It’s an experience that I doubt seriously is mine alone. From where I grew up, to the schools I attended, to the jobs I had, to the way I have been treated by authority figures—be they teachers, employers or cops—most everything about my experience has been at least partially (often significantly) related to my racial identity. So even though everyone is different, being white in America has meant something, just as being black, Latino, Asian or an indigenous person has meant something. History happened, and it matters.

From nearly the second that Europeans first stepped onto the shores of this continent, our identity mattered. It allowed us to feel superior to the native peoples whom we began to kill, subordinate and displace from their land almost immediately. It allowed us to take advantage of land-giveaway programs in the colonies—which we created, of course—like the headright system, which provided fifty acres of land to males from England who were willing to settle in the so-called New World. Within a few decades, classification as a white person would become the key to avoiding enslavement; it would determine who could hold office, who could sit on juries, who had rights of due process; and by the time the republic was founded, being considered white would become the key to citizenship itself. The Naturalization Act of 1790—the first law passed by Congress after the ratification of the Constitution—made clear that all white persons and *only* white persons could be considered citizens of the United States, a status that would elevate even the lowliest and most despised European ethnic above *all* persons of color, without exception, for generations to come.

Of course, even after the legal right to buy, sell, breed and enslave people of color officially ended, our whiteness continued to matter. It determined where one could live, work and attend school; it determined

who would and would not have access to land and other wealth-building assets. Segregation and immigration restrictions aimed specifically at non-Europeans continued to make a mockery of our national pretense to freedom and democracy for another century after the fall of the chattel system. This nation was, simply put, conceived in and plagued by formal white supremacy for over 350 years, going back to the colonial period: it was a system of racial fascism. I know we don't like that kind of talk. It probably seems like the kind of thing that would only be said by someone who hated America, or, alternately, had studied history. Same thing, I guess, to some of us.

In any event, the reason I bring this up is not just to make a point about the past, but rather to frame the remarks that follow, because the past matters, and not merely as a historical referent. The past affects the present. Inertia is not merely a property of the physical universe; it also relates to the political, socioeconomic and cultural universe. We have to deal with the past because the past comes into the present whether we like it or not, and whether or not we wish to speak of it. It is akin to dirty laundry, and while I know that none of us likes to air such a thing in front of others, what I also know is that dirty laundry never manages to air itself.

Please understand that I don't wish for us to exam-

ine these matters so as to generate some kind of self-flagellating guilt on our part. I know we aren't to blame for history—either its horrors or the legacy it has left us. But we are responsible for how we bear that legacy, and what we make of it in the present. There is a difference, and it is not a small one, between guilt and responsibility, however much and however long we may have confused the two concepts, treating them simply as synonyms. Guilt is what you feel for the things you have done, while responsibility is what you take because of the kind of person you are. In any number of situations we take responsibility for things even when we were not, strictly speaking, directly to blame for them. So, for instance, we contribute tax dollars to remedy the effects of pollution, even when we have not, individually, released toxic waste into the air, soil and water. And surely, were we to become the CEO of a multibillion-dollar company, we would not be free to make use of the company's assets (all of which were accumulated before we got there, and for which we would be due no credit), while refusing to make payments on outstanding debts, just because we had not, ourselves, incurred them.

In the discussion about race and racism, to make note of the accumulated inequities, which date back generations, is not to blame anyone currently alive for those inequities. It is not intended to produce guilt, for

indeed no one living today is directly responsible for them. But their legacy persists in many of today's institutions for which we are responsible. And just as we have inherited many of the blessings and national assets of past generations—the accumulated national wealth for instance—we have inherited the deficits too. To take advantage of the upside of history while refusing to address the downside—to make use of accumulated assets while refusing to take aim at the debts—would be morally irresponsible .

