

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*

*there doing it. Nothing ever changes in this regard. Academia still gives its blessing on what is real and what is not, which is why when writing, one has to cite an academic as verification on any claim or statement made. Actually, academics are a bastion of white supremacist thought and practice, in my experience. Ask any person of color who is teaching in one of our great universities. I was there as an observer, sitting among those listening to the professors and other notables, but at the same time bristling a bit on not being recognized as one of those about whom Sharon Martin spoke. She was also one of those long-time movement members who organized continuously around issues of white supremacy, white hegemony and how we, as whites, intrude on movement-building led by people of color. I had met Sharon only a few years before, but we bonded over our similar experiences organizing on the left and in other white radical circles. We stay close today.*

*The quixotic and ever-changing nature of whiteness came clear to me a number of years ago when I applied for work at an historically black public university. I thought, somewhat ironically, that my being white would be to my advantage. What else is new, you might ask? But it turns out that this advantage would not be for the usual reasons. I was eager to check the box marked "white," hoping to add to their "diversity" statistics. Here is how I found "white" defined on the employment application: "A person from any of the original nations of Europe, North Africa, or the Middle East." "Whoa!" I thought to myself. "From North Africa? The Middle East? What was this about?" A colleague clued me in. She said, "It must be like this in order for white supremacy to be faithful to its claim that white is the highest form of humanity. North Africa is white because Egyptian pyramids are one of the greatest wonders of the world. The Middle East has to be white because the Tigris and Euphrates rivers flow through this 'cradle of civilization' and, of course, Jesus was born and lived there all his life." Race has always served as a hierarchy establishing who is superior to whom in this world. There are two constants, however. Whites are always on top and blacks are always on the bottom.*

*This is changing in the aftermath of the destruction in 2001 of the Twin Towers in New York City and the rise of militant Islam. The census people are considering "MENA" as a category. MENA stands for Middle East/North Africa. This race stuff continues to be tricky and malleable. It changes shape as it needs to and always to the benefit of white supremacy.*

## Left out of the contract

African enslavement in the Americas is unique in historical annals. It represents for the first time a people removed from the context of humankind and made chattel. It differs from historical forms of slavery enforced through warfare over the generations where one might eventually find release and sometimes even assimilation into the society of one's captors. The status of Africans in North America and thus in what became the United States was permanent, lifetime servitude. It was not subject to change for it was God-ordained. It was a "peculiar institution," one that theologians, economists, politicians and scientists would deem "natural." It was not debatable. At the time of the ratification of the Constitution in 1787, enslavement was such a permanent fixture in the minds of those who framed the nation's foundational laws that those who opposed it and predicted its ultimate destructive power lost the political debate. The Constitution did not prohibit nor outlaw slavery. It took almost another century to finally end it.

African peoples captured and enslaved in the Americas would die in the millions during the European transatlantic trade between the mid-sixteenth century and the end of the nineteenth century. The enslavement of Africans would not end in Brazil, where vast numbers of Africans were transported, until 1888. Death tolls were enormous prior to the Middle Passage as many Africans were murdered or died from other causes like tribal warfare, religious struggles, illness or exposure to the elements as they were kidnapped, driven, then crammed together on the death vessels called "slave ships." Millions more Africans and African Americans were sold "down the river" to enrich the expanding plantation economy even after the international slave trade was abolished in the US in 1808. Most enslaved Africans were young people in their teens and early twenties. That fact constitutes yet another lesson, so obvious once told to me by my colleague Monica Dennis, but one never mentioned to me and generations of children. Stolen young people were just entering their adulthood. Teens, especially boys, who had not yet reached their full physical strength, were ripped from their families and cast into the abyss. If they survived the voyage, they might survive a year or ten years, depending on the nature of the work they were compelled to do. As they reached puberty young men and women would become mothers and fathers to other workers. By thirty years of age, most were dead. Thirty was

old. The movies depict enslaved Africans as old. Maybe they just looked old.

