

REFLECTIONS ON THE HISTORY OF WHITE SUPREMACY IN THE UNITED STATES

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“History ...is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by its many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do...And it is with great pain and terror that one begins to realize this. In great pain and terror one begins to assess the history, which has placed one where one is and formed one’s point of view. In great pain and terror, because, therefore, one enters into battle with that historical creation, Oneself.”¹ —James Baldwin

“I doubt the past can be apologized for in any case, because it is beyond the reach of forgiveness. The past can only be understood and integrated into the present—its effects on the present recognized and incorporated into a daily practice of repair that cannot have an ending any more than the past has an ending. This is not apology but a moral life in a tragic world.”² —Scott L. Malcomson

There is a widespread attitude held by white Americans that racial issues are best left to the past. Scott Malcomson writes,

“We inherit the belief that the past does not matter – we can start over, we can go beyond the racial thinking that, deep down, nearly every American has know is not a wise way of thinking – the funny and often tragic part being that this anti-historical belief is itself an inheritance from our past.”³

Wanting to forget the racial past is not a new attitude for those of us who are white. This was a common desire among whites after the American Revolution as they struggled to reconcile their newfound freedoms with the institution of slavery. But when it comes to addressing issues of race today, history is critical because our current race relations are deeply embedded in our history.

As Matthew Frye Jacobson notes,

“Racism is fundamentally a theory of history. It is a theory of who is who, of who belongs and who does not, of who deserves what and who is capable of what.”⁴

For me, coming to terms with our history is essential if we are to move toward becoming a more racially just society. In addition any attempt by those of us who are white to deal with issues of white identity must be grounded in an understanding of how white identity came to be shaped over the past four hundred years. That is the primary reason that I have written this paper.

PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

1. to discuss the use of the term white supremacy
2. focus on white supremacy in the context of colonization, the conquest of Native Americans, and the enslavement of African Americans (section one)
3. explore explores a number of important historical events that shaped the development of white supremacy during the time of the American Revolution (section two)
4. discuss how race science was developed to ensure white supremacy (section three)
5. review manifestations of white supremacy from the early 19th century up to Reconstruction (section four)
6. Reflect on the immigration of Europeans to America and the labor movement and how they fit into the construct of whiteness (section five).
7. Draw some conclusions regarding white identity from a historical perspective

DEFINING WHITE SUPREMACY

Today a variety of terms are used to refer to white identity including whiteness, white studies, internalized white superiority, and white supremacy. For the purposes of this paper I will be using the term white supremacy since I think that term best reflects the power dynamics embedded in the racial history of our country.

White supremacy is an “invented category” or what we might call a social construct. Over many years scientists tried to develop scientific concepts of race and white superiority. We now know that these theories have no truth as science. But they are very powerful as social constructs that give power to white people and disempower people of color.

Elizabeth Martinez in her paper “What is White Supremacy?” defines it in this way

“White Supremacy is a historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations, and peoples of color by white peoples and nations of the European continent, for the purpose of maintaining and defending a system of wealth, power, and privilege.”

In our Crossroads anti-racist collective we use the following definition of internalized racist superiority:

“A complex multi-generational socialization process that teaches white people to believe, accept and /or live out superior societal definitions of self and to fit into and live out superior social roles. These behaviors define and normalize the race construct and its outcome – white supremacy.

The term white supremacy defines relationships of power between whites and people of color. Matthew Frye Jacobsen refers to race as an “organizer of power.”⁵ Similarly we could say the white supremacy is an organizer of power. One form of the power of white supremacy is the power to oppress, control, disempower, and destroy people of color. Another form of the power of white supremacy is the power to provide power and privilege to those who are identified as being white.

SECTION ONE: COLONIZATION, CONQUEST OF NATIVE AMERICANS, ENSLAVEMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

COLONIZATION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF WHITE SUPREMACY

During the 1500s the European powers began a process of conquest and colonization. For example, the Spanish went into South and Central America. The Portuguese went into the Canary Islands, Cape Verde, and Brazil. The French moved into North America and parts of Africa. The Dutch took over in Indonesia. The Belgians dominated the Congo. And of course, the sun never set on the British Empire.

Those of us who are trying to understand the development of white identity here in the United States would benefit from some comparative studies of how concepts of white supremacy developed in other parts of the world.

Four European nations contested for control of what we now call the United States of America: France, Spain, Holland, and England. The English and French engaged in a series of wars – the so called French and Indian wars- to determine who would control the land. Of course, the English eventually won out and were able to control the land mass we now call the United States of America.

Scott Malcomson observes that in the mid fifteenth century the Portuguese began taking African people as slaves out of Africa. This was the beginning of the process that led to the enslavement of millions of Africans in Europe and the Americas. Malcomsen notes that toward the end of the 15th century those who enslaved Africans used blackness to justify enslaving African people. In other words, Africans were made slaves because of the color of their skin. (Africans were also said to have “pagan” faiths.) As a result dark people became the black race and with the development of a black race came a white race. Malcomson’s insight here is that there was no white race before the “invention” of the black race. ⁶

ENGLISH ATTITUDES ABOUT RACIAL SUPERIORITY

Our English ancestors thought of themselves as being white before they came to the Americas.

What did the English colonists bring with them by way of racial consciousness and a sense of white identity when they came to the Americas?

Europeans saw themselves as superior to people of color. This belief forms the basis for the attitude of white superiority and the culture of white supremacy

The English were the worse offenders. The English saw themselves as morally and culturally superior to others –even other European communities.

Scott Malcomsen notes that by the time the English began exploring the New World racist ideas about blacks, Indians, and whites had taken a life of their own. Slavery had already existed in England. And Queen Elizabeth, herself, had a black page. ⁷

Audrey Smedley in her book Race in North America writes “It was the English in North America who developed the most rigid and exclusionist form of race ideology. ⁸

Smedley explains that the English were more isolated racially isolated than Mediterranean peoples. Mediterranean peoples experienced more heterogeneity of peoples and cultures. For centuries people in the Mediterranean had had contact with African peoples especially in Portugal and Spain.

