

# Book Notes

## OUR HIDDEN CONVERSATIONS: WHAT AMERICANS REALLY THINK ABOUT RACE AND IDENTITY

by Michele Norris

*New York: Simon & Schuster, 2024. 528 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), \$16.99 (e-book), \$29.99 (audio).*

Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1967 speech, "The Three Evils of Society," concludes with the warning that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere"—a compelling charge to "challenge the status quo," to declare "eternal opposition to poverty, racism, and militarism" (King, 1967). In this speech, King suggests the interconnectedness of these three issues as he highlights their collective threat to American society.

Roughly six decades after King's gripping speech calling the nation's attention to race as an inextricable link to the realization of true justice, Michelle Norris has ushered her latest book, *Our Hidden Conversations: What Americans Really Think About Race and Identity*, to the forefront of literary discourse during a period of racial reckoning; of national efforts to dismantle Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs; of assaults on free speech through the targeted banning of books; of the Supreme Court's overturning sixty-two years of affirmative action; of exacerbated disparities in post-pandemic America; and of seemingly unending wars around the world.

In *Our Hidden Conversations*, Norris masterfully captures the raw, profound, and impassioned perspectives that Americans hold regarding race. Acting as both a time capsule showing America's troubled history and a floodlight illuminating the present-day repercussions of racial strife, the book explores the enduring effects of racism across various categories of intersectional identities (Crenshaw, 1989). With a compassionate and urgent tone, Norris evokes connectedness, inviting all of humanity to listen in and join a public discourse about race. She emphasizes that only through such intimate, vulnerable engagement can we truly create a just society. Her invitation is the pathway by which she introduces hope for an evolved, empathetic, and equitable society in which all people are seen, heard, and valued.

Norris writes of how she had hoped that a previous US book tour of hers would facilitate open and free-flowing discussions about race. However, her

experience as a journalist intercepted that hope and anticipated instead an evasive audience, one reluctant to participate in race-based conversations. Her keen intuition and profound storytelling have created a compelling and deeply relevant body of work for the preK–12 US education system. Reflecting on past conversations with family members who shared stories that were buried deep within them for decades, and gripping tightly to the hope of relieving them of their sorrows, Norris was reminded of a personal assessment that “people would rather eat their toenails than participate in a no-holds-barred conversation about race” (xv). Her presupposed ideas about the audience’s ambivalence around participation during her tour sparked the creation of The Race Card Project (TRCP), a conversation prompt she designed to elicit direct discussions about race. While the expression “playing the race card” often conveys accusations and shuts down conduits to common ground, Norris skillfully used The Race Card Project to open up conversations.

The Race Card Project was a calculated hook, a six-word exercise strategically designed to move audiences beyond their ambivalence, to draw them into candid conversations about race. The point at which Norris instituted TRCP on her thirty-six-city book tour and the process by which she engaged audience members remain unclear; nonetheless, the rate and volume of responses from audiences were remarkable. Perhaps Americans had been long awaiting a safe entry point into the conversation, one sure to evoke sentiments of a pain-ridden past. Perhaps the responses were an indication of the longing in American society to confront the complexities and nuance of race, a malignant social construct that continues to have deleterious effects on humanity. What began as a conversation starter on a book tour morphed into postcards randomly completed and mailed back to Norris from local establishments and then online submissions by people from all across the US. Similar to the book tour, the postcards read, “Race. Your Thoughts. 6 words, please send.” TRCP released a valve in the hearts of many who readily accepted the invitation to submit their response to the prompt they found in an airport, a cafe, the supermarket, or some other serendipitous encounter. Since 2010, more than 500,000 people in the US and ninety-six countries, have voluntarily shared their short responses, backstories, and photos as they participated in conversations about race (TRCP, 2024).

Identity can often be relegated to the practice of categorization and naming (Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006). In *Our Hidden Conversations*, Norris skillfully weaves the stories of thousands of people who used her six-word prompt. Each of the book’s twelve chapters compassionately primes the reader to embrace the synchronous themes of pain, love, betrayal, and fear, and many others, depicted in photographs and personal stories. Centering the voices of participants in TRCP, as illustrated in each of the following six-word examples, Norris shows throughout the book how the responses overwhelmingly underscore the intersectionality of human identities:

Mixed baby coming soon in-laws afraid. (57)

Gay, but at least I'm White. (56)

Turban, Assumptions, Fear, Perpetually Foreign, Resistance. (59)

I ate pasta, family ate rice. (75)

Three Cultures. Two Races. No Home. (390)

Offering more than the binary understanding of race in America, *Our Hidden Conversations* zooms in on communities of people with intersectional identities and widens the conversation, capturing the stories of those who are frequently displaced and often positioned on the periphery and posing the question, "What about me?" (xxxiv). Norris invites legions of once-uninvited voices to now be centered in the expansive discourse surrounding race in America and candidly describes her experience as fourteen years spent "examining what it means to be White" (399). While there was a presumed correlation between this phenomenon of majority White submission and the National Public Radio (NPR) audience, possibly introduced to Norris during the period of time she hosted *All Things Considered*, the submission trend remained consistent even years after Norris's departure from the network. Indeed, conversations about race in America have long held people of color as the focal point in relation to the disparities, inequities, and injustices they've continued to face. Perhaps it was because of this premise that Norris believed that "most of the submissions would come from people of color" (399). Interestingly, however, TRCP debunked that assumption, as it yielded a majority of White responses.

In US society, where "White" has been established as the normative category, many White Americans have long maintained their privilege of occupying the perimeter, electing to refrain from participating in race-related issues they are emotionally and physically removed from. However, Norris contends that a change in our nation's political landscape, the growing appeal for White nationalism, and the teaching of the history of slavery and civil rights are among the activating factors in the dissolution of White America's racial detachment and the expansion of "White" as a racialized cohort. Regarding what she calls "the tilt towards stories that come from White America," Norris posits that it "is emblematic of a period in US history when America's Caucasian population has increasingly become part of a racialized cohort, regarded as White" (399). The idea of White becoming part of a racialized cohort is also addressed by Wilkerson (2020): "[Europeans] went from being Czech, Hungarian, or Polish to White, a political designation that only has meaning when set against something not white" (49).

Because Norris amplifies conversations often hidden from and even far beyond the details given in our history books, readers are left to grapple with the harsh and much-needed recognition of America's history that demonstrates repeated assaults on the dignity of People of Color as experienced through atrocities like slavery, the forced removal of Native American peoples, the internment of Japanese Americans, and lynchings. While the stories she presents intertwine topics of identity, cultural relevance, ethnic studies, and

social justice, readers could have benefited from the inclusion of grounding practices for reflection. For instance, through a reflective practice like journaling (Milner, 2003), stakeholders could be encouraged to pause and collect their thoughts as they make meaning of their reaction to the text (Learning for Justice, 2014). Given this book's relevance to education, journaling would also act as a nudge toward personal accountability, as educators in local and state education agencies, policy makers, and schoolboard members could begin to consider where their point of action or sphere of influence may be in America's continuous fight for social justice and equity.

Although race is a fabricated social construct, racism and its residual consequences are undeniable. With *Our Hidden Conversations*, Norris contributes a rich and dynamic work that compels each researcher, policy maker, or practitioner to grab hold of the arc of the moral universe, ensuring that it bends toward justice for all humanity.

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