Birth of a White Nation

The Invention of White People and Its Relevance Today

by

Jacqueline Battalora

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Acknowledgements

When I first identified myself, in a self-conscious way, as white, I was about thirteen years old and living in southern Texas. I had moments where I experienced my whiteness as something contingent upon behavior. I came to realize that a white racial status was something that could be changed, and perhaps even lost.

These were my earliest clues that the "white race" is not rooted in nature or the result of biology. These early experiences of race, combined with a heavy dose of Catholic social justice teachings (primarily expressed and encouraged by my mother, Arleen Battalora), significantly shaped my life and my studies.

While this book is steeped in history, law, and sociology, it is equally influenced by social ethics. This ethic has its roots in social justice teachings. I was fortunate to pursue undergraduate studies at Siena Heights University, where the faculty in the religious studies department, Susan Conley Weeks and Donna Kustusch, O.P., fostered critical thinking and introduced me to liberation theology through the writings of James H. Cone and Gustavo Gutierrez O.P., and the feminist critiques of Rosemary Radford Ruether. These "outsider" writers helped give greater substance to my white female experience by giving voice and legitimacy to the lives of those who were not white and/or not male. For this early fostering of critical thinking, especially within religion, I am indebted.

While my life experience of race shaped my academic interests, studying with Rosemary Ruether in graduate school at Northwestern University laid the foundation for this book. There I was introduced to the now-classic article on white privilege crafted by Peggy McIntosh, and to the writings of David Roediger, Noel Ignatiev, W.E.B. DuBois, Edmund S. Morgan, and Alexander Saxton. Joseph Barton helped guide

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On Autobiography and a Study of Race: An Introduction

Any exploration of race is inherently complex, because personal experience cannot be erased. Every person is assigned a place within the racial landscape, and our experience of race shapes how we see what we see. In other words, life experiences are often very different depending upon one's race, and these experiences impact how we make sense of events. This is especially true when we examine race. Personal experience aside, a study of race is challenging because scholarship addressing key historical questions is varied, sometimes in opposition, and sometimes indeterminate. Furthermore, language of "race" is problematic and confusing. I will address each of these challenges before discussing the theoretical approach that will guide this study of race.

Comedian Steve Martin began the film *The Jerk* with the words, "I was born a poor black child." Laughter filled the theater as the audience stared at the image of the speaker, a very, very pale-skinned man familiar to most as the funny guy who frequently appeared on *The Tonight Show*. I have thought of that line, the audience's laughter, and the assumptions upon which the humor depends often as I have processed my own thinking about race. My first conceptualization of myself is that I was born a young white child. By this I mean that I saw myself as "white" and viewed it as an essential part of who I am, having a biological reality that links me to all others who are white through a shared genetic sludge that is "whiteness."

Now, I know better. Now I would say: I was born female and made a white girl. What has stayed consistent is that the status "white" has mattered in my life. My understanding of why it matters, though, has altered dramatically.

As I was undergoing these changes in self-concept and growing socio-historical understanding, I knew they were significant. I realized I would never be the same and neither would the world in which I inhabit, because my perception of it had changed. There was no going back. As a teacher, I have watched students undergo similar transformations and growing awareness. While teaching has many challenges and rewards, these "ah-ha" moments are some of the most gratifying. The compilation of laws, histories, and analysis within this text has been selected and organized to help foster such learning moments.

The primary concerns of this book are to uncover the social efforts deployed to create a racial category, to explore the ways in which the racial category "white" has become central to the organization of society, and to realize the consequences. I can claim no objective distance from the topics in this book: race, human division, social constructs, and the always-present intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Indeed, my interest in these issues has grown out of my own experiences of them.

I spent almost the first decade of my life living mostly in Europe, until moving to a small city in southern Texas. Despite living in Europe, my family spent many weeks over the summers visiting my grandparents in the Chicago area. I did not realize it until much later, but those summers in Chicago constituted crash courses. Chicago is known not only as the Windy City, but as the southern city of the north. Summers in Chicago provided cultural familiarity for the future move to southern Texas. As it turns out, Corpus Christi, Texas is the windiest city in the U.S. Although, truth be told, the reference to the "windy city" came about not because of the cold winter gusts off of Lake Michigan that chill you to the bone, but rather because of how Chicagoans spoke (windy) about their city when it hosted the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893. It turns out that this proclivity toward windiness in reference to one's geographic location was also good training for a move to Texas. Texas fosters its own culture of wind about itself, in an aggrandizing way that is pervasive and unique, and no world's fair is required.