So when the Portuguese and Spanish came to the Americas they were more willing to intermix with the Native Peoples. There was a great deal of sexual intermixing between the Spanish, Indians, and Africans especially in Peru and Mexico – where many Africans were brought. None of the Latin countries passed laws strictly prohibiting intermarriage. Whites were at the pinnacle but the mestizos were right below them and they had considerable power in society.

Audrey Smedley refers to Frank Tannenbaum’s work showing the different approaches to slavery in Catholic cultures and Protestant cultures. ⁹

Smedley contrasts the differences between slavery in Latin America and North America. ¹⁰

LATIN AMERICA	NORTH AMERICA
Many slaves freed	Few slaves freed
Slaves had some limited rights	Slaves had no rights
Mestizo identity values	Sexually exploited Africans. Unwilling to include children in the white community
Strategy of including	Strategy of excluding
Recognized the humanity of native peoples	Defined people of color as subhuman

Ronald Takaki describes how the English thought about the colors of white and black

“In the English mind, the color black was freighted with an array of negative images: “deeply stained with dirt,” “foul,” “dark or deadly” in purpose, “malignant,” while the color white on the other hand signified purity, innocence, and goodness.” ¹¹

THE CONQUEST OF IRELAND CREATES A TEMPLATE FOR THE CONQUEST OF THE UNITED STATES

In his book The Invention of the White Race, Theodore Allen describes how the racial formation process that was developed in Ireland set a precedent for the relation between Africans and Europeans in the American colonies. ¹²

The English treated the native people of Ireland as an inferior race in the six northern counties of Ulster. The English referred to the Irish as savages –just as they described the Native Americans later.

In Ireland, loyal Scot settlers were made into a landlord class to provide social control over the Irish people using the Penal Laws of Protestant Ascendancy. The Penal Laws were the forerunners of the slave codes that were developed in the new American colonies.

In the American colonies, a buffer social control group – like the Scots in Ireland- was needed to stand between the mass of slaves and the numerically tiny class of slaveholders. Allen writes "The primary

emphasis upon 'race' became the pattern only when the bourgeoisie could not form its social control apparatus without the inclusion of property less Euro-Americans." ¹³

In Ireland the English destroyed the tribal and kinship identity of the oppressed Irish peoples, took their land, and exploited their labor. These were the strategies that were used by the English colonists in their relations with Native Americans and African peoples.

So concepts of whiteness, white superiority, and the inferiority of other peoples were already in place when the English colonist arrived in North America. And strategies for social control had already been developed in Ireland that would be used in the Americas. The belief in white superiority was strengthened and reinforced during the colonization of the Americas and the encounter with Native Americans and African peoples.

THE CONQUEST OF NATIVE AMERICANS AND THE FORMATION OF WHITE IDENTITY

We might remember the strong resistance which Native Americans made to the conquest of the lands they were living on. The European colonists would never have been able to conquer the Native Americans if whites had been a divided people. One way the colonists unified themselves was to strengthen the white racial identity they brought with them from England.

As whites came into North America they were intent on taking the land of the Native Americans. When whites first arrived there were an estimated 7,000,000 people divided into approximately 600 distinct communities. Through a process of conquest, war, disease, and broken treaties Native Americans were decimated so that by the end of the 19th century only 225,000 survived.

The conquest of Native Americans and the taking of their land was an essential part of forming white supremacy. Ronald Takaki writes, "The social construction of race occurred within the economic context of the competition for land." ¹⁴

Jill Lepore, in her book The Name of War, explores the origins of white American identity in King Philip's War – the war fought in 1675 and 1676 between English settlers and the Wampanoag Indians and their allies the Narragansett and Nipmuck. According to Lepore, in proportion to the population, this was the bloodiest war fought in North America. Both sides pursued the war without restraint killing women and children, torturing captives, and mutilating the dead.

At first, the English colonists in New England defined their identity against both the Native Americans and the Spanish who were their archrivals in Europe. After settling in New England, the colonists began to have doubts about their identity. Their distance from England and their proximity to Native Americans magnified these doubts. Some English settlers left their fellow colonists and went to live with the Indians. Those who remained were shocked by these actions. They feared that becoming like the Indians would mean they were no longer "civilized". As Ronald Takaki notes, "Indians personified the Devil and everything the Puritans feared – the body, sexuality, laziness, sin, and the loss of self-control." ¹⁵

The Wampanoag went to war because the colonists were taking their land, interfering with their agriculture, and attempting to convert them to Christianity. They fought to protect their way of life and they were determined to drive the Puritans out of America.

Some Puritan colonists saw the war as a holy war fought to rid the land of infidel Indians. The Puritans called the Native Americans devils and barbarians. They thought of the Native Americans as being inhuman, illiterate, non-Christian, and uncivilized. This dehumanization of the Native Americans gave the Puritan colonists the justification they needed to wage war and commit atrocities.

During King Phillips War Lepore sees the beginning of a racialized identity for the Puritan colonists and the Native Americans. She writes, "(For the colonists) the Indians were not, in fact, truly human, or else were humans of such a vastly different race as to be considered essentially, and biologically, inferior to Europeans." ¹⁶

And Takaki observes,

"What happened in America in the actual encounters between Indians and the English strangers was not uniform. In Virginia, Indian savagery was viewed largely as cultural; Indians were ignorant heathens. In New England, on the other hand, Indian savagery was racialized; Indians had come to be condemned as a demonic race, their dark complexions signifying an indelible and inherent evil. Why was there such a difference between the two regions? Possibly the competition between the English and the Indians over resources was more intense in New England than in Virginia, where there was more arable land. More important the colonists in New England had brought with them a greater sense of religious mission than the Virginia settlers. For the Puritans, theirs was an "errand into the wilderness" – a mission to create what John Winthrop had proclaimed as a "city on a hill" with the eyes of the world upon them. ... Thus savagery was racialized as the Indians were demonized..... Once the process of this cultural construction was under way it set a course for the making of a national identity for centuries to come." ¹⁷

Before the war the boundaries between the cultures were somewhat porous, but after the war the boundaries hardened. The European notion of self became contrasted with the Native American "other." This set the tone for the rest of American history as the Europeans gradually took over the whole continent and pushed the Native American survivors onto reservations.

