

color helps to counteract that effect. Instead of being color neutral we need to notice much more acutely and insightfully exactly the difference that color makes in the way people are treated.

Just as it's not useful to label ourselves racist or not, it is not useful to label each other. White people, individually and collectively, have done and continue to do some very brutal things in the name of whiteness. We may want to separate ourselves from the white people who commit these acts by claiming that they are racist and we are not. But because racism operates institutionally, to the benefit of all white people, we are connected to the acts of other white people.

Of course we're not members of the Klan or other extremist groups. Of course we watch what we say and don't make rude racial comments. But dissociating from white people who do is not the answer. We need to dissociate from their actions and challenge their beliefs. We can't challenge them, or even speak to them if we have separated ourselves from them, creating some magical line with the racists on that side and ourselves over here. This division leads to an ineffective strategy of trying to pull as many people as possible over to our (non-racist and therefore superior) side. Other white people will listen to us better, and be more influenced by our actions when we identify with them. Then we can explore how to work from the inside out together.

Perhaps most importantly, the people who are more visibly saying or doing things that are racist are usually more scared, more confused and less powerful than we are. (Or they are trying to increase their own power by manipulating racial fears.) It is often amazing how, when we get scared, confused or powerless, we do and say the very same things. Since racism leads to scapegoating people of color for social and personal problems, we are all susceptible to resorting to racial scapegoating in times of trouble. Visible acts of racism are, at least in part, an indication of the lack of power that a white person or group of people have to camouflage their actions. More powerful and well off people can simply move to segregated neighborhoods, or make corporate decisions that are harder to see and analyze as contributing to racism. Since the racism of the wealthy is less visible to us, those of us who are middle class can inadvertently scapegoat poor and working class white people for being more overtly racist.

We do need to confront words and actions which are racist when we encounter them because they create an atmosphere of violence in which all of us are unsafe. We also need to understand that most white people are doing the best they can to survive. Overtly racist people are scared, and lack the information and skills to be more tolerant. We need to challenge their behavior, not their moral integrity. We also need to be careful that we don't end up carrying out an upper class agenda by blaming poor and working people for being racist when people with wealth control the media, the textbooks, the housing and job markets and the police. We need to stay focused on the institutions themselves.

What is Whiteness?

RACISM IS BASED on the concept of whiteness—a powerful fiction enforced by power and violence. Whiteness is a constantly shifting boundary separating those who are entitled to have certain privileges from those whose exploitation and vulnerability to violence is justified by their not being white.

Racism itself is a long standing characteristic of many human societies. Justifying exploitation and violence against other peoples because they are “inferior” or different has a long history within Greek, Roman and European Christian traditions.

In more recent historical times in western Europe those with English heritage were perceived to be pure white. The Irish, Russians and Spanish were considered darker races, sometimes black, and certainly non-white. The white category was slowly extended to include northern and middle European people but still even fifty years ago definitely excluded eastern or southern European peoples, such as Italians, Poles, Russians and Greeks. In the last few decades, although there is still prejudice against people from these geographical backgrounds, they have become generally accepted as white in the United States.*

The important distinction in the United States has always been binary—between those who counted as white and those who did not. Drawing on already established “popular” classifications, whiteness was delineated more clearly in the United States in the 18th Century as slavery was introduced and distinguished from various forms of shorter term servitude.

Although a racial hierarchy was in place from the time of the earliest European settlers, racism was only defined “scientifically” as a

* In some northern and western European countries there are still strong and abusive patterns of racism against southern and eastern Europeans.

biological/genetic characteristic about one hundred and fifty years ago with the publication of Darwin's theory of species modification and Linnaeus' system of classification. These ideas were combined by others into a pseudo-scientific theory, eventually called Social Darwinism, which attempted to classify the human population into distinct categories or races and put them on an evolutionary scale with whites on top.

The original classification consisted of three categories—Caucasoid, Negroid and Mongoloid. These were not based on genetic differences, but on differences that Europeans and European Americans perceived to be important. They were in fact based on stereotypes of cultural differences and (mis)measures of physiological characteristics such as skull size (Gould 1981).

From the beginning the attempt to classify people by race was fraught with contradictions. Latin Americans, Native Americans, and Jewish people did not fit easily into these categories so the categories were variously stretched, redefined or adapted to meet the agenda of the Europeans and Americans who were using them.

For example, in the last century Finns were doing most of the lowest paid, unsafe mining and lumbering work in the upper mid-west. Although logically they were white, in terms of political, cultural and economic "common sense" they were black because they were the poorest and least respected group in the area besides Native Americans. The courts consistently ruled that they were not white, despite their skin color, because of their cultural and economic standing.

On the west coast, during the Constitutional debates in California in 1848–9, there was discussion about the status of Mexicans and Chinese. There were still Mexicans who were wealthy landowners and business partners with whites, while the Chinese were exclusively heavily exploited railroad and agricultural workers. It was eventually decided that Mexicans would be considered white and Chinese would be considered the same as blacks and Indians. This decision established which group could become citizens, own land, marry whites and have other basic rights (Almaguer, pps. 9–10, 54).