Those summers in Chicago first introduced me to a racial landscape that was the norm throughout the south. "White" people were in

their own areas and "others," especially African Americans, were in theirs. Family and friends fled in the late 1960s from the Lithuanian neighborhood in Cicero that they called home. They left soon after African Americans began to exercise their rights to pursue home ownership where desired, rather than in the areas to which they were relegated by restrictive covenants and violent neighbors. My relatives who could afford to do so headed to a residential neighborhood in Arlington Heights, a northwest suburb of Chicago, where their neighbors, on the surface, looked like them.

The move to Texas brought into clear focus the divisions and separations I experienced in small bursts on those summer visits to Chicago. In Victoria, Texas, people lived in areas that reflected not only economic class but also the relative shade of one's skin. Railroad tracks literally and figuratively served as a significant human divide. Within two years, probably much less, I learned that separating the "races" was the culturally expected norm, especially in romantic relationships and particularly when a "white" woman was involved. As I grew up, I experienced race generally as something firm and unchanging and yet in certain moments, usually of strain, I experienced my "white" racial status as contingent on behavior consistent with the expectations of "whites." In these moments my race became palpable as something that can be lost or at least changed, creating the experience of race as something other than an immutable product of nature.

I cannot pretend to be uninfluenced by these experiences. They made me "white" even while presenting hints of its fictitious nature. Both the reality and fiction of whiteness co-existed in my experience and created the desire to make sense of that contradiction. This struggle helped give direction to my graduate studies. I enter into this project having first studied law and then sociology, U.S. history and social ethics in an interdisciplinary Ph.D. program. These academic disciplines shape the approach taken to the concerns addressed in this text.

I pursued the study of law because it was the most obvious avenue for engaging in efforts to improve the distribution of opportunity, access, and resources, liberty, rights, and freedom. However, law presented its own inequities that I struggled to sort and clarify. When a judge in a rape trial interpreted hands around a woman's neck as

foreplay, thereby dismissing an alternative perspective (that those actions could reasonably be experienced as a threat of strangulation), it brought into focus a gap between my view of the world and that which was recognized in a court of law. There were many of these moments and I soon realized that, too often, my version of "reality" was not the authorized or legitimized version. I felt more and more distant from the world in which I lived, especially the "world" of law, because it is a significant legitimizing institution that often authorized a "truth" that was not mine. I pursued further graduate studies because the structures of "reality" and "common sense" that were simply taken for granted by legal actors did not fit my experience of reality, and I struggled for the words and concepts to name and explain this gap.

In many ways, this book is a result of that pursuit. Today, I still click off "Caucasian" or "white" among the "race" options on the census and those official forms at schools, medical providers, etc. What is different is that today, I know that "white," like "race." is a historical imposition given content and form through the proliferation of ideas imposed and claimed through law. This is not to say that people labeled "white" are not real. Rather, I mean to convey that "white" as a category of human organization rooted in a biological reality is anything but real. Furthermore, this is not to say that being labeled "white" has no meaning within society or an individual's experience. It has tremendous meaning. These meanings have been imposed and assigned by and through human action, rather than because the category reflects a fundamental truth of nature. If the distinction between "white" as a category of humanity produced by humans rather than nature remains unclear, this topic is central to the next two chapters that follow. In those chapters this distinction shall be drawn within a specific historical context working to ground the discussion.

One of the most confusing aspects of race is differentiating between the biological reality of race on the one hand, and the reality that the imposition of a racial group creates within society on the other. In other words, one's racial classification can have tremendous *social* meaning attached to it, resulting in very real and concrete consequences, even while the category itself represents no necessary

human differentiation rooted in *biology*. It is an aim of this book to help clarify this important difference.

Historiography

This exploration of the first appearance of "white" people as a group of humanity referenced in law, and the reliance upon "whites" as a significant influence in the organization of U.S. society, not only relies upon laws and policies but also draws heavily upon historical texts addressing the roots of racism. It is helpful to have a general understanding of two important areas of historical inquiry, including agreement and dispute among scholars. Scholars in the twentieth century were largely concerned with addressing whether racism produced slavery or slavery produced racism. Another area of significant debate among contemporary historians is the issue of the precise status of persons of African descent prior to the passage of laws creating permanent indenture or slavery.

Both questions are important because they factor into how we make sense of the invention of "white" people. For example, if persons of African descent were from their arrival upon British colonies made separate and distinct, understood by the masses of colonists to be inferior and relegated to the status of another's property, then the invention of the category "white" makes sense largely as a rhetorical convenience, a shorthand for referencing a growing variety of peoples who joined the British in the colony. Some people were already grouped and named by the British (e.g., Indians, Negroes) but the remainder were referenced by their nationality (e.g., Dutch, Portuguese) while enactments sought to lump them together as "English and other Christians" or "English and other freeborns." On the other hand, if the status of Africans prior to the institutionalization of slavery overlapped more significantly with that of British servants, then the invention of "whites" may make more sense as a tool to facilitate a restructuring of colonial society.