One of the important themes that played out in our history is how whites became the "real" Americans. White people have had to deal with the fact that they took the continent from Native Americans who had been here for 10,000 years. Native Americans were truly the original Americans. In order to become the "real" Americans whites have used a variety of justifications including viewing themselves as being God's chosen people, Manifest Destiny, Social Darwinism, and the assertion that the Native Americans have "disappeared."

THE ENSLAVEMENT OF AFRICAN PEOPLES AND THE FORMATION OF WHITE IDENTITY

Just as the conquest of Native Americans shaped white supremacy so did the enslavement of African peoples.

Three important factors led to the social construction of whiteness in relation to African peoples: the need for cheap labor, the desire for social control, and the fear of insurrection. As Rubio notes in his book A History of Affirmative Action:

"Neither slavery nor the white race constituted fixed or natural categories or activity, but rather both were institutions devised over the course of the first century of settlement by

Anglo American colonial authorities in Virginia, Maryland, and the Carolinas in order to cut labor costs and blunt the threat of labor solidarity and rule.”¹⁸

The first factor in the ongoing social construction of whiteness was the need for cheap labor. Workers were needed to clear and farm the land especially as tobacco became a productive product. If the colonists were to make any profit they needed cheap labor. The question was who was going to do this arduous backbreaking work?

At first white indentured servants did the tobacco farming. Seventy five percent of the earliest colonists were indentured servants who had to work from five to seven years before they could be free. Many of the earliest indentured Europeans were kidnapped in England and Ireland. Other whites came from prison. Other whites came willingly seeking economic opportunity, political freedom, religious freedom, or a fresh start on life. But whatever the reason they came, they were forced to work in horrible conditions. Many died because of the severity of their circumstances. And many others fought back against the harsh regime of their masters or ran away to live with Native Americans.

The earliest Africans were not slaves but were indentured laborers like their white counterparts from Europe. Yet by 1650, 70% of Africans in Virginia were indentured for life. This was defacto slavery. In 1661 the Virginia Assembly passed a law legalizing this practice -making it de jure slavery. Africans were enslaved because they were easily identified, they did not know the terrain (like the Native Americans) and they could not escape homeward (like the Native Americans). The enslavement of African people was the way that white landowners resolved their need for cheap labor.

The second critical factor in the ongoing social construction of whiteness was the need for the social control of whites. How would the establishment keep the indentured white people under control and how would they prevent these indentured peoples from joining with the Africans to overthrow the system?

Historians refer to Bacon's Rebellion (1675) as a critical event in the development of social control. Nathaniel Bacon was a wealthy white planter who united bonded whites in order to take Indian land. The white power structure responded to this rebellion with shock and horror and charged Bacon with treason. Bacon then marched on Jamestown, Virginia. Enslaved Africans joined Bacon's army as it burned down Jamestown. This is the last recorded revolt of African and white bondservants united against their masters. The rebellion was quickly put down. The ruling class was frightened by Bacon's Rebellion.

Takaki notes,

“Large land owners could see that the social order would always be in danger so long as they had to depend on white labor. They had come to a crossing. They could open economic opportunities to white workers and extend political privileges to them. But this would erode their own economic advantage and potentially undermine their political hegemony. Or they could try to reorganize society on the basis of class and race. By importing and buying more slaves they could decrease the proportion of white indentured servants. They would then be able to exploit a group of workers who had been enslaved.”¹⁹

After Bacon's Rebellion there was a massive switch from the use of white indentured labor to African slave labor and the numbers of Africans brought into the country increased dramatically.

The third dimension in the creation of white supremacy was the fear of slave insurrections. The massive importation of African people led to fears of a slave revolt. Both Rubio and Allen posit that the white race

was “invented” in the colonial era as a social control mechanism to prevent slave revolts. The freed white indentured servants joined with their former masters to form slave control militia units known as the patrol.

Theodore Allen, in his book The Invention of Whiteness, argues that the colonial laboring class of southern whites, who made up 60% of the white population, was coerced into being a “superior race” to provide social control over Africans and Native Americans.

But Philip Rubio takes a different position. He notes that laws were deliberately passed giving privileges to whites of humble means. The white servants, after serving their five to seven years of indentured servitude, got 50 acres of land in what was then the western part of the country. They also received a reduction in the poll tax. The free land and the reduction in the poll tax provided a real economic incentive. Because of these new privileges, the status of bonded and poorer whites rose not only in relation to Africans but also in relation to their white superiors.²⁰

As a result of these economic incentives, whites developed a new caste consciousness and a new caste loyalty. This was the beginning of a class of working white people with a commitment to maintaining white power and privilege for their class that continues through the rest of American history. Scott Malcomsen notes the paradox. “Under relentless pressure from the lower classes, a broad social liberty had been born but at the cost of a complete denial of liberty to a portion of society.”²¹

White as a social status first appears as a legal description in Virginia in 1691 when the legislature used the term “white man or woman.”

Now we can see how the stories of the conquest of Native American and the enslavement of Africa peoples shape the identities of different peoples. For we will remember there were no Indians when whites first came to the Americas. But as a result of the conquest the Native Peoples were racialized as Indians. This was also true for the Africans who came from many different tribes but were lumped together after they were enslaved.

But just as the conquest formed Indians and enslavement formed slaves/Negroes/blacks so did it shape white people as well. One way the colonists unified themselves to take the land from the Native Americans was to take on a strong white racial identity. The wars the white colonists fought with Native Americans strengthened this sense of racial identity and their belief in their racial superiority. Moreover, the white race was “invented” as a social control mechanism to prevent revolts by enslaved African peoples. Scott Malcomsen writes, “Whiteness had stolen upon white people like a ghost, a result of their thoughts and actions toward non-white people.”²²

SECTION TWO: WHITE SUPREMACY AND THE REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD

I want to move now to the period of the American Revolution.

