



Silent racism: How whites perpetuate the racial status quo

by Ann Friou

A staff member at *Glamour* magazine recently triggered a major controversy when she made a racially insensitive comment about the appropriateness of black women's hairstyles in the workplace. Her comment, that Afros were "a don't" for work, found its way into Internet blogs, outraging hundreds of readers who wrote to *Glamour* in protest. Readers noted that, at a time when women of all shapes, sizes, colors and manner of hairstyles are increasingly seen in magazines and on TV and movie screens, black women still find it difficult to be themselves and get ahead at work.

Realizing the need for an open discussion of biased beauty standards, *Glamour* magazine organized a panel of eight experts to discuss "women, race and beauty," inviting Barbara Trepagnier, professor of sociology at Texas State, as one of its participants. On the panel, which took place in November 2007 in front of a New York audience of about 100, Trepagnier joined ethnically diverse academics, journalists and businesswomen to discuss racial bias with regard to ethnic hairstyles in corporate America. Excerpts from the panel's discussion appeared in the February 2008 issue of *Glamour*. The discussion can also be read online at http://www.glamour.com/fashionbeauty/articles/2008/02/round_table.

Trepagnier, author of *Silent Racism: How Well-Meaning White People Perpetuate the Racial Divide*, pointed out that white people perpetuate racism by denying that they are racist and by being afraid of racial controversy. "We need to stop wondering 'am I racist?' and ask how aware we are of the concerns of people of other races," she said.

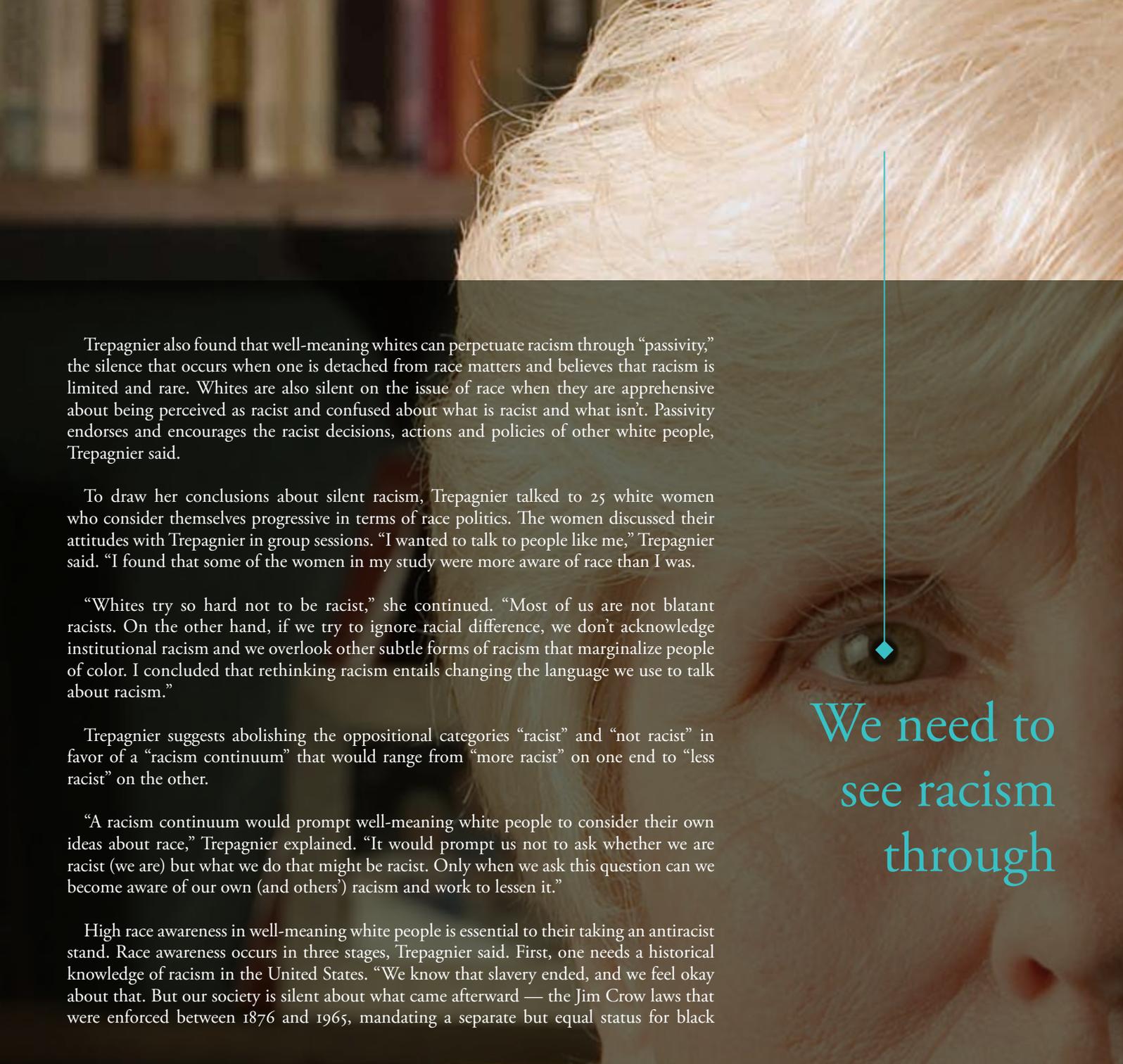
In a letter to *Glamour* following the panel discussion, Trepagnier wrote about the incident that sparked the discussion. "[The *Glamour* staffer] didn't know that 'Afro' translates into 'natural hair' when black women hear the word. (Full disclosure: I didn't know that either.) The point I would add . . . is that if white women have close friendships with women of color, those friendships include conversations about race. White women in cross-racial relationships know about and understand the concerns of black women, including concerns about their hair. They know about them because close friends share those kinds of things."