The legal status of white, Indian and black people determined how the United States constructed its social mores and built its national systems. For example, as historian Jordan explains, “In 1806 Virginia restricted the right of masters to manumit [free] their slaves. [It] effectively prevented benevolent masters from providing manumitted slaves with the one endowment they most needed—land.”<sup>1</sup> “Might the poor Indian warrant standing before the law?” The answer was NO! Indians, not taxed, did not count. “The only good Indian is a dead Indian,” as General Phil Sheridan boasted and Americans came to understand. “What about the Negro?” many lamented. “Is a Negro not a human being?” Again, the answer was NO! Negroes were but 3/5 of a human being for purposes of representation only, Congress concluded. The fundamental question was: If blacks are 3/5 human, then who is fully human? The answer is implicit in the social contract. Only white people (men, women and children) are full human beings. In 1857, Supreme Court Justice Roger B. Taney reaffirmed this point in the famous Dred Scot case. Taney declared in *Scot v. Sanford* that Dred Scot, an enslaved African, had “no rights a white man need respect.” The personhood of Dred Scot was found to not be legitimate. This white supremacist ruling did not say Dred Scot could be disrespected only by rich white people, but rather used the more inclusive racial category “white” — men, women and children included. Regardless of the Declaration of Independence, with its statement “All men are created equal,” Chief Justice Taney reasoned that black people were “not intended to be included” because they formed “no part of the people who framed and adopted this Declaration.” According to Taney, only white people were ever protected under the Constitution because only white people “would have represented the Founders’ make-up and intent.” The social contract existed between the United States government, its Constitution, and white people.

The wealth created by the enslavement policies of the United States helped finance the East Coast banking system, fueled the great western advance of the nation and undergirded its manufacturing/industrial revolution. America’s twin pillars of wealth — free land from Indian nations and the free labor of enslaved Africans — produced great riches for the nation’s white citizenry. Most of the profits from

the export of cotton around the world in the years between the ratification of the Constitution and the end of the enslavement period would eventually find their way into the Northern financial centers of Philadelphia, New York and Boston, although the ownership class in the South included far more millionaires than the Northern part of the country. “[It is] estimated that slaves accounted for about 15% of all privately owned assets in the United States before the Civil War, totaling over \$3 billion in 1860. Another calculated the value of slaves’ unpaid wages as \$1.4 trillion, adjusted for inflation up to 1990, or \$56,000 each if divided among twenty-five million African Americans.”<sup>2</sup>

When history is understood in this light, the argument for reparations — “repaying” African Americans in some measure for their centuries of unpaid labor — becomes indisputable. One often hears from whites, “My people didn’t own slaves.” Yet there is no piece of land or labor that anyone owns today in the United States that can’t be traced back to those who did. The wealth created by subjugation of black labor and the expropriation of Indian land is less than “six-degrees of separation” from every American.

As enslavement of Africans expanded and took root, the cruelties of slavery inevitably produced a sense of disassociation:

To the horrified witness of a scene of torture, the victim becomes a “poor devil” a “mangled creature.” He is no longer a man. He can no longer be human because to credit him with one’s own human attributes would be too horrible.<sup>3</sup>

Black and Native American men were treated as prey in the new nation. It was not until the Indian was near extinction that the Indian warrior was romanticized and memorialized in the nation’s mythology. Prior to the 1880s, the Indian was often hunted like buffalo and elk. Similarly, the fear of the black man has been central to the white psyche since the first ship of enslaved Africans docked in the Americas. Far from enjoying privileged status as males in the United States, black men have had to survive the most heinous forms of degradation and dehumanization at the hands of white people. The looks of almost sexualized rapture on the faces of whites (men, women and even children) in photographs of black male lynchings were not exclusive to poor whites or just white males. Race was the one unifying factor among the white populace. And it existed only in relationship to its opposites — red and black.

Such manifestations of a “hunted” people lasted well into the twentieth century. James Weldon Johnson described a 1917 Memphis lynching thus:

Early on the morning of May 22, a mob of men boarded the train outside of Memphis, took the prisoner [Ell Parsons] from the deputies and brought him to the place that had been prepared for the lynching. The press reported that a crowd of fifteen thousand — men, women, and children from counties throughout Tennessee and in Mississippi — gathered after daybreak. They tied Parsons to a tree, doused him with gasoline, and lit a fire. His body was consumed by flames as onlookers “fought and screamed and crowded to get a glimpse.” A woman protested, “They burned him too quick!” and the complaint echoed across the mob. Two men hacked off the ears of the burnt corpse, another severed the head, and others pinched souvenirs from the remains.<sup>4</sup>

Africans were enslaved in the United States one hundred sixty-eight years before the Constitution was ratified and two hundred forty-six years before the Thirteenth Amendment was passed. They were kept in “slavery by another name,” as newspaperman Douglas Blackmon names it, for another 100 years. Thus, Africans in America were ruled by legally sanctioned white supremacy for three hundred forty-six years before the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was signed by President Lyndon Johnson.

Creating white people was possible only in contrast to and comparison with people of color, especially red and black people. White was created to bond people from the European nations together in a way that produced wealth and social status for them.