Some recent historical scholarship has focused on the racial dynamics that led to the American Revolution. One reason the American Revolution was fought was to get access to Indian lands protected by treaties with the Crown. Another reason is the English Judiciary was beginning to pass laws outlawing slavery. And support for the abolition of slavery was growing in England.

The Revolution was fought over the ideals – “We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal that they are endowed by the Creator with certain unalienable rights that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” The Revolution could have ended slavery. In fact in the North most states abolished slavery after the war. But slavery was solidified in the South after the Revolution.

THE PASSAGE OF THE US CONSTITUTION

The term white is never used in the Constitution but was implied in the expression “free person” which appears numerous times. A political compromise was made that led to the 3/5ths rule. This would count African people who were enslaved for purposes of determining representation in Congress.

THE REVOLUTIONARY GENERATION

Scott Malcomsen observes that many members of the Revolutionary generation wanted to end slavery because of the contradiction between their emerging freedom and the oppression of African peoples.²³

The “white liberals” of that time used a number of strategies, including denying the relevance of their racial past, placing the blame for slavery on England, despairing over the bad hand that history had dealt them, and feeling helpless about the current state of affairs.

There were two important reasons why slavery was not ended at that time. First, South Carolina and Georgia had the political power to prevent such a change. And, second, the “white liberals” may have wanted to end slavery but they didn’t want blacks to achieve political power. And they couldn’t resolve that contradiction.

After the Revolutionary War there was increased segregation in the North. Excluding the physical presence of former slaves meant that whites would not have to be reminded of the past. Out of sight, out of mind. For this reason the practice of living in segregated communities goes way back in our history.

THE NATURALIZATION LAW OF 1790

Matthew Frye Jacobsen in his book Whiteness of a Different Color cites the Naturalization Law of 1790 as being crucial in shaping the racial identity of our country. This law restricted immigration and naturalization to “free white person.” The act reads:

“All free white persons who, have, or shall migrate in the United States, and shall give satisfactory proof, before a magistrate, by oath, that they intend to reside therein, and shall take an oath of allegiance, and shall have resided in the United States for one whole year, shall be entitled to the rights of citizenship.”

As a result of this law only white Europeans would be allowed into the country to become citizens (except for slaves). This law had a powerful impact in shaping the racial make up of our country and the physical

features of our people. It took 175 years before the 1965 Immigration Act eliminated race, creed, and nationality as a basis for admission to the US resulting in large-scale immigration from Asia and Latin America.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

Ian Hannaford in his book Race: The History of an Idea in the West observes that in Europe, during this period, different nations were shaping their identities as nation states. People in the emerging European countries explored the history of their people looking for a distinct national character and identity – a set of national characteristics that were passed on through the blood – not learned. The English were proud of their Anglo Saxon roots. The connection to Anglo Saxon identity began to develop in the early 1600s in England. The English rulers needed to justify Henry the Eighth's break with Rome. So they went back before the days of the Norman Invasion and the importance of the Catholic Church. ²⁴

Audrey Smedley notes the Anglo-Saxons had originally come to England from Germany in the 5th and 6th centuries. The Anglo Saxons were remembered as the freedom loving branch of the German people. They were thought of as being great lovers of liberty who started free institutions and equitable laws. What the Anglo-Saxon Americans liked about their German ancestors was their will to conquer and their will to remain unconquered. What is notable here is that this belief was based solely on the writing of the Roman Tacitus in his description of the Germans in contrast to the falling Romans. ²⁵

Just as European nations were developing a sense of national character and identity so were their cousins in the United States, especially since they were in the process of conquering a new land and forming a new people. The Americans referred to their heritage as Anglo-Saxon.

Smedley writes that in the late 1700s and into the 1800s, this idea of Anglo-Saxon roots was adapted to the racialized context in the US - with the notion that this helped to explain white superiority here in the United States. The idea of having Anglo-Saxon heritage became a very popular idea in the American colony. Smedley notes that Jefferson was a big believer in the idea of Anglo-Saxon roots. ²⁶

NATIONAL IDENTITY IN AMERICA: REPUBLICANISM

Mathew Frye Jacobsen notes that Republicanism was a very popular idea when the United States was formed. Americans believed that the idea of responsible democratic government requires high moral character and fitness for self-government. The founders assumed only white men had these qualities and characteristics and that white women and people of color were not fit for self-government. This is one of the important ways that the democratic way of organizing government supported white superiority. ²⁷

SECTION THREE: RACE SCIENCE SUPPORTS WHITE SUPREMACY

THE DEVELOPMENT OF RACE SCIENCE IN THE UNITED STATES SUPPORTS WHITE SUPREMACY

Slavery and the conquest of Native Americans were central to the development of a science of race in the North American colonies.

Audrey Smedley notes that arguments about the Negroes natural inferiority began to take hold in the United States during the American Revolution. An important reason for this is that there were some people who were speaking out against slavery. Whites needed a defensible justification to keep slavery intact.²⁸

During the Revolution Americans had to confront the moral dilemma of fighting a revolution for freedom while at the same time enslaving other people. One level of ideology rejected undemocratic divisions of class and ancestry while another accepted unequal placement based on race.²⁹

The rise of the abolitionist movement also led to another period of people trying to justify race through scientific means.³⁰

To deal with this fundamental contradiction some decided to justify slavery by asserting that African Americans are inferior people. One way to accomplish that goal is to provide “scientific justification.”

US scientists drew on the racial theories of European scientists, like Carolus Linnaeus and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach. These scientists had categorized racial groups as Caucasoid, Mongoloid, Australoid, Negroid, and Indian. Those who were not Caucasoid were seen as different and indeed subhuman. White scientists studied physical differences and conducted anatomical investigations to prove the other racial groups are inferior.³¹

American race scientists developed their own race theories within the context of America.

Thomas Jefferson was critical in the development of race science in the United States. In his personal library Jefferson had one of the largest collections of books on science in that time. His collection became the basis for the start of the Library of Congress.

In his book entitled Notes on Virginia – a study of the flora and fauna of the state- Jefferson defined African Americans as being intellectually inferior to whites. He wrote that blacks are equal in memory, inferior in reasoning, and dull in imagination.

