



Part Two of a Series on Whiteness (Part One)



“When the first Africans arrived in Virginia in 1619, there were no ‘white’ people there; nor, according to the colonial records, would there be for another sixty years.”—Theodore W. Allen

“There’s nothing that a white man with a penny hates more than a nigger with a nickel!”—Chris Rock

There’s a perception that whiteness is working for white people. It’s not. Whiteness is one of the biggest and most long-running scams ever perpetrated.

It started in the late 1600s in America, but like so many scams, it spiraled out of control until it had a life of its own.

Not long after Europeans started arriving on the east coast of North America and the Caribbean Islands they found themselves rich in land but desperate for labor to work the land. The answer they struck upon was importation of bond labor, initially mostly Irish. The Irish had not been considered fully human under English law for centuries, and they ended up in plantations and working sugar under the Caribbean sun. The easy part of importing Irish (and Scottish) slave labor was that they were right next to England. The downside is there wasn’t enough of them for the amazing amounts of land laid before the eager English settlers, and thus the Atlantic slave trade with Africa was born. This is the story we hear in school, but the abridged version we get, intentionally or not, hides the scam of it. Initially the bond terms of convict, Scotch-Irish, and African labor was a set period of time, at the end of which they received bond money and their freedom in this new land. In fact, not that many bondsmen and women lived to be free, but some did, and established themselves as a mixed-race, free peasantry of the new world. If you’ve ever

wondered where the free blacks of so many stories of early America came from, a large number were the families of freed African bond laborers.



The white cry, from the 17th century, to George Wallace, and still alive in the present day.

As time went on, the labor needs of the land holders continued to grow, and desperate to cultivate the land, they were loathe to let go of their bond servants and the bondsmen and bondswomen's children (whom they kept in bondage for a legally defined time as well). In the mean time, a growing American peasantry was proving as difficult to govern as the European peasantry back home, periodically rising up in riot and rebellion, light skinned and dark skinned together. The political leaders of the Virginia colony struck upon an answer to all these problems, an answer which plagues us to this day.

The Virginians legislated a new class of people into existence: the whites. They gave the whites certain rights, and took other rights from blacks. White, as a language of race, appears in Virginia around the 1680s, and seems to first appear in Virginia law in

1691. And thus whiteness, and to a degree as well blackness, was born in the mind of America.

As of the 18th century whites could not be permanently enslaved as they sometimes had been before, and black slaves could never work their way to freedom. The whites were told this was because God had made the blacks inferior to the whites, just as the whites were inferior to the superior classes that owned property. It's worthwhile to remember that they didn't give whites political rights, they didn't give whites the vote—that would not happen then nor at the revolution and independence. Whites didn't get the vote until the presidency of Andrew Jackson. Property owners, both of land and slaves, were the only ones who could vote. That included black land and slave owners until various states passed laws in the early 18th century to take their franchise away.



This Reconstruction era election poster is free of any content that is not inarticulate blind fear of black people.

This plan worked gorgeously. It broke all efforts of the majority of people, African or European, to fight for civil and political rights in America against a landed class that literally ruled everything. It reduced a portion of the people to the status of the negro slave, and gave the poor but now white people a precious and entitled inch to stand above the permanently enslaved on the social ladder. The next thing the politicians did sealed the deal: they paid poor whites a bounty for runaway slaves, and often made them overseers for slaves, turning every poor white in America into a prison guard against the people who had once been their neighbors and allies.



The Iberians are believed to have been originally an African race, who thousands of years ago spread themselves through Spain over Western Europe. Their remains are found in the barrows, or burying places, in sundry parts of these countries. The skulls are of low prognathous type. They came to Ireland, and mixed with the natives of the South and West, who themselves are supposed to have been of low type and descendants of savages of the Stone Age, who, in consequence of isolation from the rest of the world, had never been out-competed in the healthy struggle of life, and thus made way, according to the laws of nature, for superior races.

