

## CHAPTER 5

### *Seeing White and Naming Injustice*

From the moment that white people were invented, the category has been integrally tied with the control of women and nonwhite men and the interests of the wealthiest capitalists. While white people are clearly a fiction, the organization of society and relationships that the fiction structured are very real and have resulted in consequences that have provided white people material and symbolic resources throughout U.S. history. How might a social construct with these roots be challenged?

The term “whiteness” captures the fictions integral to and realities resulting from the social construct called white people. In other words, whiteness captures not only those people labeled as white but, more significantly, the dominant ideas about them that sustain the group and the organization of society that these ideas have shaped. The histories within chapters one through four reveal whiteness to be divisive and an abrogation of the promise of liberty, justice and equal opportunity in the United States. The histories, first and foremost, expose that the “white race” is a product of human action rather than nature. As a result, the histories redirect our focus away from racial explanations and instead point toward social structural explanations for social phenomena, patterns, and individual experience. Both of these will be discussed in detail, and their significance for the dismantling of whiteness considered.

The invention of white people has had a lasting impact, not the least of which is the persistence of the belief that white people constitute a unique group of humanity – a race. The history of the invention of white people exposes the “white race” for what it is: a historical creation to

serve the interests of the wealthiest capitalists and provide unearned advantages for those labeled white, and unearned disadvantages to those labeled other-than-white. The invention has served the interests of the wealthiest by keeping laborers divided, viewing each other as competition along so-called race lines rather than collective strength as was demonstrated in Bacon's Rebellion.

The invention of white people has worked not only to divide laborers from each other, but has caused white laborers to perceive a stronger link with those whose social condition and class is dramatically different from their own, on the sole basis of sharing a fictitious race. White people do share something as white people, but it is nothing biologically-based, nothing racial; it is social and the result of common advantages that have generated shared experiences, perceptions, and expectations. These combine to constitute white culture. There is a tremendous range of advantage among white people depending upon any number of significant social factors, such as class, religion, abilities, and gender, among others. This fact, however, does not erase that all whites share to some degree in the overall package of advantages conferred upon them at any given historical moment on the basis of their being viewed as white.

For example, even the poorest British bond-laborers, following the post-Bacon's Rebellion enactments asserting white people, experienced privilege by virtue of having been made white. Law demanded it. It did not matter whether any individual wanted such privileges or not. Privileges on the basis of whiteness were conferred via the very organization of society from basic human interactions, including prohibitions on intermingling and miscegenation, to the structure of work wherein whites were placed in positions of management over nonwhites, to the ability to survive and defend one's self and one's family with laws that required white men to receive a gun and powder upon completion of their term of bond-labor and denied gun possession by law to persons of African descent.

The history examined in chapters one through four reveals the existence of the group called white people and the belief in their supremacy as inseparable. Superiority is the logic or the glue for the grouping. This is not to say that members of the group are in fact superior intellectually, physically or otherwise, but rather, that superiority

served as the reason to justify the creation of the group. This was true in 1681, when "white" first appeared in law and assumed ideas about the British as those deserving of rights and privileges from which others can be denied. It was true in 1790 when Congress rendered naturalization a white-only process. It has been true ever since in labor struggles that have manifested as whites claiming "their" jobs as Americans. It manifests in many ways in contemporary U.S. society, some of which are explored in the afterword of this book. Because white people were a creation of people, not nature, the demise of this invention demands a fracturing of the very idea of the white race and its superiority.

Being aware of the history of the invention of white people is important because that awareness helps to contest the commonly held belief that whites are a distinct group of humanity united by biology or genetics. This alone is powerful, because it directs one to different questions and actions. When patterns arise that are linked to people grouped as white or not white, such as that of white people having higher rates of upward mobility (for example), the awareness moves us away from racial or essentialist explanations – for example, that white people are more successful because they are more intelligent – and begs the question, "What social forces and what historical practices might help explain the pattern of higher levels of financial success among those labeled white in the past and today?" The shift from thinking about groups of people possessing qualities by virtue of the group (i.e., white, black, Asian, tribal member, etc...) to thinking about the structures put in place as a result of the invented groups and meanings attached is key.

The histories in the preceding chapters reveal that one of the greatest roadblocks to the promise of equal opportunity is the institutionalization of the idea of white people as a biological reality reflecting a superior group of humanity. If equal opportunity, liberty and justice for all are ideals to which we strive, then these beliefs and the structures they sustain must be dismantled. They begin to be fractured by awareness of the social construction of race, including the white race. Awareness invites new ways of being and acting because common practices that rely upon the belief in white people as a product of nature no longer hold the power they once did.