Because of his fame and stature, Jefferson more than any other figure framed the debate on Negro intelligence.³²

SOCIAL DARWINISM

Social Darwinism was another European scientific concept that supported the concept of race. What was Scientific Darwinism and how did it support the concept of race?

In Europe in the 19th century, the rise of Social Darwinism as a political philosophy was another important development in thinking about race. Darwin’s ideas about evolution in nature were wedded to laissez-faire philosophy by Herbert Spencer.

Spencer argued that natural selection and the survival of the fittest explained the differences in the races. That is why whites achieve higher levels of development. People of color were in their “natural condition” because of the deficiency in their intellectual or physical capacity. And, whites were in their superior position because they were “more fit.”

Spencer lectured in America and needless to say his ideas were very popular here. In fact, he was more widely read in the US than in Europe ³³

Social Darwinism was very popular as a race science here in the United States. It was popular because it could be used to justify the extermination of Native Americans and the continued oppression and segregation of African Americans.

Prominent Social Darwinians in the US were Samuel Cartwright and Frederick Hoffman. Samuel Cartwright wrote an article “Negro Freedom Impossibility under Nature’s Law.” (1861) Frederick Hoffman wrote Race Traits and the Tendencies of the Negroes (1896). He provided a statistical way of describing Negroes with the implication that they are inferior. ³⁴

John Fiske -1842-1901-introduced Social Darwinism at Harvard.

William Graham Sumner 1840-1910 at Yale used Social Darwinism to justify the extermination of Native Americans

Madison Grant 1865-1937-was the chair of the New York Zoological society and Trustee of the American Museum of National History. He advocated segregation, sterilization, eugenics (selective breeding) and population control.

Ian Hannaford in his book Race: The History of an Idea in the West provides a full elaboration of the thinking of Fiske, Sumner, and Grant. ³⁵

Smedley quotes Nancy Stepan (1982) The Idea of Race in Science 1800-1960
Evolutionary thought strengthened racial ideas and provided them with a new scientific vocabulary of struggle and survival.

White supremacist scientists used Social Darwinism to support segregation and miscegenation laws. Since African Americans are not fit and are inferior they should be segregated so that they will not contaminate white society. This would cause the deterioration of all that is noble, pure, and superior. ³⁶

Mulattoes are viewed as abnormal or degenerate so we should prohibit interracial marriage. ³⁷

SECTION FOUR: WHITE SUPREMACY IN THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY UNTIL RECONSTRUCTION

In this section I will give small snapshots of some of the expressions of white supremacy in this period. Each of these could be expanded into a chapter in a book.

THE ERA OF JACKSONIAN DEMOCRACY – 1833-1837

The creation of the Spoils System represents the democratization of white voting power by expanding the franchise to whites who did not own property. This enfranchisement of whites was accompanied by the disenfranchisement of free African Americans.³⁸

One of President Andrew Jackson's highest priorities was the expulsion of Native Americans who lived east of the Mississippi to designated areas west of the river in Oklahoma. This was the time of the Trail of Tears for the Cherokee people.

Jackson was a slave holder and a strong defender of slavery against its critics. He ordered Postmaster General Amos Kendall to censor abolitionist mail.

IN THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY THE NOTION OF WHITENESS WAS SHAPED BY FOUR DIFFERENT GROUPS OF WHITES

Scott Malcomsen observes that, before the Civil War, four groups of white people contended over the meaning of whiteness and the use of white power.³⁹

1. Some Northerners opposed slavery on moral grounds. Other Northern whites resented slavery because it undercut the wages of working white people. But very few of the Northerners who opposed slavery believed in equal rights for enslaved people or wanted them to gain political power. Some of these people we would describe as both anti-slavery and anti-black. The vast number of Northern whites wanted to keep freed slaves separate.
2. Southern slave owners want to keep African peoples enslaved because they were dependent on their labor.
3. Non-slave owning whites in the South did not want slaves around. For poorer whites their whiteness gave them status, pride, and a large measure of freedom.
4. White immigrants wanted the jobs of free blacks.

Up until the Civil War, these four groups of whites contested with one another over the future of the country and the fate of people of color.

EXPANSION INTO THE NORTHWEST

White Southerners led the initial expansion into the Northwest (Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin). They outlawed the possibility of slavery because they did not want to live with blacks and they resented the power of the "haughty slave owners." One of the major tenets of the "free soil movement" was that no blacks should be in the newly forming states because whites are superior. Whites then passed laws excluding free blacks from living in the states of Illinois (1847) and Ohio (1850).⁴⁰

DRED SCOTT DECISION (1857)

The slave, Dred Scott claimed freedom after his owner, Mr. Sanford, took him into free territory as defined by the Missouri Compromise of 1820. This compromise created a dividing line between free and slave states. This decision was the Supreme Court's first invalidation of a major federal law. Chief Justice Roger Taney wrote in his decision, "The African American has not rights which the white man is bound to respect." This gave powerful legal support to the idea of white supremacy.

ABOLITIONIST MOVEMENT

Garrison and the radical abolitionists rejected whiteness as irrelevant in favor of the common humanity of all people. They wanted to go beyond race. But they were also anti-black. They urged black abolitionists not to form black groups or hold conventions as separate racial groups. They were saying to blacks that your racial experience has no importance - that whites and blacks face slavery on equal terms. But abolitionists still had white privilege and they had the power to say that race has no meaning. This led to the split between Douglass and Garrison. ⁴¹

RECONSTRUCTION

The attachment of white people in all regions to white supremacy intensified before the Civil War and did not lessen after the war. The Republican Party wanted to abolish slavery but hold onto white political power. We know that the end of slavery did not lead to racial equality. After the Civil War, the South re-imposed white power and the North withdrew with indifference to the plight of African-Americans in the South. The Hayes-Tilden Compromise of 1877 politically shaped all of this. Rubio notes that in Reconstruction the historical identification of citizenship with whiteness was at the heart of the opposition to the black franchise. ⁴²

HOMESTEAD ACT OF 1862

One of the important provisions of the Homestead Act was that only whites, including white immigrants, would be given free land. If former slaves had had this possibility it would have made a huge difference in their lives. Today some people refer to the Homestead Act as a justification for reparations. ⁴³

SECTION FIVE: IMMIGRATION OF WHITES FROM EUROPE, THE RISE OF THE WHITE WORKING CLASS, AND POST WORLD WAR TWO ENTITLEMENTS

IMMIGRATION FROM EUROPE

In his book Whiteness of a Different Color, Matthew Frye Jacobsen divides the experience of white immigrants after the passage of the 1790 Immigration Act into three periods.

