

## CHAPTER 1

### Creating a White Social Contract

*My mind boggles. I knew the "slave trade" from school, but in my schooling there were never numbers or people attached to it. Faces were never shown or depicted by an artist's rendering. The moans of the captured were never made audible as a symbol of the brutality and inhumanity endured by enslaved women, men and children stolen from the African continent and trafficked from the Door of No Return in westernmost Senegal to God knows where in the Americas. The trade in Africans involved all of Europe and those Africans who facilitated the enslavement process. Those African and Arab traders had little idea either as to where the ships were headed or what was awaiting their cargo when they arrived. It is said that sharks followed the boats as they rocked and swayed their way westward to the Americas with so many dying en route that their corpses were merely pitched into the sea as a food feast for carnivorous fish.*

*I have often wondered as I grew older what the captors felt. Had they lost so much of their own humanity they could not recognize the humanity of the Africans below? What must it have been like to be the "keepers of the watch" as people suffered and died and met their God or the ancestors as fish food.*

*I had never heard the word MAAFA. I knew nothing of its meaning. In white dominant culture we were taught little about "the trade." What we were taught treated the calamitous trip as basically insignificant. It was never depicted with any of its accompanying horrors or the ghastly and degrading conditions those chained and tight-packed had to endure. After all, they had to get here some way, it was said. My teachers were quick to point out that Africans played a role*

in it. It was not just Europeans. Somehow, it even seemed to put the onus on the "slaves" themselves. As if it was somehow their fault. Or others of their same race for certain.

There are always those who collaborate in their own oppression just as there are always those of us who collaborate in the oppression of others. But in our school lessons the Triangle Trade had no personality to it. It was just a description. Slavery was started on the coasts of West Africa. "Slaves" were transported here in something called the Middle Passage. The slave ships landed somewhere along the Atlantic coast and slavery continued for two hundred plus years. This remained true until the war was over in 1865. President Lincoln freed the slaves. Now it is a historical reference point like the Civil War, like Jim Crow, like the Civil Rights Movement. That's it.

I was not ready for the MAAFA. Not one bit. I had been invited to preach at the St. Paul Community Baptist Church in East New York, Brooklyn. St. Paul was pastored by the Rev. Dr. Johnnie Ray Youngblood who was famous for building some three thousand affordable housing units in one of most beaten-down sections of New York City. He was also famous for being somewhat "outlandish" in the pulpit and unpredictable in his approach to ministry. What particularly impressed me was his ability to bring into the church those usually left out. Formerly incarcerated persons and those struggling with addictions were as much a part of the congregation as professors, city government workers and other middle class churchgoers. He had members called "Saints in Caesar's Household." These were people who worked in the jails and at juvenile court, in the hospitals and at the schools and who were expected to stand with others in the church who were caught up in the system. It was something to behold.

I had read his 1995 book, *Upon This Rock*, in which he told the story of St. Paul Community Baptist Church. It was the most self-determined Christian congregation I had ever seen or heard of and it was there in vivid detail. It was an honor for me to be asked to preach at St. Paul's commemoration of the MAAFA. I prepared as best I could.

My first indication that I was in for something unique was when I saw parishioners of St. Paul all dressed in white lined up around the block at 6:00 a.m. Some two thousand people packed the church as they would at each of three services that day. I remember thinking that at my small church in New Orleans we sometimes

did not see two thousand people at church in an entire year. I was nervous, but appropriately so. My family was there. So were colleagues from the People's Institute.

My second indication that something was up was after some minutes when seated in the pulpit area, hands clasped and a prayerful countenance on my face, I noticed the sanctuary had been remade into a replica of one of the "slavers" as they were called. This replica was extraordinary, rounded at each end as a ship would be. There were posters advertising "Slaves" for sale and others for a "Runaway Negro." The MAAFA began to the sound of heart-wrenching cries of the tortured and maimed in the "hull" of the ship, with a procession of elders, holding the limp bodies of dolls representing children in their arms. They deposited the lifeless forms overboard into the sea (at the front of the church). Then the congregation witnessed what seemed to be a never-ending depiction of horror and violence, as men and women were raped, lynched, and bull-whipped across the stage. It was more powerful than I could imagine. I have never seen anything so dramatically depicted before or since. The commemoration ended not with resolution but with the appearance of the Sankofa bird looking back and yet facing forward. A huge banner stretched across the sanctuary that read: THE WAY OUT IS BACK THROUGH. The MAAFA was a ritual healing process. Its message was that trauma unaddressed and unacknowledged leads only to the spiritual death and the internalized rage of a people. I can try to put it in words, but that's it. No way I can really know it or feel it.