## Legitimizing whiteness

This country’s social contract was between its white citizenry and its Constitution as interpreted by the courts, the Congress and the President. To those who protest that these racial categories have been consigned to the dustbins of history, the disproportionate outcomes speak for themselves. Each of the systems that undergird the nation’s social order is rooted in the 360 years of legalized white supremacy (roughly 1607 – 1967). Each of these systems is rooted in the institutional worldview and ethos developed during the centuries when Indians were “removed” and Black people were enslaved and then separated as “unequal.”

The Irish represented an interesting challenge to the myth of white superiority when they began to immigrate to the United States in the early nineteenth century. The historic enmity between English and Irish — rooted in 700 years of warfare, mistrust and hatred — meant that English saw the Irish as a mongrel race, boorish and slovenly in their habits. The “paddy” wagon would be so designated since it was used nightly to round up Irish men and women and throw them in jail for vagrancy or public drunkenness. But by the 1850s, as they continued to migrate by the hundreds of thousands to the United States, the Irish were becoming white. Ironically, given their long history of animosity with the English, many Irish would become buffers between white Anglo Protestants and all manner of other, less desirable white people as well as Indians and blacks. Irish would be laborers for the most part in America. Risking their hearing and even their lives, they would take jobs building the great bridges and subways of New York City and levees and canals around New Orleans. It was the Irish men who laid track along the eastern portion of the intercontinental railroad, meeting the Chinese who were building from the western slopes of the Rockies. This buffer role made the Irish natural civil servants, especially in the developing city police forces. The Irish cop and later political ward heeler as well as the Irish priest would be keepers of the status quo, prominent gatekeepers maintaining the country’s racial arrangement.

Within communities of people designated as white, where no race designations were in play, whites divided along many different dimensions such as gender, class, ethnicity, religion, even region of the country. White women’s role in the race-constructed nation would be a complex one, encouraged by the 1790 Naturalization Act which allowed “only free white persons,” even women, to become citizens, albeit second class ones. White women had privileged status when compared to both men and women of color dating back to the origins of the nation. Yet poor white women lived lives of brutal drudgery, especially if they were immigrants and unmarried. Their lives were a never-ending round of hard work, child rearing, and white male domination. Their wages were meager. Benefits such as holidays and maternity leave were unheard of, and chances of advancement were a pipe dream. Conditions were so bad for most that many would jump at an opportunity to move westward with a husband to set up stakes, although life on the “frontier” was often back-breaking, dangerous, and emotionally starved. Marriage in the early stages of nation-building was often the result of economics

and required hard work from both partners. Children became extra hands around the farm, in the mill or wherever they could be used to help support the family.

All the while institutions were being developed, which both shaped and defined persons' lives in the United States. Textbooks, though making scant mention of anyone beyond white male presidents, adventurers and military leaders, still describe a society whose white people were fully human. Poor white men could aspire to become President and white women could inherit Africans held as slaves and all were guaranteed due process of law under the Constitution. Whites could own property, move wherever they could afford, cross state lines without a pass, move westward and be granted 160 acres of land, and get paid for services rendered. And whites could own other people — people of African descent. White men were rarely charged with rape of any woman and never for the rape of a black woman. White women and men could accuse black men and women of a crime and black people could not defend themselves in court in most jurisdictions in the United States. White women could not vote for the first one hundred thirty years after the ratification of the Constitution, but could nurture their white sons to do so knowing that they would grow up to defend the white supremacist society. This pattern follows whites throughout the history of the United States into the present day. Whites are the real Americans. Others are mere add-ons. This is our country.

## Whiteness as Manifest Destiny

*Jim Dunn used to say, "Being white is like the American Express card. You never leave home without it." And the wealthier you are and the more degrees you have, the more freedom of movement one has as a white person. We are like the TV character Kung Fu: We walk the earth. Poor white people leave home less often than those who possess credentials, but at home we are protected most of the time even when we don't see it out there. When I was working in the St. Thomas Housing Development in New Orleans or visiting the Lafitte Projects in Tremé, many eyes were on me. I felt them. What I know now is that those eyes were looking out for me, not following or threatening to me. What the residents knew that I did not at first was if something happened to me, they would be held responsible for my actions, not me. This has happened to me time and again.*

*One evening I was speaking to a white church congregation in Metairie in a suburb of New Orleans and doing my usual spiel about my work in New Orleans and how I was called by the Lord to do this type of work and how this was the true mission of United Methodists and try as I would to not make me the center of attention, it always came back to me and I developed a reputation as a minister to the poor and oppressed. That's how I saw it anyway. On this particular evening some members of a group called Black Men United for Change came with me and on the way back I was chastised for this. I feigned ignorance, but I knew what they were saying: "You made it appear as if you were Tarzan saving black folks at the risk of your own life." "You're the safest person in St. Thomas. If something happened to you we would all have hell to pay." I knew this and I had been caught. It was not the first time and probably not the last time either. An elder in the Tremé community asked me to come speak to her early in my career as a community church person and she asked me point blank, "Why are you here?" I told her because Jesus had called me to serve the poor. She said back to me. "I knew you were going to say that." "Tell me," she said, "Why doesn't your Jesus ever call any of us to go wherever you came from." Touché. She had me. I could go with institutional backing and cultural support wherever I chose; she could not. The thought was ludicrous. I was white and she was not. It was not my degrees or expertise, or even Jesus that called me, but Manifest Destiny.*