There is tremendous confusion about the status of Africans prior to the institutionalization of slavery, in part because the term "slave" was rarely applied to Africans prior to the 1640s and because European servants were sometimes called slaves. According to Audrey Smedley,

the reference to European servants as slaves was most likely an expression of "the subjective feelings of those who held positions as owners and masters" (2007: 99). Some historians claim that the status of Africans can be found within the existing roles of British servants. These roles included tenant, bond servant, and apprentice. Each role was for a term of years ranging from four to fourteen. Historians Oscar and Mary Handlin concluded that the first African people brought into the British colony at Jamestown in 1619 among the "cargo" of people sold from a Dutch trading ship were not slaves (1950). It is worth noting that European servants were regularly purchased from ship captains. Yet other historians of the colonial period claim that the status of Africans is entirely unclear, and surmise that it is most likely that they arrived as slaves (Morgan 1975: 154). At this point, I simply want to raise the topic as one of tremendous importance and serious dispute. The question will be pursued in more detail in the next chapter.

Whether racism preceded slavery is another question for which historians dispute the answer. Winthrop Jordan, in the important historical text *White Over Black*, argues that the English came to the colonies with racial animus toward Africans firmly entrenched (1968). Jordan viewed English hostility toward Africans as the result of negative meanings associated with blackness. In English language and culture, the color black includes such negative meanings as evil, filth, and danger, among others. Such a negative conceptualization of blackness, Jordan argues, may have paved the way for hostility from the British toward persons of African descent (1968: 7-8). Historian Carl Degler agrees with Jordan that English language and culture predisposed the British to a negative perception of Africans (1959-1960).

This argument has been firmly contested by a number of historians who have shown that, prior to the 1680s, there is significant evidence to suggest that those who would become "white" (English and certain other Europeans) were treated in a similar fashion to Africans within colonial North America and engaged in daily life on equal footing (E. Morgan 1975; P. Morgan 1998; Parent 2003; Rowe 1989). "In certain places and at certain times between 1607 and 1800, the 'lower sorts' of whites appear to have been pleasantly lacking in racial consciousness"

according to David R. Roediger (1991). There is a significant historical record revealing that both African and European men "serving the same master worked, ate, and slept together, and together shared in escapades, escapes, and punishments" (Morgan 1975: 155). Some ethnographic evidence supporting this position will be explored in the following chapter.

There is also evidence that being born free was the critical measure of access to rights and privileges in law and, therefore, persons of African descent who held this status had access to all such rights, including the right to vote. In fact, there is evidence that free Africans held bond laborers (Jordan 1968: 74-75). Historian Edmund Morgan states that colonists in Virginia during the 1660s and 1670s were "ready to think of Negroes as members or potential members of the community on the same terms as other men and to demand of them the same standards of behavior" (1975: 155). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that marriage among those of African descent, mostly men, and those of European descent, mostly women, were not unusual and appear to have been met with acceptance (Smedley 2007: 105).

The body of historical evidence suggests that slavery did not emerge as a result of widespread British animosity and hostility toward Africans because of their skin color. As we will see, slavery appears to have grown out of a specific context, where both European and African laborers were treated to varying degrees as objects; the continuing demand for labor in the colonies of Virginia and Maryland was no longer being met by the shrinking pool of available men from England; a growing number of landless free Europeans were increasingly frustrated by their inability to obtain land or otherwise realize economic gain in the colony; both British and international law failed to protect Africans or any "conquered" people from slavery; and African and Europeans, laborers and free, united in opposition to the landholding elite in Bacon's Rebellion.

This brief review of two key historical inquiries, the status of Africans prior to the 1670s and whether racism preceded slavery, is by no means complete. It does, however, provide enough background from which to launch into a more detailed historical examination of these questions and consider their influence upon how we make sense

of the invention of "white" people, an examination that will be pursued in the chapters that follow.

Theoretical Approach

Academic discourse on race is further complicated by terminology that asserts a "natural" status. By this, I mean that use of common race terminology such as "whites" to talk about people of European ancestry works to give a "truth" status to the social meanings that have been attached to it.