I turned to Rev. Youngblood at some point in the service and could only say "DAMN." He had a smile as wide as the sanctuary slaver. The notes I had carefully prepared had been rendered useless. The text I was to use seemed vapid and uninspired. What I said was hardly up to the moment at hand. I tried as best I could. I said my people (whites) were on the floor of those ships and that for whites, the way out was back through too. I could not lapse back into white-speak. I could not separate myself by ethnicity or nationality. I could not say that history does not know who was there. That audience did not want to hear that from me. It was clear who had been on the ships and where the ships were going. St. Paul's wanted to hear me "own it." They needed no explanation. I said even Jesus bowed to the gods of white supremacy. The MAAFA was hell.

## Creating white people

No one really knows when the concept of white people came about. It could have been a descriptive term spoken in various languages dating back to European encounters with indigenous peoples of the "New World," especially those in what became South America and Africa in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Members of the Wampanoag nation might have used a word that translated as "white" as English people stepped off the Mayflower and onto Plymouth Rock.

For Europeans, becoming white took more than 500 years. There were no white people when Europeans initially came to North America or South America. The first Europeans were Portuguese and Spanish followed by English, German and French. Some were Swiss and Scots, Scandinavians and Dutch.

Europeans in colonial North America were referred to by various names. In the first decades after the Jamestown settlement in 1607 (over 100 years after Portugal and Spain landed in South and Central America) persons were spoken of as "English and other persons" meaning other Europeans. Indians — and later "Negroes" — were non-persons under the law. This nomenclature evolved as increasing numbers of non-English Europeans arrived and became recognized in the law by their ethnicity or nationality such as "a Dutch man" or "a French man." All of these European ethnicities gradually conformed to Anglo-Saxon (English) cultural presumptions and dictates. English remained the national language. Over time, other Protestant Europeans gave up their languages in public trade and debate, conformed to certain manner of dress and decorum, and inculcated the story of the new nation as a history dominated by Anglo-Protestants. As European immigrants internalized this process of assimilation, they accepted the canon that constitutes what is fundamental to our nation's sense of self. Some literary critics, for example Barrett Wendell in his *Literary History of America* (1900), "argued that the greatness of New England letters in the period from 1830 to 1860 was to be attributed to the fact that the region was then almost racially homogeneous."<sup>1</sup> Others, such as Charles F. Richardson, "believed that the 'Saxon characteristics' of 'honesty, rugged independence, reverence for women and love of home and children' were ingrained in the early Americans."<sup>2</sup> As laws changed to reflect the changing demographics of colonial North America, English and Protestant Europeans were described as "Christian" or "baptized."

But this nomenclature created a dilemma once Africans were introduced into the Virginia and Maryland colonies in 1619. The Christian baptismal rite was used as a social control mechanism to bring "Negroes" under the precepts of the Church, especially to its dictates of subservience to one's master. Historian Winthrop Jordan concludes:

From the first...the concept embedded in the term Christian seems to have conveyed much of the idea and feeling of *me* as against *they*. To be Christian was to be civilized rather than barbarous, English rather than African, white rather than black.<sup>3</sup>

Judge Leon Higginbotham's chronology in his book, *In the Matter of Color: Race and the American Legal Process: The Colonial Period*, uses the date 1691 as the first time the word "white" was used in the laws of Virginia to refer to the legal status of persons of European descent:

Whatsoever English or *other white man or woman* (italics added), bond or free, shall intermarry with a Negro, mulatto, or Indian man or woman, bond or free, he shall within three months be banished from this dominion forever.<sup>4</sup>

In the century between 1691, when "white" was first used in the laws of colonial Virginia, and 1787, the year the US Constitution was ratified, "white" and "American" became synonymous. The difference between "white" and "Indian" or "Negro" is crucial. White confers legitimate status before the law so white people have access to the institutions sanctioned by the state. Whites were seen as full human beings. The terms "Indian" and "Negro" confer a status outside the protection of the law and without support from the institutions. Neither Indians nor Negroes were stasued as full human beings in the US Constitution. Indians, not taxed, were not considered to be part of the body politic except as dependents of the federal government or as domestic foreigners subject to the Commerce clause. Negroes were 3/5 human, but only for purposes of determining Southern white representation in Congress. In the eyes of the law, in the emerging race-constructed society of the United States, Indians and Negroes were illegitimate — less than. Minority.