All white people perpetuate racism against black people, even well-meaning whites who most people would regard as "not racist," Trepagnier explains. This "silent racism" — rarely noticed by whites — is instrumental in the production of institutional racism, which continues to cause inequality between white and black Americans. Judging whether individuals are racist won't improve racial equality, Trepagnier argues in her book. Rather, she says institutional racism will be lessened only when whites heighten their awareness of race and begin to discuss racism with black Americans.

Today, in spite of the successes of the civil rights movement and the election of an African-American president, blacks continue to do worse than whites on every social indicator — health, education, employment, housing, justice. Trepagnier points to "silent racism" — routine actions that often are not recognized by the actor as racist but that uphold the racial status quo — as responsible for perpetuating institutional racism. According to her study, these routine actions take a number of forms. One is stereotypical images — misinformation about blacks prevalent in our culture. For example, whites are often surprised to find that a black person has a college degree or is employed as a professional, believing instead that blacks generally are not well educated.

Another form of silent racism is paternalistic assumptions — a sense of superiority found in hierarchical relationships between blacks and whites. Embedded in this form of silent racism is the notion that whites are responsible for blacks, who are seen as in need of protection. As an example, Trepagnier told the story of Karen, one of the women in the study, who ordered ice cream for a black friend when they were in high school. Karen explained that she was trying to take care of her friend because they were in a "white" ice cream shop.

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Trepagnier also found that well-meaning whites can perpetuate racism through “passivity,” the silence that occurs when one is detached from race matters and believes that racism is limited and rare. Whites are also silent on the issue of race when they are apprehensive about being perceived as racist and confused about what is racist and what isn’t. Passivity endorses and encourages the racist decisions, actions and policies of other white people, Trepagnier said.

To draw her conclusions about silent racism, Trepagnier talked to 25 white women who consider themselves progressive in terms of race politics. The women discussed their attitudes with Trepagnier in group sessions. “I wanted to talk to people like me,” Trepagnier said. “I found that some of the women in my study were more aware of race than I was.