In the first period, from 1790- 1840, the European immigrants still tended to be from Anglo or Germanic groups that had been the dominant white groups through the American Revolution.

In the second period, from 1840-1920, there were mass migrations of other European peoples. First came the Irish, and later came the Italians, Poles, Scandinavians, and Jews.

Jacobson explains that the white Americans who had immigrated earlier did not eagerly accept the European white immigrants who came in after 1840. The Anglo-Saxons who were already here looked down their noses at the immigrant whites coming in from Ireland and Eastern Europe. They thought of them as being inferior white people. At their worst leading intellectuals referred to these immigrants as morally inferior, ignorant, brutalized, disease ridden degraded criminals

The Irish and Italians thought of themselves as having their own unique religious and cultural identity as well. Out of these conflicts developed the idea that there are three different European racial groups:

1. Nordics from England, Germany, and Northern Europe
2. Mediterranean's from Italy and Greece
3. Alpines from Eastern Europe

It took a while for the new European immigrants to be fully accepted into the Anglo-American white society. As a result people became white at different times.

In 1920 the Anglo majority was so upset about these white immigrants they passed the Johnson-Reed Act which established quotas of immigration based on population proportions in 1890. The result of this was that immigration quotas favored the Nordic Europeans and diminished immigration by Mediterraneans and Alpines.

This has a real impact on European immigration. For example from 1900-1910 nine million new ethnics came into the country. But then in the 30s, 40s and 50s only three million came in.

David Roediger, in his book Working toward Whiteness refers to the white immigrants as in between people. They were entitled to immigrate because of the 1790 immigration law and the owners wanted to fill the factories with workers. They could become citizens – unlike immigrants from other part of the world - because of the 1790 Naturalization Law. ⁴⁴

They were not fully accepted by the white nativists. They were subjected to segregation, job discrimination, lower wages, economic exploitation and in extreme circumstances lynching.

At its height the KKK was the largest voluntary group in the USA. It was not only anti-black, but anti Jewish, and anti Catholic.

Yet the “new immigrants” were not as harshly treated as People of Color.

They were called “new immigrants” and not ethnic groups in the 19th century. The term ethnic groups came into play later as they became more settled.

Roediger also describes the strategies the new immigrant used to adapt to America.

Many of the new immigrants left the United States and went back to Europe. When you go to Ellis Island you can see the wall mural that tells the story of the many immigrants that went back to Europe rather than stay here in the US. There were many reasons of course. People missed their families or their cultures. It was not easy to get established. Living conditions were often very poor. And some reacted to the racism in America.

Others developed their own identities within the context of the larger white society. The Irish and Italians thought of themselves as being different races with their own cultural and religious identities as well. So in large cities even today you have Irish and Italian communities. White workers coming into the country from Ireland and Italy organized trade unions, joined the Democratic Party, and participated in the Catholic Church. We might say that they assimilated on their own terms.

Still others did what they could do to assimilate as fast as they could, changing their names, learning English, and leaving their childhood faiths. The right to become white for these European immigrants required learning English, being willing to inter-marry, and show hostility toward people of color. Assimilation is not only taking an American identity but a white American identity

Let’s imagine the situation that the European immigrants faced. They wanted their children to get education and be able to succeed in society. They wanted to have good jobs and prosper. They even wanted to contribute to the well being of society. Those are all good things, but in order to do these worthy things they had to take on white identity and fit into the white culture.

Many of the immigrant families traded their connection with the vibrant European cultures of their ancestors for the power and privilege of whiteness here in the United States. As they emigrated from Europe they exchanged their European heritage and European cultures for a white culture identity. They gave up their European identities in order to take on a white identity. They gave up their European cultures in order to be part of a white culture.

Roediger also talks about relations between European immigrants and people of color. There are examples of solidarity with people of color from that time. But given the depth of prejudice against People of Color it was easier for immigrants to just go along with racist practices. And many immigrants were willing learners – some having brought their whiteness with them. Many new immigrants sensibility was “in between” not being fully white but looking down on people of color.⁴⁵

Remember these were struggles that took place between the different communities identified as being white as white society still dominated and controlled people of color.

After 1920 the different white races – what we now call ethnic groups - melded together in the “melting pot” to become Caucasian (drawing on Blumenbach’s category). There were three reasons for this. First, the Johnson Reed Act lessened Anglo - American anxiety about the immigration of “those other white people.” Second, the mass migration of African Americans out of the South meant that whites felt that

they needed to band together against the African-Americans moving into Northern cities. This is what Jacobson refers to as the third phase of white European immigrant experience. Third, many of the sons and daughters of the new immigrant fought courageously in World War Two. Their sacrifices ensured their status in the white world.

RISE OF THE WHITE WORKING CLASS

Some historians assert that the white ruling class divided black and white workers and played them off against one another. There is some truth to that assertion. But Philip Rubio argues that the racism of the white working class is intentional as white workers were determined to benefit from white supremacy. The white immigrants coming into the country didn't take on whiteness reluctantly. They claimed whiteness in order to get power and they did their best to heighten the importance of whiteness. He calls them the "patrollers" of the early 20th century, which is a reference going back to the formerly indentured whites who participated in the patrols during slave owning times.⁴⁶

I noted earlier that the Anglo-Saxon whites looked down on white immigrants from other parts of Europe. At the same time, Anglo-Saxon American whites urged European immigrants to assimilate and fit in to the dominant white culture. So there was both a push and a pull.