Racism drafted every intellectual endeavor to reinforce the idea of an intrinsic superiority to the upper class European. When Darwinism came along, it was immediately adapted as a justification for exactly the same message that had been presented as the will of God previously.

If this seems like a crazy way for people to behave, it's important to think about what was believed about the natural order of things back in the 1600s. Nowadays, we don't really think about class as a thing that often, and certainly not a natural thing. But when white and black people were conceived, the idea of class was literally believed to be handed down from God. Aristocracy flowed from the divine right of kings, and by their blood or elevation. The poor were poor because God so wished it. Keeping peasants in line and using them to their fullest was what the aristocracy was for, and the tactics that accomplished this were considered wise stewardship. Sometimes that meant concessions, and sometimes divide and conquer, but as long as you didn't have peasant rebellions, you were doing a good job. This view of the world, never universal but powerful and prevalent, held on in one form or another for a very long time. It infected the views of British, Spanish, Dutch, and French imperial masters all over. The powerful were those God had chosen, and those in their power were chosen by God to be of use. While fainter, this idea is so

strong it still leaks into the modern era in places like the atheological ideas of Prosperity Christianity. In the frame of mind of aristocracy and a divinely ordained ruling class, such a plan to reorder people and make them pliant was understood to be a move of genius blessed by god and king, if it worked.

This plan worked, in fact it worked so well it became the blueprint for the next few centuries of colonization, revised and spread all over the world, even beyond the conception of white and black.

As the aristocrats and their successors traveled around the world through the colonial age, Europeans all over would find or define a group within the colonial territory and elevate it above the other groups, give it some privileges, though never enough to challenge the intruding rulers. In exchange for this slightly elevated status, the rulers would make those people do the colonial dirty work, and usually keep them slightly more well off than their fellows. Over time, these slightly elevated people often tried to keep their European masters in power even after the people realized how evil colonialism was, maintaining the system both to keep above their fellows and out of fear of retaliation for the dirty work they'd done. The most familiar contemporary case of this practice people will recognize is the Belgian categorization of Tutsis and Hutus, and the tragedy that still hangs over that arrangement over a century later. But really, the idea started in Virginia.



While the perception of race riots is often of black rioting, the worst and most frequent race riots were whites against blacks. The worst such riot in US history was the New York Draft Riot, which killed 119 blacks and scarred the city of New York forever.

The invented category of white people is still the largest case of this colonial strategy in the world. Whiteness was not always invented in opposition to chattel slavery, even in America. As the newly invented whites pushed West, they were reinvented in opposition to the existence of other people inconveniently on the land the newcomers believed God had ordained to them as their destiny. Elsewhere, they were reinvented as the able administrators, the teachers and ministers, and God's own technocrats, both bettering and properly using the non-white world. Each invention of whiteness was a new permutation, but each one also harkened back to the ur-form of Virginia: God made the whites to serve kings, and everyone else to serve whites. Today, corporations and the remains of colonial systems have reduced the vast majority of those in the arbitrary category of white people to drafted screws for a global forced-labor prison camp.

A Lower Tide Drags All Ships Down

The great thing about the divide-and-conquer of creating white-skin privilege is that you don't have to give people thusly bought off anything more, and American power structures didn't. In places with black slavery, the whites suffered terribly.



1930s-era Alabama sharecroppers, among the most viciously exploited groups of people in American history.

There's a simple truth to American history for the majority of people who have ever been American: the worse the black experience, the worse everyone else's experience, including whites. Driving down (or eliminating) black wages, while always agreeable to whites, drove white pay lower than their European counterparts for most of our history. The labor movement that got its start in America took longer to make progress here, especially in terms of hours and working conditions, largely because employers pitted whites against black or immigrant labor, splitting the movement. Civil and political rights in

America only ever had to be better for whites than they were for blacks, preserving that furious inch of superiority that was the defining quality of whites. To this day poor whites are the most intransigent racists—left by an exploitative and violent system without education, access to food and medical care, or even the basic necessities of life in the developed world. In this state their only precious possession is the idea of whiteness. Virginian aristocracy blessed them with hundreds of years ago.

