

### Santa Claus: In “OUR” Image

I am sure some of you will remember the controversy surrounding “Santa Larry” at the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota, during the holiday season of 2016. Santa Larry was the first African American hired to portray Santa Claus in the history of the Mall of America. As a result, some headlines read “*Mall of America endures controversy over Black Santa,*” or “*Despite the Haters, Black Santa Thrives at Mall of America.*” If you remember some of these headlines, you were likely baffled by them just like me. What would cause some of our neighbors to react to Black Santa in this way? What would make people take to social media outlets with messages like “SANTA IS WHITE!”? Some of the outrage over Black Santa, of course, was led by people who we would describe as racists (i.e. hatemongers, people who actively practice hatred toward others). Interestingly, others who opposed Black Santa were not individuals we would describe as racists. Some of the umbrage came from well-intended, everyday Americans who were simply accustomed to seeing Santa portrayed in a certain way. They had grown accustomed to seeing Santa as White and could not imagine him as any other “race”. Racial Equity scholar, Tema Okun, would argue that these individuals had succumbed to white dominate culture, an identity standard that places whiteness at the center of all identities. This standard is woven in and throughout most aspects of American life. Okun defines white dominant culture as:

*The explicit to subtle ways that the norms, preferences...of White European descended people overwhelmingly shape how we organize our work, [play] and institutions, see ourselves and others, interact with one another and with time, and make decisions.*

Okun argues that these attitudes and behaviors can show up in anyone, both in people of color and in those who identify as White. Okun also invites us to examine ourselves to explore how the characteristics of this phenomenon reveals itself in our lives individually and collectively.

The image of Santa Claus is a trivial way to underscore how the phenomenon seeps, inadvertently, into our daily lives. Santa is emblematic of the tacit and implicit way white dominate culture affects us all. Far too often, we’ve associated white dominate culture or white supremacy culture with violent segregationist groups like the Ku Klux Klan, Neo Nazis, White Nationalists, etc., however, if we were to examine our society a bit deeper, we would notice a series of seemingly innocuous identity standards that normalizes whiteness in juxtaposition to other racial and ethnic identities. If we are honest with ourselves, we would acknowledge that these identity standards in many ways are not only found in the seemingly innocent portrayal of “Jolly Old St. Nick,” but have led to the marginalization and discrimination of many people of color.

As you are doing your holiday shopping and you happen upon a Santa of color, offer him or her a gesture of gratitude. Not only is he or she there as a symbol of what our country aspires to be, he or she is there for all kids—African American kids, White kids, Native American kids, Latinx kids, Pacific Island kids, Asian kids—all who come to see Santa and deserve to see Santa in their image.

Happy Holidays!

Dr. Rodney D. Smith  
Vice President for Access and Engagement