Historian Y. N. Kly calls this "the anti-social contract." He puts it this way:

The anti-social contract is an unwritten, unspoken and unofficial agreement between the U.S. ruling elites and the remainder of the

white ethny [*sic*] to maintain the minorities, particularly the African and Native American minorities, in a position inferior to that of the white ethny.<sup>5</sup>

This race-based nation had to be structured and legitimized. From the establishments of colonies at Jamestown and Plymouth Rock, in 1607 and 1620 respectively, until the civil rights acts of the 1960s — over 350 years — most judicial rulings handed down by the US Supreme Court or US federal courts upheld the preemptory rights of white people and discounted the rights of Indians and Negroes. Those few exceptional rulings that asserted Negro or Indian rights were ignored, circumvented or quickly rescinded.

The creation of the legalized “white person” with inalienable rights not granted to Indians or blacks presaged the end of indentured servitude in the US. Indentured servants had been present since the beginning of colonization. An indentured servant was a man or woman or even a child under some circumstances, almost always European and poor (although Africans also held that legal status for the first few years of colonial North America), whose passage to the colonies was paid by a bondholder in exchange for a prescribed number of years of work. The agreement usually lasted seven years. In addition to free passage to the colonies, an indentured servant was given subsistence shelter, food, and in some instances, a small amount of currency. It was a hardscrabble existence at best and at worst resulted in sickness, starvation, even death. But despite his or her lowly caste, an indentured servant was a human being who could become a citizen with some standing before the law even if such standing was rarely recognized. An indentured person’s relationship with a sponsor was by individual contract. The contracts varied. Sometimes the agreement upon completion of the contract involved land. For example, Virginia, in 1705, passed a law requiring masters to provide white male servants whose indenture time was up with ten bushels of corn, thirty shillings, and a gun; white women servants might receive “fifteen bushels of corn and forty shillings.”<sup>6</sup> Also, freed male servants were to get 50 acres of land. For white indentured women, receiving no land was an incentive to marry in many cases. Despite their lowly status, white female servants were privileged by law over their African co-workers. “A 1663 Virginia law prohibited English female servants from doing fieldwork, but allowed African women to work outside”<sup>7</sup>

Colonial administrators feared the continual prospect of indentured European servants making common cause with either Indians or enslaved Africans. Again, Kly says:

The potential for revolt among impoverished Europeans, in combination with enslaved Africans, increased the necessity for ruling elites to emphasize white nationalism or the color line, to create a sense of community of interest among whites, an inter-class, inter-ethnic solidarity to be exercised for the benefit of all whites (although to the greater benefit, naturally, of the Anglo-Saxon elites), and at the expense of the national minorities.<sup>8</sup>

Within a few decades of their arrival at Jamestown in 1607, indentured servants from northern Europe began to acquire a status — a stake in the evolving structures of the new world that was crucial to the creation of the concept of white people. In fact, “by the early 1660s white men were loudly protesting against being made ‘slaves’ in terms which strongly suggest that they considered slavery not as wrong but as inapplicable to themselves.”<sup>9</sup> The theme of developing and maintaining a docile white working class has woven throughout the history of the United States. Many early European immigrants detested the social and economic hierarchies of Europe, especially those of England. However, in the New World one could, it was said, regardless of status or present circumstance, carve out a piece for oneself in the vast land. This opportunity became an indelible story of the new nation. Even in the twenty-first century, the United States white citizenry is represented as middle class despite the chasm between wealthy and poor white people, dating to the earliest days of the nation.

“White” also acquired moral underpinnings and a set of values that justified white control and inclusion and, to the contrary, subservience and exclusion of those deemed “colored” or non-white. This was, in part, because of the increasing status of scientists who attributed moral qualities to different races of human beings. For example, in 1738, Carolus Linnaeus, the distinguished Swedish scientist, classified four races of human beings thusly:

*Homo Americanus* — Tenacious, contented, free; ruled by custom.

*Homo Europaeus* — Light, lively, inventive; ruled by rites.

*Homo Asiaticus* — Stern, haughty, stingy; ruled by opinion.

*Homo Afer* — Cunning, slow, negligent; ruled by caprice<sup>10</sup>

Yet becoming white, with all of the advantages of a preferred racial status in the new land, came at a price. To be included in the social contract required that white people relinquish ties to the old country — the languages and customs and ways of doing and living associated with Europe. Even one's name had to be changed, if necessary. White was no ethnicity. It did not embody history or a sense of place. White was not a language or a form of music or art. White did not come with a dance or a national literature. White was a political designation. It signified one's relationship to sanctioned state power. So did black or red, brown or yellow. White had to be assembled. It had to be molded. In the race-based nation still under construction, white people existed only in relationship to black people or to red people, and later to Asian people. Whites were included in the social contract; the others were not.