So privilege doesn't really work for the people who have it, or at least not the way many people imagine it does. Some white privileges are basic human rights, like the right to live where you wish in safety from your neighbors and the local police. Others shouldn't be privileges for anyone at all, like preferred medical treatment based on race. White privilege is sold to whites, but it is the socio-political equivalent of putting "Contains No Arsenic!" on a breakfast cereal box. White folk have bought into that message tremendously. I mean, who wants a breakfast cereal with arsenic in it? Of course, the problem is there's no reason cereal should ever have arsenic in it in the first place.

Just keep things plausible, the political arsenic keeps getting introduced into the metaphorical food supply. Perpetual bondage as chattel slaves, Jim Crow, and the current drug war are things terrible enough that white people are happy to accept getting out of them, and into a failed health insurance system, outrageous levels of military spending, failing schools for their children, and even actual arsenic in their food supply. The idea that people should be denied rights because of an organizing principle of 17th

century aristocratic control baffles conception, even as it shapes our practical and political lives on a daily basis. It is to the political benefit of the existing system to keep whites, especially poor whites with little more than their whiteness to be proud of. It makes for a predictable political group. Whites thus managed will vote and flock to issues as reliably as tides.

The situation is deeply miserable, even for those living slightly higher up on the shit pile. The biggest two indicators that someone will commit suicide in America are the two boxes they check on the census that are supposed to confer the most safety from misery, and the most advantage one could have in our society: white, and male. What could accuse privilege of failure more than seeking one's own violent end?

“The cost of liberty is less than the price of repression.”
— W.E.B. DuBois

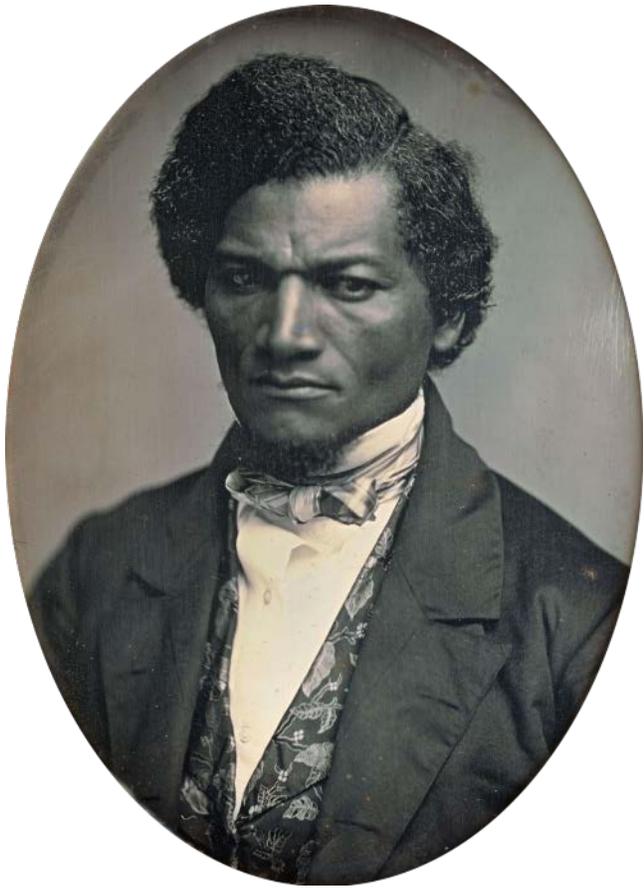
Hope vs a Comfortable White Exceptionalism

The very happiest white men I know are those actively working towards ending racism and sexism, not necessarily professional, but in all the small ways they learn to. Like people who work on space programs or meditate on rejoining the wonder of their conception of God, I believe an enduring and deep form of happiness arises from imagining a future that is better than the present, and feeling like you have the power to move the world towards it. Hope for the future is not only a good way to be happy,

it is the best form of happiness, the most enduring, the most resistant. White people have been told they have it the best it can be had, they are told by power structures, the media, and the people disadvantaged by a global system where overwhelmingly the poorest are not considered white. Thankfully, this pernicious and alienating thought is untrue—a world without our present power structures is one of amazing possibilities, with art and play and dreams of space and life made wondrous beyond imagining.