Don't misunderstand; I am not claiming that *all* the responsibility for fixing our nation's racial quandary rests with whites. Everyone has played a part in the mess, and everyone will need to be involved in digging out from under it. As my friend and colleague Jacqui Wade puts it, "We all have a few nickels in the quarter." But as a white person, I believe I have a responsibility—we all do—to clean up our own backyards, so to speak, before casting about for black and brown folks on whom to place blame for one or another aspect of our current crisis. It's called "personal responsibility," which, notably, is a term we use quite often when talking about people of color. We are quick to lecture *them* about the need to take personal responsibility for their lives, to stop blaming others or the system for their problems, to address the issues in their own communities, rather than deflecting blame onto us or

the larger society we share. This is why we responded so favorably to the words of Bill Cosby several years ago, when he hectored black America to straighten up and address its own internal pathologies. But we seem unable or unwilling to apply the logic of personal responsibility to ourselves. We use it as a weapon against others, never noting the irony that to point at someone *else* while speaking of taking *personal* responsibility for oneself is the ultimate contradiction.

*Of course* people of color need to take personal responsibility for their lives and do whatever they can—regardless of circumstance, regardless of racism—to better their own situations. That has always been true, even under periods of formal apartheid. But that says nothing about what the larger society must do to improve the opportunity structures in which such persons must operate. Just because a person should work hard and behave responsibly, that does not mean the rest of us have no obligation to ensure a fair and just society within which that first person will be trying to better his or her station. Personal responsibility and collective responsibility are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are each contributory to the whole.

So while black and brown folks have work to do too, it is not *my* job, or yours, to dictate the terms of that effort. Nor can we suggest that until *they* do their part to make things better, *we* can remain inactive

when it comes to doing ours. Each of us has a responsibility to do what we can, no matter what others do or don't do. If racism and institutionalized white advantage never went away, people of color would still have a moral obligation to do their best and to try their hardest; likewise, if people of color continue to do certain things from time to time that we feel only perpetuate their own disadvantage, we will still have an obligation to help create equity and end racial discrimination against them.



The truth is, discrimination and inequity stalk the present day. In other words, it is not merely a matter of historical significance, but also a contemporary reality. Perhaps if the injuries and injustices of the past had been wiped away we could avoid this discussion, or at least relegate it to our history classes, but they haven't been, and so we can't. And this is yet another way I know you must exist, white America: because the data very clearly tell me that you do—that *we* do.

For instance, the data tell me that even before the present economic meltdown (which has only made things worse), our families possessed about twelve times the net worth of the typical black family and eight times that of the typical Latino family. Even black and brown middle-class families with good incomes and

occupational status tended to have one-third to one-fifth the net worth of similar families in our communities. Now, in the wake of the collapsed economy, the median net worth among white families is *twenty times* that of black families and eighteen times greater than that of Latino families—a difference of over \$100,000, between the typical white family and the typical family of color.

In large part those gaps were (and still are) the historical residue of generations of unequal opportunity and access. They certainly have nothing to do with superior investment wisdom on our parts. After all, if we have learned anything in the past few years of financial collapse, surely we should have learned this: a handful of rich white men—some of the best and brightest Wall Street has to offer—can lose a *hell of a lot of money* with no help from black folks, Mexicans (documented or not), Asian Americans or native peoples. In the course of only about eighteen months from 2007 to early 2009, these financial wizards—who possess no talent to produce anything of value, their skills being limited to the manipulation of investment instruments like “derivatives,” which even they cannot fully explain—lost over *twelve trillion dollars* of other people’s money thanks to the shady practices that tanked the stock market during that time. That’s roughly 20 percent of the accumulated wealth of the United States,

which it took a couple of centuries to build up, but less than two years to obliterate. If that money were placed end to end in \$1 bills, it would stretch to the sun and back to Earth *two times over*. This, the handiwork of that very group—rich, white, and mostly male—that we are told are superior in work ethic, insight and abilities relative to the black and brown, and to women of all colors. So no, the racial wealth gaps we see in this society surely can't be due to merit.

And yes, I know that some might think it untoward to make reference to the race of those who squandered all this wealth by their illegal, unethical or incompetent machinations; isn't their racial identity an irrelevant detail? Fair enough. Yet I think we know—whether or not we are prepared to acknowledge it—that if those criminal, unethical and incompetent hedge fund managers, derivatives traders and stock manipulators had been black or brown, we would surely have heard about their race, and little else. We would have been treated to one chorus after another of white resentment, voices asserting that those folks of color shouldn't have even been in those positions, and probably only got them because of affirmative action, rather than the merit system (better known as Daddy's personal contact list), which had historically procured the same jobs for the white frat boys who just tanked the economy.