In July 1845, the New York newspaper editor John L. O'Sullivan coined the phrase "Manifest Destiny" to explain how the "design of Providence" supported the territorial expansion of the United States.<sup>5</sup> Millions from across Europe emigrated to the United States between 1800 and 1920. Even as white women, poor whites (both men and women), immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, and Jews from all over Europe faced persistent discrimination and marginalization in every aspect of their lives, they were given citizenship — made white.

The concept of Manifest Destiny gained popularity as the country continued its westward push to the Pacific. It was a term that evoked God's blessings on removing the Indians from the land and seizing more than half of Mexico. It explained white supremacy as a civilizing force as the white nation increasingly interacted with peoples of color. Those persons who agreed to "settle" wherever their wagons brought them became the backbone of America. In the mid-1850s, as differ-

ences over slavery engulfed the nation, the struggle over “free soil” in the West came to prominence. White farmers opposed the extension of slavery into Western territories for fear of competition from large plantation owners with enslaved blacks. In 1857, the US Land Office denied public land grants to African Americans. Yet in 1862, during the Civil War (thus without the Southern states), President Lincoln signed the Homestead Act offering 160 acres of land to any qualified homesteader. The term “qualified” was key. Only citizens or those persons applying for citizenship were eligible. Since black people did not become citizens until the Fourteenth Amendment was ratified in 1868, few were able to take early advantage of the Act. Historians at the Homestead National Monument in Beatrice, Nebraska, estimate that 93 million Americans living today are beneficiaries of the Homestead Act.

Poor white men and white women were dirt farmers and assembly line workers, small town haberdashers or store clerks. They populated the factory and mill towns of rural America as well as big cities. Small town preachers and teachers, the family doctor and the town’s attorney blessed and certified the ongoing racial arrangement. While some white individuals took umbrage at the way “Indians” were treated, or decried how “Negroes” were forced to bow and scrape before white people, such doubts were sidelined by the immediate need to make a living. The assumption that “that’s just the way things are” became part of the racial vernacular of the United States. “Things” meant black people or Indians in one part of the country, Mexicans or Chinese in another, Japanese and Puerto Ricans on the coasts. Nowhere in America did people live with equity across lines of race.

Whites and Indians could cohabit and their offspring could still be white, although only as an extremely marginalized and much-despised “half-breed” version of white. Whites and Negroes, on the other hand, were forbidden by law in much of the nation from marrying. Offspring of whites and blacks were almost always stultified as black. The law varied slightly from state to state. In fact, in the popular mindset white could not prevail if even a drop of “Negro blood” was determined to be present by the guardians of white racial purity. This is the infamous “one drop” rule. This arbitrary and capricious method of determining “Who is black?” remains a social control mechanism even today. It is neither scientific nor logical. Race cannot be determined by blood quantum.

As recently as 1977, a Louisiana woman named Susie Guillory Phipps sued the State of Louisiana because her birth certificate was marked with a “C” for colored. She said she was white and always had been. Phipps declared “I am white. I was raised as a white child. I went to white schools. I married white twice.” This was to no avail. By Louisiana standards a check of her genealogical records found her to be 3/32 “Negro,” dating back to an Alabama liaison between a white slave owner and a black woman enslaved on a plantation in the mid 1770s. By Louisiana’s “one drop” rule, Phipps was “Colored.” The US Supreme Court refused to hear the case, ruling that “race” was a matter of state law!<sup>6</sup>

Chinese immigrants had been in America since the early nineteenth Century. Yet all Asian peoples were collectivized as “other” in America, their many ethnic and cultural differences erased by the dominant white culture. Chinese and Japanese laborers, admitted to the US on work visas in the mid-nineteenth century, were regularly expelled as the need for their labor ended. All Chinese were banished by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Ultimately, in 1924, Chinese, Japanese and all other “unassimilable Asiatics” were barred by federal law from immigrating to the US.

This combination of citizenship for whites only, the expression of God’s will through Manifest Destiny, and the race-constructed and color-coded racial pecking order, solidified the white supremacist state, even after our nation fought a calamitous war over slavery.