Gradually, white came to mean more than a legal status conferring economic opportunity and social possibilities. White began to mean "better than" just as being someone of color would come to mean "less than." This idea, that whites were smarter, more creative, trustworthy, more attractive, the purveyors of civilization, the guardians of the future of humankind and made in the image of God, became internalized and lived out. Whites became acculturated with a sense of superiority that gave them voice, assuredness, and mobility. As John Woolman, anti-slavery Quaker activist, wrote in 1762,

White children, "born of Parents of the meanest Sort," were never considered candidates for a lifetime in slavery. "This is owing chiefly to the Idea of Slavery being connected with the Black Colour, and Liberty with the White: and where false Ideas are twisted into our Minds, it is with difficulty we get fairly disentangled."<sup>11</sup>

White became a "propertied right" like a copyright or the right of private ownership. White was seen as scientific, especially when biologists like Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, in his 1775 treatise, *De Generis Humani Varietate Native*, argued that the original type of man was Caucasian "based on characteristics such as stature, carriage, skull, hair, skin color, and so on...The white man was the 'primeval' type and stood at the center; but there was no indication that he was on top."<sup>12</sup> Subsequent natural philosophers developed the concept of the Great Chain of Being to create and refine racial groups into a hierarchy of mankind. Whites were said to be made in the image of God while blacks occupied

the lowest rung of the great chain, closer to the animal kingdom than to God.

## Creating a white nation

Racial policies of white supremacy, Indian genocide and African enslavement had been evolving for over 175 years by the time the nation won independence from Britain in 1784. One of the first acts by the new nation, the Naturalization Act of 1790, made clear the Founders' intentions. As historian Ronald Takaki explains in *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, the Act affirmed the Founding Fathers'

...determination to develop a citizenry of good and "useful" men. Only the "worthy part of mankind" would be...eligible for citizenship...They also had to be "white"...The Naturalization Act excluded from citizenship not only nonwhite immigrants but also a group of people already here — Indians...As domestic "foreigners," Native Americans could not seek naturalized citizenship, for they were not "white."<sup>13</sup>

Why would this be one of the earliest legislative acts of the new nation? To understand, one needs to go back to a papal edict called the "Doctrine of Discovery," put forth by Pope Alexander VI in 1493. The Doctrine of Discovery played out in different ways in the Western Hemisphere. In the southern portion of the Americas, lands and people were set upon and conquered by European explorers. The conquering nations, in the main, did not seek to inhabit, but solely to plunder lands for their riches. The inhabitants of these lands were mere obstacles that got in the way of the conquerors' primary purpose. This conquest, first by Portugal and then Spain and later England, France and the Netherlands, impacted all of the Caribbean peoples and eventually included all countries in what is now Central and South America. This conquering strategy created a mestizo (mixed race) people throughout Central and South America, although it was achieved primarily through force of arms and the brute force of rape.

The Doctrine of Discovery empowered Columbus and his cohorts to claim all lands and peoples found by them in the name of Christ and His Church. This Doctrine was worldwide. It gave broad latitude to European explorers to use any means necessary to conquer the lands and their peoples. It included the right to claim the land's min-

erals, especially gold, silver, copper and tin. Indigenous artifacts, however precious or sacred to those whose lands were vulnerable to discovery, were there for the taking.

Even in Australia, organized by England as a penal colony in the 1700s, whites used *terra nullius*, a variation of the Discovery Doctrine, to declare the land unoccupied and therefore free for exploitation.<sup>14</sup> In the North American colonies, Europeans *settled*. Most who came decided to stay. Unlike the conquistadors of Latin America, they planned to establish themselves and raise families. Their labor was essential to the colonies' economic development. In some of these North American colonies importation of Africans to work the land was crucial because of the extreme heat and humidity to which poor whites were not acclimated. The use of Indians as laborers was not successful because of their familiarity with the terrain and thus their propensity to flee. English colonists did not see their efforts as simply reflecting a military campaign even though military might was a primary means by which the indigenous would be removed from the land. European women were colonists from the earliest seventeenth century.

The United States was to be a white nation, not mestizo. The Founding Fathers attempted to ensure its racial purity by federal mandate. As Benjamin Franklin explained in his 1751 *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind*:

...the Number of purely white People in the World is proportionably [*sic*] very small...I could wish their Numbers were increased...Why increase the Sons of Africa, by Planting them in America, where we have so fair an Opportunity, by excluding all Blacks and Tawneys, of increasing the lovely White and Red?<sup>15</sup>

At the same time that colonial America was organizing itself into a United States, "race" was attaining a scientific status, with terms like *Caucasoid*, *Mongoloid* and *Negroid* invented to classify humankind and determine which peoples were from "civilized" nations and which people were thought to be "uncivilized," such as "Indians," or not even human, like the enslaved Negro. People in the emerging United States were color-coded—white, yellow, red and black — according to this new science. The system of racial stratification guaranteed that race would undermine any efforts to organize across class lines. Europeans, as they became Americans, might still be poor, but they would not be colored. White, as a legal and preferred status, would apply to any white

person whether rich or poor, male or female, child or adult. Whites, in this racial pecking order, were considered full human beings. This social contract for white people was both an individual and systemic phenomenon. It came to be called the American Way of Life.