### *Hard Work and the American Dream*

Most children in the United States grow up learning that America is a land of equal opportunity offering liberty and justice for all. The message, we are told, is that if you work hard, you will eventually succeed. Success is generally defined as having a spouse, two children, and a dog, owning a car or two and a home with a white picket fence, and having a financial nest for eventual retirement. It is hard to escape childhood without being indoctrinated in this American ideology. This ideology, however, is simply untrue, and even harmful.

The history of the invention of white people and the institutionalization of whiteness in the U.S. among so much American history requires that this ideology be reassessed. The histories examined in chapters one through four reveal that inequality has been foundational as a matter of law in the U.S. To be more precise, the presumed superiority of white people was institutionalized within law and policy from the very founding of the country, and has awarded whites unearned advantages.

The American ideology of hard work and success is not only problematic because it is not sustained by facts; it is also harmful. Children are told from their earliest years that everyone can succeed in America if you work hard. This message fails to account for the dramatically unequal playing field upon which people work to succeed. The message erases the many structural advantages that white people (men in particular) have been afforded, from access to citizenship, higher wages, better jobs, access to advancement, cheaper property, and less competition in every area of society, including access to women and the institution of marriage.

The message of this American ideology erases the many structural hurdles that those rendered not white, including persons of African descent, members of native tribes, Chinese, Japanese, and Mexicans, to name a few, have had to confront as they work hard to succeed. These structural hurdles have certainly restricted and in some cases blocked success, even when one engaged regularly in hard work. Here is where the ideology is particularly harmful. The message of the ideology is that if you do not succeed, if you do not

accomplish the American dream, it is your fault. The message is that any failure to accomplish the dream is the result of *personal* failure. You simply did not work hard enough. The structural roadblocks that exclusion from whiteness have presented, from denial of citizenship to the lowest of wages, and exclusion from neighborhoods, jobs, education, and opportunities, are all erased in a single ideological claim.

Conversely, when white people realize the American dream, credit is given as if there were no unearned advantage along the way. This is not to say that white people have not faced incredibly difficult situations and had to work very hard. Irish Catholics in the mid-nineteenth century are one among many examples of people who faced incredible hardship and worked very hard to improve their lot. It is simply undeniable that their status as white in the U.S. afforded them opportunities and access denied to those rendered not white. Without being successful in asserting themselves as white, Irish Catholics would have found themselves along a path much more similar to the Chinese and free persons of African descent in the U.S. It was only through the assertion of the Irish as white that they gained full citizenship and became a force on election days.

Having equal opportunity, liberty, and justice for all as *goals* that this country strives to achieve is admirable, and can serve the country well in guiding policies and action. It is important that these ideals not be portrayed as realized, and it is important that hard work be valued without erasing social structural realities that give a greater reward, including recognition for the hard work of some over others. Equal opportunity, liberty, and justice must be held out as principles that, to date, the country has afforded in different degrees to different groups at different times, and must strive to offer all.

If the United States is going to take steps toward the ideals it espouses, we must be honest; we ~~must~~ must assess and plan relying upon facts, not fiction. I can think of no greater fiction embedded within the fabric of this country's founding law and policies than the existence of a separate and distinct group of humanity called the "white race."

### *Dismantling One of the World's Most Harmful Constructs*

Because whiteness as a facet of reality and object of knowledge is not necessary by nature, it must be constantly maintained and re-affirmed in order to persist. Indeed, a social construct like white people and the idea of various human "races" that it helps maintain requires a dynamic process of production, re-production, and institutionalization to be rendered common knowledge. The imposition of the human category white was originally imposed by elite lawmakers, but was soon enacted by white laborers. The degree of investment in whiteness on the part of laborers can be seen in the efforts of native-born Americans to exclude Chinese laborers and Mexicans in order to advance their own interests on the *basis* of whiteness and, with regard to the latter, on the basis of being "really" white. It can be seen in the struggle of Irish Catholics in the mid-nineteenth century to gain acceptance and a footing in America *through* a claim to whiteness.

Because whiteness begins to be fractured by the very recognition of its fictitiousness as a race, widespread recognition of white people as a social construct can dramatically transform society. This is true because the awareness demands a new focus. As previously noted, the awareness results in a shift from "race" to the social conditions that such an invention has made. The dominant construction of race however, presents a challenge. Let me explain.

