



This is Part One of a Series on Whiteness. (Part Two)

“Politically, the Negro is the touchstone of the modern democratic idea. The presence of the Negro puts our democracy to the proof and reveals the falsity of it”—Hubert Harrison, 1911

“I’m not saying that white people are better. I’m saying that being white is clearly better, who could even argue? If it was an option, I would re-up every year. ‘Oh yeah I’ll take white again absolutely, I’ve been enjoying that, I’ll stick with white thank you.’”—Louis CK, 2008

**Contained in the struggle between black liberation
and white supremacy is almost every issue that
concerns us currently —**

Surveillance, government control, privacy, security, maintenance of infrastructure—even pollution, environmentalism, and what has become climate change, they're all there. Add to that tolerance of religion and non-religion, access to healthcare, dominion over one's own body, the right of self-defense, the right of free expression, the desire for justice and equality. Each one of these issues is there in black liberation, and often explored at length long before this current generation was born.

This is no accident, no coincidence, because the making of black and white was the making of the world we know now.

Being White

I don't think I was born white. I think white children are manufactured. There is a social process wherein neutral children get assimilated into the white race. I imagine there is something similar that happens to black children, but as I didn't experience it, I don't know much about it. This process is not contingent on the pallor of a child's skin—there are plenty of pale people of color as well as swarthy white people. White beauty norms has never been the extent of whiteness. The making of white children has to do with how adults behave towards you, and others around you, on the street, at the playground, and the books you read and the ads you see. The white race is reconstructed, millions and millions of times, in each person's life, growing up in America. And a defining part of that construction is inevitably a denial that it is happening at all.

When I was a child growing up near the beach in LA I was surrounded by people obsessed with getting a good tan. My first assumption, encountering the fact that black people didn't talk to the pale people I knew, was that being so much better at tanning, they outclassed paler people in this desirable quality so much that they wouldn't bother talking to us.

Like many childlike assumptions about the world it is adorably wrong, but it is a more logical interpretation of the facts than the insane truth as I eventually learned it. What is perhaps most interesting is the number of people who have argued with me that I didn't think that as a child—that I never could have not known about black people and white people.

“It's not possible,” I've been told, “because studies have shown children recognize the racial features of human faces!” These kinds of arguments have been made at me more times than I can count by fellow whites. What often happens next, if I ask what those features are, doesn't belong in a civil conversation. But what astounds me most isn't white perceptions of black people, it is that people are arguing *with me* about what *I thought* as a child. They are not even arguing that I'm lying now, they are arguing that my recollection of myself is false. This is an incredible claim to make about someone you just met. It is just these sorts of claims, almost more syntactically bizarre than outright wrong, that white racial identity is based on. My childhood naivety offered me no escape—the world around eventually taught me I was white, and all that means.

This communication about race to children fated to be white is consistently bizarre. Contemporary whiteness in schools and neighborhoods is a collection of incompatible messages. Don't be prejudiced against black people, we are told, who are poor and criminal. Here is a month we will study black people, and write an essay. We cannot openly criticize black people, that would be racist, but we will violently protect you from them, even in your own schools. This is black music—jazz, maybe even some Motown—and we study and respect it (now that its popularity has passed). This is rap, and we ban it for being violent and about gangs. We will ban red and blue from our school for the safety of our children, but really, we're banning it from the black and latino children, which is how we protect all of the children.

Slowly white children develop ideas about people of color, and in particular black people, that can accommodate this crazytown of incompatible ideas from adults and authority. Black children—and to a lesser degree latino children—must be protected from themselves for the good of all, as if they contained bombs. Good black and latino people are in books, and usually dead. Good people of color are almost always in the past. Bad black and latino people are right now, and could be around any corner. A good child (of any color) doesn't act like them. This haphazard taxonomy of race isn't about color, except white and black. To call people yellow or red would be offensive. So it is about color, sometimes. Don't get that wrong, and don't ask questions, it's rude.

All of this is crazy, and it makes the children trying to

assimilate it crazy too. The white race is reinvented again for every person born through a practice that is gaslighting children into a state of constant cognitive dissonance.

Many people understand that this is not ok when it's done to children who will end up in a category of color. But it's also not ok when the child will end up in the category of white, because it's just not ok to ever gaslight children.

It's within this damaged mental framework, this position of self as not the other people you've been taught to fearfully respect, fear, and eventually retreat from thinking about altogether, where white people have to start thinking about race. □

As for me, I suspect I will struggle with the damaged thinking given to white children until I die.

An aside—in case you've ever believed that whiteness is somehow a product of genetics, it's not. Whiteness is no more genetic than speaking a language or going into the family business. The term "white" aside, it has little to do with the genetics of skin color. Populations that have adapted to northern climates often become pale in order to manufacture vitamin D with limited sunlight, but are still not "white." Mediterranean Europeans sometimes are, and sometimes aren't, despite centuries of population exchange. White is a political and economic category. The history of whiteness demonstrates this. Groups

have been integrated into whiteness as it was politically useful for rulers to do so. The Irish didn't used to be white, nor the Italians. Non-whites have, at various times, been allowed to buy their way into the white race, with their progeny enjoying white-skin privilege. The only people who could never be white were blacks—this has always been the defining quality of whites.