It's hard to want anything to change when you're comfortable, and it is the particular quality of humans, both wonderful and terrible, to get as comfortable as they can where they are. Contentment doesn't really depend on how much stuff you have, or even how safe you are. Whites in terrible circumstances have often looked at blacks and decided their lives were fine. But there is so much more we all could have.

We've spent the last few hundred years throwing out every Isaac Newton or Albert Einstein or Jonas Salk or Tim Berners-Lee who didn't happen to be white, and didn't happen to be a man. That's a terrible thing to have done to those brilliant and now lost people. It's a much worse thing to have done to the rest of humanity, including our



Frederick Douglass escaped from slavery to become a statesman. He spoke out for the human rights of all blacks, advised President Lincoln, lectured in Europe, and worked in support of the vote for women. He was also devilishly handsome, and authored several books after teaching himself to read as a slave. He is one of the great badasses of human history. It is too much to ask that every black person be Frederick Frickin' Douglass in order to be heard.

white selves. When I think, “why don’t I have a jet car and live in Alpha Centuri by now?” I think this is because the people that would have invented sky cars and interstellar travel were born black in Detroit, or in rural India or in the medina in Algiers in the 1950s, and

spent too much time figuring out how to eat and not get killed to invent my damned skycar.

White exceptionalism runs to both negatives and positives.

Whether whites are seen as intellectually and spiritually superior or morally abhorrent, the argument that whites are intrinsically different from the rest of humanity has all the same flaws as any such argument. There are no intrinsically innocent and wise

peoples of the earth, we are all the same wonderful and terrible creatures. Every community produces gentle geniuses and violent monsters. If we accept the normality of white people—and this proposition has in its favor overwhelming evidence:

circumstance, (the arbitrariness of whiteness) history, (the universality of both human crimes and genius) and physiology (the genetic difference among “white” is pretty much the same as any group of white and non-whites)—this leaves us looking to social systems and systems of power for the sources of our social problems, which seems pretty sensible, when you think about it.

Just as American exceptionalism has been used to prevent sensible change—“Americans have the best healthcare in the world! We must retain the present system to keep that!” (Hint: America does not, in fact, have the best healthcare in the world)—white exceptionalism has been used to keep whites and non-whites from asking why society doesn’t work in obviously more sensible ways.

We can’t undo hundreds of years of cultural programming in a stroke, but the principles of black liberation begin to point a way out of all this for everyone, not just blacks. There are many great lessons to pick up from movements against the status quo across the 20th century and even before, but none in my study so singularly covers the issues that plague both white people and even the existence of our speck of a planet so much as black liberation. Black liberation is comprehensive—it touches on economics, social values, mutual care, environmental systems and problems of pollution, and even the availability and quality of food.

White exceptionalism, and even the elitism of old, finds their end in this age of global troubles. There is no sanity in maintaining these standards of difference. All our children share one destiny—to live their lives at the bottom of the same polluted gravity well, trying, and usually failing, to get their needs met as the acid seas encroach the land and the great variety of life dies before us.



Hubert Harrison, a key figure in the early 20th century Harlem Renaissance, whose thoughts lead off this series.

Hubert Harrison was right to say that the black experience tests and proves the modern democratic idea, but he didn't go far enough for the current age. In the system that created white supremacy and black persecution, nearly all of our causes lie trapped in the swamp of white mythology, all our hopeful futures slowly drowning in it. No one living is responsible for creating this system, and no one living is really at fault for being caught in its workings. But there is no deus ex

machina that will descend from the heavens and set it right. We will have to reach across this chasm ourselves. White people must join the world in fighting the pernicious ideas that created their

category. Not because it is merely moral, but because without arriving at the principles contained in black liberation, humanity as we know it will surely pass from this earth.

← Part One

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