And many of the Europeans wanted to assimilate into the dominant white culture as quickly as possible. White workers coming into the country from Ireland and Italy organized trade unions, joined the Democratic Party, and participated in the Catholic Church. We might say that they assimilated on their own terms. Scott Malcomson notes that the right to become white for these European immigrants required learning English, being willing to inter-marry, and show hostility toward people of color.⁴⁷

White working class people carried out pogroms to destroy successful African American communities such as Danville, Virginia (1883) Wilmington, North Carolina (1898) New Orleans, Louisiana (1900) New York, New York (1900) and Tulsa, Oklahoma (1921).

Samuel Gompers was one of the founders of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in 1886. The AFL was a collective of the craft unions at that time. Gompers was a strong believer in white supremacy. The AFL focused on the right of white workers to organize themselves while they excluded African-Americans from the workplace.

THE NEW DEAL STRENGTHENED WHITE SUPERIORITY

During the Depression widespread strike activity led to the passage of the Wagner act. This act legalized unions as exclusive collective bargaining agents. But the Wagner Act passed without an anti-discrimination amendment that African American organizations pushed for. The AFL and the CIO vigorously opposed this amendment.

As a result organized labor was established and recognized on an essentially white's only basis with the support of the federal government. This created not only "closed shops" but closed white shops. The Wagner Act also created the seniority system, which provided job security for whites but was a barrier to employment for blacks.⁴⁸

The American Agricultural Act sought to help predominantly white cotton farmers by paying them not to grow. This led to the mass eviction of one third of the African-American agricultural workers in the south

(500,000 people). This led to a mass migration of African-Americans from the South to cities in the north and the west. ⁴⁹

POST WORLD WAR TWO ENTITLEMENTS

Phillip Rubio describes how the passage of the GI Bill in 1944 became an important piece of legislation that enhanced white supremacy. This act of legislation provided free college education, low interest housing loans, and jobs in the federal government especially for white people. ⁵⁰

These programs provided the springboard for white people to leave the cities for segregated suburbs. The migration to the suburbs was motivated by a desire for open property away from the crowded city, the need to be closer to better paying jobs, and the desire to flee the incoming black migration.

The segregation of the suburbs was sustained by the regulations of the Federal Housing Authority (FHA) - especially the appraisal procedures that were used. Many housing developments had deeds that prohibited sale to African Americans. And, once whites moved in they formed white homeowner's associations.

Rubio observes that the idea of white republican citizenship reemerged in the 20th century by fusing the property of whiteness contained in "white jobs" with the quarter acre suburban tract. The colonial and republican and post Civil War antecedents lay in the freeholder's minimum plot of 50 acres of farmland and the homesteader's 160-acre claim. ⁵¹ Rubio writes, "If the white race was invented in colonial America one could argue that it was reinvented with the post World War Two suburbs." ⁵²

SECTION SIX: WHAT ARE THE CONCLUSIONS WE CAN DRAW FROM THIS HISTORY?

The history of white supremacy in the United States is a long one stretching back almost four hundred years. This history has shaped the racial relations in our country today and must be addressed as we move toward the future. As Phillip Rubio writes,

“The white race is not a passive demographic act but an invented voluntary social institution whose only utility is oppression. It is one that continues to be collectively reinvented in a vain attempt to resolve the contradiction between white political power and social freedom and the denial of the same to (people of color) while simultaneously blurring class difference between capitalist and working class among those who share the coincidence of looking white.”⁵³

We noted that the concept of whiteness was brought to the Americas by Europeans and that the concept took on further meaning during the conquest of Native Americans and the enslavement of African Americans.

Historically, white supremacy serves as a social control mechanism. As white supremacy developed people could be included or excluded from the institutions and culture of the dominant society based on the color of their skin. Ways of excluding people of color included slavery, segregation, reservations, exclusion laws (for the Chinese), and repatriation (of Mexicans). Some examples of ways of including whites, or giving them special favor, that have been noted in this paper are: the Naturalization Law of 1790, extending the vote to white people during the era of Jacksonian democracy, providing land through the Homestead Act, the policies of Reconstruction, and the benefits of the GI Bill.

In terms of white identity today the issue is: Who is in and who is out of the white club? And, how do we benefit from being in or out of the club?

There is a powerful connection between white supremacy and the ability to have power, privilege, and benefits in our society. The development of white supremacy led to the profound inequities of economic wealth and ownership of property, the vote and access to political power, and the social benefits of leniency in the courts, access to education, social mobility, and public deference.

Historically, in order to have power and privilege in our society you have to be white. And being white means that you have the power and privilege of whiteness.

In terms of white identity today we might say that power and privilege is an essential part of white identity.

Historically white identity has been grounded in the experiences of fear, control, and violence. White supremacy leads to fear of people of color. Fear of slave revolts. Fear of loss of political power as in the time of Reconstruction. Fear of declining property values when neighborhoods change. Fear of losing social capital as in integrated education. Fear that whites will become a “minority” in the United States by the year 2050. As Malcomsen notes, “The endangered property is like an external proxy for an endangered self.”⁵⁴

The fears created by white supremacy lead to a desire for control. The control of the patrol and overseer. The control of the Klan and Night Riders. The control of pogroms and ghettos. The control of prisons and loss of voting rights for people of color who have been in prison.

And the need to control created by white supremacy leads to violence. The violence of the conquest of Native Americans. The violence of the slavery of African peoples. The violence of whites torching black communities. The violence of lynching. The violence of white run police departments in communities of color. The violence of bombing Baghdad. As bell hooks notes, "Black folks associated whiteness with the terrible, the terrifying, and the terrorizing." ⁵⁵

In terms of white identity today many white people live deeply rooted in this experience of fear, control, and violence. Michael Moore captures this theme in his movie "Bowling for Columbine."

Whiteness does not exist without there being people of color. During the process of colonization and enslavement whiteness developed as a response to the difference of color of other peoples. Whites were eager to be seen as not black or not Native American, or not Mexican to separate them from the "other." This is why historically white identity is a negative identity – it means not being a person of color. Malcomsen writes, "Whiteness is an identity without a soul and empty interior space created by negations and exclusion." ⁵⁶

In terms of white identity today we who are white have a difficult time talking about what we like about being white since being white has meant not being a person of color.