In at least two ways, use of the term "whites" plays into the belief that "whites" are a biologically occurring, distinct group of people. First, use of the term "whites" asserts the boundaries that the word "white" has been interpreted to reflect, giving credibility through the assertion itself. Second, as a category of "race," it promotes a biological meaning, because the term "race" is derived from a breeding line or stock of animals whose qualities are inheritable genetically. Anthropologist Audrey Smedley explains that "unlike other terms for classifying people (e.g., "nation," "people," "variety," "kind," and so on) the term "race" places emphasis on innateness, on the inbred nature of whatever is being judged" (2007: 40). I have found no reasonably useful way out of the conundrum that using terminology for so-called racial categories presents. As an imperfect response, I raise the concern up front and at the conclusion of the book, in an effort to fracture and destabilize the otherwise solidifying efforts of such language use.

In this book, the human category "white" is used to examine the social construction of race and the role of this human category in constituting a central theme of social organization in the United States. The book is also concerned with showing links between the invention of the human category "white" and the demise of the humanity of those so rendered.

Social constructionist theory is central to the conceptual framework for this project, directing its goals and shaping its approach to knowledge production. Social constructionism is a sociological theory of knowledge. It is a tool that helps to make sense of the body of information we hold as knowledge. Social constructionism rose

to prominence in the U.S. following the publication of *The Social Construction of Reality* by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann in 1967. Berger and Luckmann argue that all knowledge, including that which is taken for granted and seen as common sense, is derived through and maintained by social interactions. Social constructionism considers how social products or phenomena are created by a particular group.

A social construct is often clarified by comparison to its opposite, essentialism. Essentialism explains and defines social products and phenomena in terms of inherent essences. Therefore, from an essentialist perspective, "white" as a category of humanity is seen as derived from nature. In other words, the category is viewed as inevitable and unrelated to human activity.

On the other hand, social constructionism explains and defines the human category "white" as a byproduct of human choices. It follows that a primary concern of social constructionism is to uncover the ways in which social products and phenomena, like the grouping "white" are created, institutionalized, known, and rendered "common sense" or "reality" by humans.

The emphasis in this book is on the construction of race and how that construction shapes "reality." Because no human is ever simply his or her race, gender, or class, these fiercely enforced social categories, among others, are approached as always intersecting and interacting. Patricia Hill Collins describes intersectionality as the examination of gender, race, class, and nation as interconnected systems that mutually construct one another (1998).[1] In other words, the construction of race often simultaneously constructs aspects of gender, class, and nationality. According to Kimberle Crenshaw, intersectionality is an approach to understanding social phenomena that factors the many statuses that constitute our political identities including: Gender, race and ethnicity, class and status in society, sexuality, physical abilities, age, national status, and so on (1991). Intersectionality helps to make visible the multiple influences that structure experiences of oppression and privilege, thereby revealing areas of divergence and commonality. Intersectional studies suggest that certain ideas and practices emerge, revealing a pattern across multiple systems of oppression, and serve as focal points for these systems (Collins 1998).

Both social constructionism and intersectionality become most clear in their application within a specific context. If either or both remain elusive concepts to you, just use this as an introduction to the labels. Social constructionism and intersectionality will become more concrete as they are applied to specific historical facts within a given moment in time. In chapters one and two they are central to the exploration of the invention of "white" people. The historical and legal review in chapters one and two will provide content to help these concepts become clearer.

Overview

Consistent with the goals of social constructionism and the insights of intersectional studies, this book explores how and why the human category "white" was created within the British colonies of Maryland and Virginia and became institutionalized, in part, through foundational laws within the newly formed United States of America. The meanings and working of the category "white" are explored through a variety of groups, including persons of British, African, Chinese, Japanese, Mexican, and Irish descent, among others. The experiences of these various groups in relation to the category "white" helps reveal the dynamic processes by which the category has been produced, re-produced, institutionalized and rendered common knowledge for hundreds of years.

Social constructionist theory guides what is fundamentally a project concerning epistemology, or the study of how we know what we know. In this book, law and history serve as primary sites of investigation. The particular investigation is concerned with identifying sets of taken-for-granted ways of thinking that worked to create the human category "white," and facilitated its use as a mechanism to divide laborers. There are many ways to separate people, such as religious affiliation (i.e., Jewish versus Muslim), class variations (i.e., the 1 percent who hold a majority of wealth versus the 99 percent who hold significantly less or none), ethnic height and facial features (Hutus versus Tutsis), among any number of possibilities. Why was "white" the mechanism to divide, and what is the social ethical impact of "white" as the means of doing so?