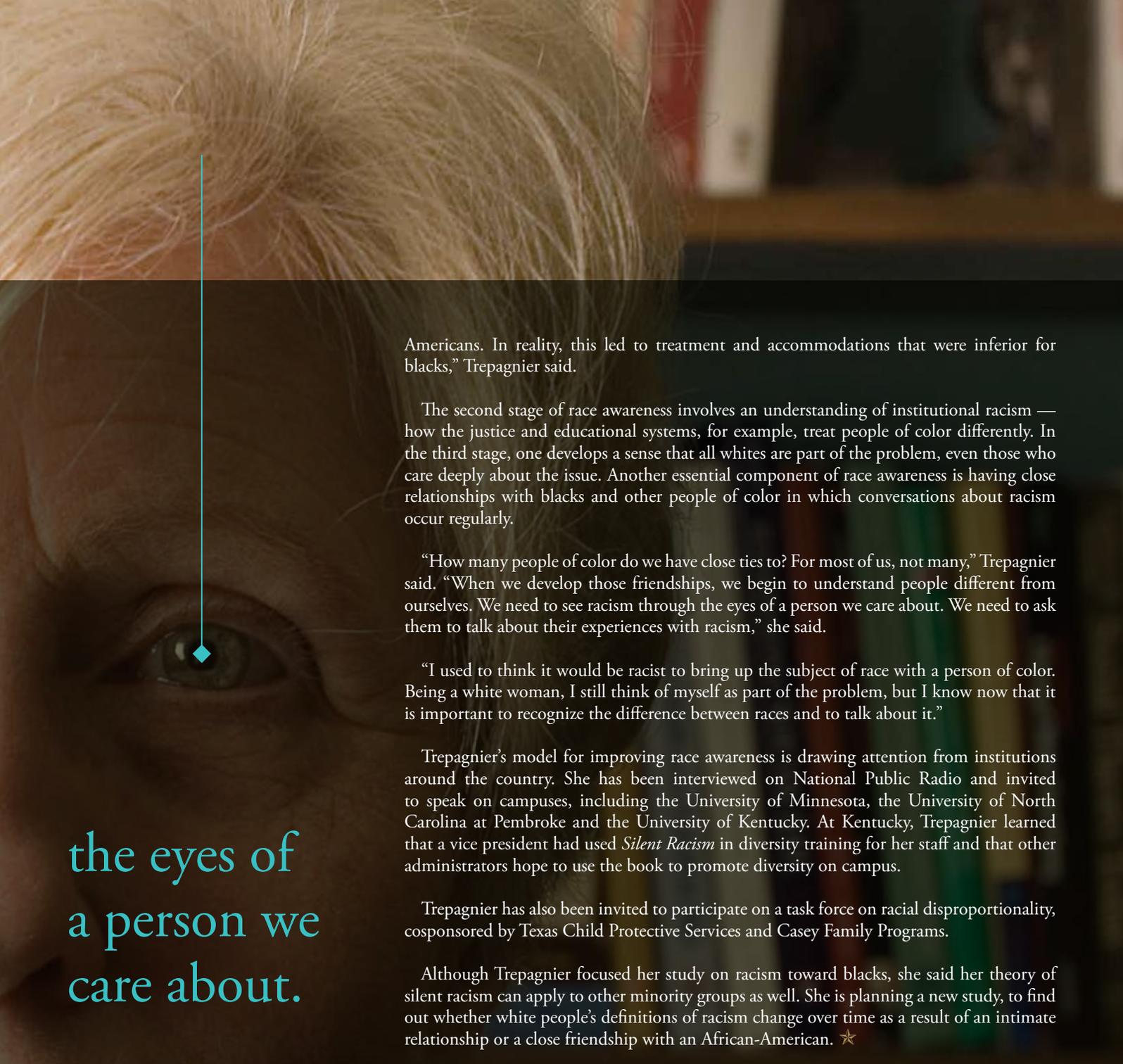
“Whites try so hard not to be racist,” she continued. “Most of us are not blatant racists. On the other hand, if we try to ignore racial difference, we don’t acknowledge institutional racism and we overlook other subtle forms of racism that marginalize people of color. I concluded that rethinking racism entails changing the language we use to talk about racism.”

Trepagnier suggests abolishing the oppositional categories “racist” and “not racist” in favor of a “racism continuum” that would range from “more racist” on one end to “less racist” on the other.

“A racism continuum would prompt well-meaning white people to consider their own ideas about race,” Trepagnier explained. “It would prompt us not to ask whether we are racist (we are) but what we do that might be racist. Only when we ask this question can we become aware of our own (and others’) racism and work to lessen it.”

High race awareness in well-meaning white people is essential to their taking an antiracist stand. Race awareness occurs in three stages, Trepagnier said. First, one needs a historical knowledge of racism in the United States. “We know that slavery ended, and we feel okay about that. But our society is silent about what came afterward — the Jim Crow laws that were enforced between 1876 and 1965, mandating a separate but equal status for black

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Americans. In reality, this led to treatment and accommodations that were inferior for blacks,” Trepagnier said.

The second stage of race awareness involves an understanding of institutional racism — how the justice and educational systems, for example, treat people of color differently. In the third stage, one develops a sense that all whites are part of the problem, even those who care deeply about the issue. Another essential component of race awareness is having close relationships with blacks and other people of color in which conversations about racism occur regularly.

“How many people of color do we have close ties to? For most of us, not many,” Trepagnier said. “When we develop those friendships, we begin to understand people different from ourselves. We need to see racism through the eyes of a person we care about. We need to ask them to talk about their experiences with racism,” she said.

“I used to think it would be racist to bring up the subject of race with a person of color. Being a white woman, I still think of myself as part of the problem, but I know now that it is important to recognize the difference between races and to talk about it.”

Trepagnier’s model for improving race awareness is drawing attention from institutions around the country. She has been interviewed on National Public Radio and invited to speak on campuses, including the University of Minnesota, the University of North Carolina at Pembroke and the University of Kentucky. At Kentucky, Trepagnier learned that a vice president had used *Silent Racism* in diversity training for her staff and that other administrators hope to use the book to promote diversity on campus.

Trepagnier has also been invited to participate on a task force on racial disproportionality, cosponsored by Texas Child Protective Services and Casey Family Programs.

Although Trepagnier focused her study on racism toward blacks, she said her theory of silent racism can apply to other minority groups as well. She is planning a new study, to find out whether white people’s definitions of racism change over time as a result of an intimate relationship or a close friendship with an African-American. ★