White people were made white by law but they did not all live as whites in the same way. From the very beginning of settlement some whites chose to leave their communities and go to live with Native Americans. We noted in the early 19th century the differences between Northern whites, Southern white slave holders, Southern whites who did not own slaves, and white working class people. Before the Civil War we saw different points of view expressed by whites that were abolitionists, free soilers, those who wanted to repatriate African people, and those who supported slavery. We observed the "whiteness of a different color" experienced by European immigrants in the 19th and early 20th century.

In terms of white identity today we can see that there are still differences in the white community. We can identify racial hate groups, indifferent whites, mainstream whites, liberal whites, and antiracist whites. Yet while these differences do exist among white people, those who are identified as being white still have the power, privileges, and benefits of whiteness. These privileges and benefits will be given to us even if we don't want them simply because we are white. And these differences in the white community exist while we continue to dominate and control people of color.

We have also seen that, ideas about whiteness change over time. For example, Irish and Italians were called the Celtic race and Italian race at the end of the 19th century. Then in the 1930s they morphed into Caucasians. Today we refer to these communities as ethnic groups.

As Ian Haney Lopez observes,

"There is no core or essential White identity or White race. There are only popular conceptions – in the language of the prerequisite cases, "a common knowledge" - of

Whiteness. And this common knowledge, like all social beliefs, is unstable, highly contextual, and subject to change.”⁵⁷

In terms of white identity going forward we can be sure that whiteness will take on new forms and different ways of maintaining white supremacy. New strategies for maintaining white supremacy are charter schools, vouchers, and the end of busing.

One of the powerful themes of American history is the growth of human freedom. Unfortunately this growth of freedom was for significant times in our history “for whites only.” The development of democracy and the emphasis on Republicanism goes hand in hand with the denial of political power to people of color. We see then that white freedom is based on the oppression of other races. As Phillip Rubio observes, “Whiteness creates a divided consciousness of claiming liberty in an unfree land. And white people have resented and feared the protest against the contradiction.”⁵⁸

Phillip Rubio also observes that while white Americans hold a powerful belief in the meritocracy there is a contradictory white folklore that has expected and been rewarded with white racial favoritism (which does not admit) while at the same time claiming to abhor nepotism and favoritism.⁵⁹

Rubio writes,

“The modern affirmative action debate has exposed the twoness of whiteness: we’re sorry/not sorry; you’re entitled to compensation/ you don’t deserve it; you deserve protection/ do it yourself; we don’t receive privileges/ yes we do- don’t mess with them.”⁶⁰

But Rubio notes that the twoness of whiteness does not however, correspond to Dubois’ black “twoness” which was to be American and black. White twoness has merged Americans with whiteness so that whites don’t have to justify the contradiction between egalitarian ideology and caste superiority.

In terms of white identity today many whites experience themselves as being immoral people burdened by white guilt. They are aware of the powerful contradictions between political power for whites and the oppression of people of color and our commitment to a meritocracy that serves the needs of white people while it excludes people of color.

Historically, whiteness is also associated with the right of whites to live separately from people of color. We see several examples of this in our history such as the time following the Revolution, the settlement of the Northwest (now the upper mid - west), and the creation of all-white suburbs.

In terms of white identity today many whites continue to argue that a white person has the right to live a private life with other whites apart from people of color. This way of thinking combines the language of individual rights with the reality of group power.⁶¹

As I look back at this four hundred year history I see an ongoing story of oppression in the name of achieving white supremacy. Yet, as I read the history, I see a powerful story of resistance and a quest for human freedom. And I also note that important choices were made at different times in our history - when the country was formed - at the time of the Revolution and the writing of the Constitution - in the time of Reconstruction - during the New Deal - and with the GI Bill. At those critical times choices were made to support white power and privilege. But different choices could have been made at each one of these critical junctures that would have led to greater justice and freedom for all Americans.

And so I wonder, why weren't other choices made? As I look back across this history, I see that whiteness has been the basis of our privilege, our power, and our benefits. Being white has given us status and social recognition. As Phillip Rubio writes, "What good is being white if it doesn't mean being number one?" ⁶²

At too many times in our history, whites made choices assuming that without maintaining our whiteness we will lose our power, privilege, and status. Or whites believed that if we give more power to people of color the benefits of our white skin color would be devalued. Too many of us who are white were socialized to believe that with racism we gain and with the end of racism we lose.

But as we look back at our history we see our white power and privilege has come at great emotional and spiritual cost to us as white people. We have an identity that is limited to our power and privilege. We live in a fearful, controlling and often violent society. We have no useful ways of affirming being white - apart from saying we are not a person of color. We experience the "twoness" and contradiction of our freedom and the oppression of people of color. Our power has put us in "wrong relationship" with people of color. Above all we have never achieved recognition of the common humanity of all Americans.

Scott Malcomsen observes,

"History as such is not tragedy... Yet there does seem to be a certain misapprehension in our American story so far, a mistake having to do with race. We might characterize the misapprehension as being the idea of racial incompatibility, or the idea that human inequality can be ordered in the categories of race. This misapprehension presides over a series of events in which protagonists act, more or less, according to the principles - mainly, in our case, principles of individual freedom that, owing to the mistake, constantly issue in racial separation. ... Much harm is caused by the protagonists to people whom they might have recognized as family. But the moment of tragic recognition seems never to arrive. Guilt, certainly, and regret, and fears of the future, and pity for the dead, and self-pity. But how much true recognition? The tragic drama, in the classical sense, of racial separatism seems never to reach catharsis, that is, the casting out of collective fear through profound recognition." ⁶³ (63)

Is there any way out of the tragic drama of our history of white supremacy?

Can we make more liberating and humane choices about racial relations going forward? Can we find the "profound recognition" that Malcomsen describes? I live with the hope and faith that we can tempered by the realities of this history we have just reviewed.

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FOOTNOTES

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