White was normative. White was universal in its application. Noted scholar and American culturalist Allan Bloom spoke of the Constitution, but without Kly's understanding of the "anti-social contract," when he wrote:

The Constitution was not just a set of rules of government but implied a moral order that was to be enforced throughout the entire union...The dominant majority gave the country a dominant culture with its traditions, its literature, its facts, its special claim to know and supervise language and its protestant religions...The American revolution instituted this system of government for Americans, who in general were satisfied with the result and had a pretty clear view of what they had done.<sup>16</sup>

This was true, that is, if you were white and *ipso facto* part of the dominant culture. Bloom describes the social contract. It was between whites or Americans and their government. If you were "Indian" or "Negro," you were part of Kly's "anti-social contract."

The race construct in the United States originally was triangular, involving whites, "Negroes" and "Indians." After the Indian populations had been reduced to such numbers that they were no longer considered a threat to the peace of the nation, blacks occupied the outermost fringes of the racial construct. This racial hierarchy, as it evolved, would expand to include those considered to be of the "yellow" or "Asiatic" races. Chinese men, imported periodically in the nineteenth century as their labor was needed, were expelled when their work was done. After the Mexican War ended in 1848, the race construct would include Mexicans. Later still, after the 1898 Spanish-American War, it would include Puerto Ricans and Filipinos. But white would always remain at the top — to be protected and affirmed at all costs.

White was a way of brokering class privilege. The Naturalization Act of 1790 was not about social class but about race as class. It said that only free white persons might immigrate to the US and begin the process of becoming citizens. Time and again over the next century and a half, in a stream of court decisions and government regulations, the US would preference "white" over "colored" to such an extent that "white people" became synonymous with what it meant to be "Amer-

ican.” Conversely, to be “colored” was to mark one’s status as of minor significance in national law and thus in national lore.

The Naturalization Act of 1790 would remain law, with variations and exceptions, until the Immigration and Nationality Act (McCarran Act) was passed in 1952. The 1790 racial exclusionary act would be the primary reason the US would become an overwhelmingly white majority nation. Thomas Jefferson, envisioning the nation’s future, wrote,

It is impossible to not look forward to distant times, when our rapid multiplication will expand itself...and cover the whole northern, if not the southern continent, with a people speaking the same language, governed in similar forms, and by similar laws; nor can we contemplate with satisfaction either blot or mixture on that surface.<sup>17</sup>

Many whites — indentured servants, factory workers, prisoners, tenant farmers, poor women — in a nation “where all men are created equal,” felt they were not treated as such. But “race” is a political concept and “white” a term used to create a contrast with those “less than fully human” — originally Indians and Negroes. As the new nation constructed and sanctioned its systems and institutions, people designated white had access to those systems and institutions. People of color did not.

## CHAPTER 2

### Expanding Whiteness

*Had I been asked as a child growing up in either McComb or Helena, “Who lives here?” I would have responded, “Well, white people, colored people, Jews, Italians and a few Chinese.” Had my children been asked the same question a generation later, they might have responded quite differently and said, “Well, white people, black or African Americans, a growing number of Latinos or Hispanic people, and some Asian Americans.” What happened to the Jews and Italians one might ask? They had become “white.” Had they been asked? No, at least not personally. But, they were now needed. Dr. Michael Washington, a People’s Institute Core Trainer and a co-founder of the Black History Department at Northern Kentucky University was the first person I heard use the phrase “becoming white.” This fascinated and intrigued me. This would have been in the early 1980s. By 1997 at U.C. Berkeley a conference on “The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness” attracted over 1,000 scholars and “white studies” was becoming a national phenomenon among progressives across the country. Well, really, just among academics, which is why it always frustrates me. Outside academia, white privilege had been studied for at least 25 years or even more. Maybe it is because I am not considered an academic and am jealous about their presumptive standard setting. Even among progressives there seems to be this phenomenon that something is not real until it is validated by those teaching and researching in higher education circles. At this same conference I remember long-time activist and leftist Sharon Martinas challenged those at the head table about this, saying if they were organizers they would have been studying whiteness and that there were groups like the People’s Institute out*