Racism's Villain

Racism is often framed as a problem *of* people of color, rather than for them. We often talk about what people of color can or should do to improve their lives. We talk about Headstart programs and charity outreach and recidivism rates. We speak of opportunity, grasped or lost by people of color, particularly children. We put the problems of racism on those we see as having a racial problem. This is something everyone does, even people in the black, latino, asian, whatever community, as well as whites.

Whites imported and bred slaves, while committing genocide in America. After slavery fell, they created Jim Crow in the south, and ghettos in the north. Whites redlined homeownership and formally then informally segregated schools. Whites systematically excluded black, latino, native peoples, Chinese and Irish immigrants and whomever was the hated group du jour from opportunities throughout the history of the USA.

Whites spent hundreds of years excluding others from resources, often by violence, and claiming ownership over wealth created by those same non-whites. We often refuse to recognize that a

history of violence put us and our families into more secure positions with better schools, better access to infrastructure, information, and even better food. We whites often socialize among ourselves, learning very little about the lives of non-whites either in this country or beyond its borders. Whites rarely allow non-white media to become popular, preventing even an accidental encounter with the uncomfortable experience of other peoples.

Why would we call this a problem of Black America, or Latino Integration, or Native American society? Racism is a problem of white people. White people's racism is a problem for everyone else.

It is obvious that if white racism is going to be fought, white people have to fight it.

We have come a long way since the days of southern plantations and government bounties for the scalps of native children. We know these things are wrong, we are horrified by them, nobody welcome in polite society now thinks these were ok things to do, and that is progress. But the idea that it's enough, and everyone's on their own now, and we've made up for those sins or at least that wasn't what I did, etc., is astounding. The murderous inequities of this country are not currently chattel slavery, yes, but they are murderous inequities, and letting a few people of color into the middle class, and fewer still into the ruling class, doesn't erase history.

The current relationship of white America to black America is something like a spouse who, having given up regularly beating, raping, and starving their partner, complains that it's simply too much to ask that they also be allowed out of the basement.

Redeeming the Villain

People often struggle to talk about the problems the abuser has.

Why cruelty is the bully's problem as well as the bullied—why the chain of violence sucks—even if you're at the top of it. The problem with unwinding white privilege is the same as all unwindings of power—if someone's got it good, why should they give it up? This is hardly restricted to white folk. Through human geography and time there are so few examples of the rich and powerful distributing their riches and laying down their power that they often stand as foundational stories for religions when they happen.

A lot of people everywhere like the ideas of equality and justice, and most are even willing to give up some of their wealth to these ideas, but being willing to give up one's wealth entirely and shift to a lower socio-economic class existence is seen in most societies as a sign of insanity. And so it is with white power—the very quiet truth white power speaks to the world—“You'd do the same if you were where we are now.” Indeed, history is with this part of the white narrative. There is no race, no nationality, no ethnic group I can find anywhere in history that gave up wealth and power over others without struggle just because it was the right thing to do,

even though most societies have had a philosophical or religious element that extolled doing just that as the core of rightness.

Even more, I've come to believe that at some very deep level, many white people resist racial equality because, knowing what white folk have done to other races in America and beyond, they don't want to risk it being done to them and theirs. The more people are informed about atrocities that whites have perpetrated against blacks and Native Americans in particular, the more eager they are to make sure no one is in a position to take vengeance. There is a thread of real fear amongst whites, from the jokes of Lenny Bruce to the policies and papers of J. Edgar Hoover, even from the them-vs-us rhetoric of explicit white supremacy, that points to a fear of what white comeuppance would look like. Louis CK again:

We're not just gonna fall from number 1 to 2. They're going to hold us down and fuck us in the ass forever and we totally deserve it.

Deciding to fight white racism is terrifying for whites.

But there is something wonderful to be had for all people, even white people, in the two+ centuries of careful, studied, and magnificently conceived work of black liberationists. It's there in what Hubert Harrison was saying: real democracy, real rights, tested against the touchstone of the black experience. There is something powerful in the reconciliation, and in the hard work of accepting and speaking truth. Maybe something that can help all

humanity, here where we live on the brink of biological collapse.

But to get to that place, first we have to understand how white people got where we are now.

Part Two →

Further Reading and partial sources



The Message

Written by Quinn Norton

Thanks to Eldan Goldenberg, Jeremy Bornstein, heather lee, CollegeFool



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Inspired to write your own story?

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A South African White's Perspective

Full Disclosure: I am a white male born in South Africa in the late 1970's, at a time when Apartheid (the systematic repression of a black...

MATT MILLWARD 3 min read

But, we're all frustrated and feeling left out, aren't we?

As I completed reading Quinn's piece I began sorting through a variety of thoughts. His observations are right but, are they really about...

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