When a television show is "about race," who constitutes the topic of the show? Do white people? When a course or seminar is concerned with race, who is being read or discussed? Is it white people? Most of the time, such media presentations or instructional content address nonwhite people. Because of this practice, in part, the word race has come to connote nonwhites. The perceptual trickery of this conception of race is that whiteness escapes any sort of connection to the organization of groups of people called "racial" groups. As a result, experience derived from the status white is not seen as a result of that racial status. The racialness of whiteness is rendered invisible. It is simply – what is.

Talking about race here is tricky. The histories and analysis deployed in this book expose whites as a biological reality to be

fictitious. In so doing, they expose the concept of "race" as reflecting distinct groups of humanity to also be a fiction. So as we proceed and the word "race" is utilized, it is drawn upon in the same way that "white" has been utilized – to reflect the lived reality that the fiction created. In other words, because so much of life has been organized around the belief, however false, that blacks and whites, for example, constitute separate and distinct groups of people, I use the word "race" to reflect this lived reality that the construct of race has engendered.

The erasure of race from whiteness is a post-civil rights era phenomena. Prior to the 1950s, there was little resistance on a mass scale to the view that the white race was superior. This view was challenged during the civil rights movement. The racial organization of U.S. society was transformed by the civil rights movement, and so too was whiteness. The white race became the unspoken norm rather than an explicitly expressed racial location from which laws and policies are advocated. One result is that experience derived from the point of view of white people is treated today as simply "the truth" rather than a partial truth contained by a racial status among other factors including gender, class, religion, abilities, etc.

For instance, the view of a historical moment passed to us through the writings of a white male, like Thomas Jefferson, is often given a universal truth status. His words and perceptions are not viewed as shaped by his experiences in society as a white person. Contrast that with a historical figure who shares the same gender status but is not white, like Frederick Douglass, whose writings are not seen as the truth for all people. Rather, his ideas and claims are viewed as shaped by his African ancestry, his blackness. His ideas, unlike those of a white person, are seen as coming from the specific racial perspective of a black man in the U.S. In contrast, the ideas and proclamations of Thomas Jefferson reflect the perspective of a reformer, a revolutionary. His ideas and words are not viewed as racially contained and shaped. Therefore, the white racial perspective that shaped Jefferson's ideas and proclamations is generally ~~missing~~ from consideration. Being black certainly shaped Frederick Douglass' ideas and perceptions. Being white shaped Thomas Jefferson's.

While race is no more a biological reality than white people, the realities that race has shaped within society demand that we examine

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white people within the context of the larger racial framework: as a social status given tremendous meaning. Failure to do so blocks a complete picture of the social structural impact of being classified within the group called white. The tendency to miss the "racialness" of white experience has numerous effects. First, it fails to capture the significant impact that a white racial status has upon one's life experience and one's perceptions. Second, it keeps the social structural consequences of a white racial status invisible. In addition, it is a reaffirming practice because the tendency to miss the racial dimensions of whiteness works to render a white racial status invisible.

A result of the dominant conception of race, a conception that misses white people as a part of the larger racial fabric, is that white people get away with advocating for certain things such as policies, legislation, practices, and so forth as if they are race-neutral. The truth is a white person is no more race-neutral than a Hispanic, Chinese, Japanese, African American or any other person. The difference is that the latter are *seen* as racial beings, and white people are not.

Whiteness has been sustained for more than three hundred years in the U.S. because it is continuously reinforced and re-enacted. In its current form whiteness is not even seen, because it has been stripped from dominant conceptions of race. Knowing that white people are a biological fiction constitutes a critical step toward the dismantling of race and institutionalized white supremacy in the United States. Another critical step is for the whiteness within our structures of thought and social organizations to be identified and named.

When whiteness is seen as a social construct with real consequences that must be identified *as white* within the larger framework of fabricated races, we can examine almost any law, policy, ideology or practice and begin to consider the presence and workings of whiteness. An example of this sort of examination was conducted above in our consideration of American ideology regarding hard work and the American dream. For those who want to engage in the work of dismantling institutionalized white supremacy, this is one of the most demanding projects before you – seeing whiteness and naming it. You already hold the most important piece of knowledge – that white people and claims of their superiority constitute this country's greatest work of fiction.