Sociologist Susan Leigh Star, working within the field called the sociology of science, utilizes social constructionist theory to examine the making of scientific certainty in medicine and science. I draw upon the sociology of science and the work of Susan Leigh Star in particular to objectify constructive and persuasive efforts involved in producing, in this case, a category of humanity within a legal text (1989: 198).[2] By rendering these efforts into objects, or artifacts of knowledge production, they can be taken apart, carefully examined, and identified as one piece of a larger whole. The goal, according to Star, is to try and understand such processes over time, to try and make sense of the language and meanings held by respondents, and link them with institutional patterns and commitments. She calls on us to remember that the result (the scientific fact) could always be different.

This book argues that the group of humanity called "white" people is the product of tremendous human effort, as you will see in the chapters that follow. On the one hand, the invention affords psychological and material value to "whites," while dehumanizing and degrading on the other. The first point will be fleshed out in chapters two through four, while the latter point will be explored in the final chapter of the book.

Anti-miscegenation laws in the colony of Maryland and lawmakers' response to Bacon's Rebellion in colonial Virginia combine to help reveal the invention of the human category "white" in chapter one. "White" is revealed as one category among others competing to name the community of privilege as "British" alone became increasingly insufficient. It is shown that the human category "white" was built upon the idea of the British as white, Christian, of their essence free, and deserving of rights and privileges from which those insufficiently British-like could be denied.

Naming a group of humanity with a label that sticks is no small feat. It reflects a significant social achievement. The invention of "white" people is revealed as an extension of a compartmentalization of humanity beginning to be carved out by elite British and European colonists decades before Bacon's Rebellion, the rebellion that is held out as the critical historical event that gave rise to "white" people, and before the idea of race had any footing.

In chapter two, law as a labeling institution is explored. The series of laws that asserted and imposed the human category "white" and its ideological underpinnings in the decades following Bacon's Rebellion worked to discipline communities by transforming relationships among laborers and imposing a hierarchy that had not previously existed.

They also reveal ties between the invention of "whites" and a distinctly "white" patriarchal rule. British elites made connections with European laborers, in part, through the bodies of "white" women. Finally, the laws reveal the connection between the creation of a human category and the particularly exploitative version of capitalism taking hold. This version of capitalism depended upon slavery.

Immigration and naturalization law established by the First Congress of the United States reveals the success of the category "white" people. These laws worked to institutionalize whiteness as a matter of foundational law within the new republic. The ways in which whiteness shaped human relationships, labor, and the U.S. citizenry is explored in chapter three. The impact of these laws upon those viewed as "white" in the U.S., as well as those of African, Chinese, and Japanese descent, is considered.

In chapter four, the limitations of law as a labeling institution are considered through U.S. expansionism, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, and the declaration of Mexicans as "white." The declaration of a group as "white" by federal law when there is resistance at the community level is shown as insufficient to secure the social and political benefits of whiteness. I refer to such a group as "contingent whites" because their status as "white" depends almost exclusively upon specific law, and is not generally recognized in and through everyday social interactions.[3] Mexicans were rendered not-white by state laws, with the exception of antimiscegenation law. The result is that Mexicans were rendered cheap labor, excluded from the full range of citizenship rights, and were seen as not "real" Americans.

The experience of Mexicans in relation to whiteness is contrasted with that of the Irish Catholics who were initially seen as not-white, but who succeeded in establishing their inclusion within the category. The efforts that these Irish utilized to win whiteness is revealing of the racialized political and social landscape in the U.S. and the barriers

and opportunities it posed. The experience of the Irish helps shatter the commonly held belief that "white" reflects, if not genetics, then the biological state of low melanin in the skin. Large numbers of Irish Catholics arrived upon American shores with low levels of melanin. It was only by and through their ties to the Democratic Party, espousing white supremacy and their exclusion of persons of African descent from work sites, that the Irish became "white."

Chapter five reviews the patterns and commitments revealed in the histories of whiteness in the U.S. from chapters one through four, and considers why it matters in contemporary society. From its creation, whiteness has been integrally tied with the control of women and nonwhite men and the support of the wealthiest capitalists. How might a social construct with such roots, that has been imposed and enforced for more than three hundred years, be challenged? This question is pursued in chapter five. In this chapter we are reminded that revealing the human category "white" as a social construct, even one with such a lengthy history, exposes its weakness and the potential for its demise.

Let's be clear: the demise of the social construct "white" is not the same thing as the demise of the people labeled as such. 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. Challenges to the reality of "white" people and the fracturing of its knowledge-base introduce the potential for change.

This book argues that "white" is a social construct that has been assigned significant meaning. In addition, it highlights some of the ways in which this construct has shaped the humanity of "white" people and distorted the national promise of liberty, freedom and equal opportunity for all who will work hard. The Afterward considers how whiteness has impacted white people's humanity and explores why those who benefit from the social construction of whiteness would work to dismantle it.