Today people of Finnish background are considered white, Latino/as are considered not white and Chinese Americans are conditionally white at times, not white at others, but clearly different from Blacks and Native Americans.

There was a complex and dynamic interplay between the popular conception of race and the scientific categories, neither of which was grounded in physiological or biological reality, but both of which carried great emotional import to "white" people and devastating consequences to "people of color," regardless of how they were being defined.

Although a few scientists still try to prove the existence of races, most scientists have long ago abandoned the use of race as a valid category at all. Human variability is so large and so widely dispersed that no particular racial groupings or distinctions are useful or justified. There is tremendous genetic difference or

variation within "racial" groupings and huge overlap between them, making the categories themselves useless (Harding, section 2 "Science Constructs Race").

Genetic differences among humans can be explained by the distribution of genetic variables and don't correspond with any useful category of race defined genetically, by skin color or any other physical characteristic. That hasn't stopped many people from believing that distinct races exist and from trying to use scientific language to buttress their arguments. (For cogent refutations see Gould, Lewin, et al., and Goldberg.)

There is likewise no scientific (i.e. biological or genetic) basis to the concept of whiteness. There is nothing scientifically distinctive about it except skin color, and that is highly variable. All common wisdom notwithstanding, the skin color of a person tells you nothing about their culture, country of origin, character or personal habits. Because there is nothing biological about whiteness, it ends up being defined by contrast to other groups, becoming confused with ideas of nationality, religion and ethnicity.

For example, Jewish people are not a "racial" grouping. Jewish people share cultural and religious beliefs and practices but come from every continent and many different cultural backgrounds. Jews range in skin color from "white" to dark brown. Because race was falsely assumed to be a scientific category, being Jewish has often been assumed to mean that a Jew is genetically different than non-Jewish people.

I grew up learning that racial categories were scientifically valid and gave us useful information about ourselves and other people. In other words, racism had a scientific stamp of approval. It is difficult for me to let go of the certainty I thought I had gained about what racial difference meant. And, of course, there are always new attempts to prove to us that race means something. (See Fraser, Lewontin, et al., and Gould.)

What residual doubts do you have that there may be something genetic or biological about racial differences? ("But, what about...?") How can you respond to people who say that there are specific differences between "races"?

I began to understand the artificial nature of racial categories more clearly when I examined how moral qualities were attached to racial differences. This confirmed my suspicion that there was a political, not a scientific agenda at work in these distinctions.

The lack of a physical difference attached to whiteness hasn't prevented many people from assuming that they know what whiteness is, or what it is different from. Although some of these associations have changed or have had different prominence over time, they have generally been linked to moral qualities. These moral qualities have, in turn, been used to justify various forms of exploitation.

From the old phrase referring to a good deed, "That's white of you," to the New Age practice of visualizing oneself surrounded by white light, white has signified honor, purity, cleanliness and Godliness in white western European and mainstream U.S. culture. Because concepts of whiteness and race were developed in Christian Europe, references to whiteness are imbued with Christian values. We have ended up with a set of opposing qualities or attributes which are said to define people either as white or as not white.

The tendency to see the world in sets of opposites, either/or categories, is itself a core pattern of thinking developed in elite settings in Western Europe and the United States. Many other cultures do not divide the world into opposing camps. The English phrase "black-and-white" reflects our desire to divide things into opposites even though everyday reality is rarely clearly defined or neatly categorized. Classical Greek either/or logic and a Christian theology of good versus evil were combined to impose a good/bad set of values based on selected categories of racial difference. Some of the most common pairings are listed below.

*"Dark" Qualities**"White" Qualities*

superstitious	scientific
subhuman	human
crazy	sane
immoral	moral
animalistic	god-like
tainted	pure
abnormal	normal
emotional/angry	calm
primitive/uncivilized/ barbaric/savage	civilized
prone to dishonesty	well intentioned/decent
subversive	upholder of tradition
satanic	angelic
pagan	Christian
malicious	loving
godless	god fearing, wholesome
rude	polite
evil	benign
low class	middle class
crude/brutish	refined
demanding	restrained
intellectually inferior	intelligent
impulsive	thoughtful
traitor	patriot
fanciful	level-headed

weak link	strong specimen
lacking self control	prudent
manipulative	sincere
irrational	rational
radical	conservative
undignified	respectable
sinful	innocent
out of control	in control
impure/contaminated	pure
tainted/poisonous	innocuous/harmless
dirty	clean
illegal	legal/law abiding
needing permission	authorized
soulless/damned	saved
fringe/marginal	center
subjective	objective, detached
wild	calm
sexual/wanton	chaste
colorful	bland
disorganized	orderly
inefficient	effective
rebellious	upholder of tradition
traditional	modern
impatient	patient
self-righteous	righteous
rhythmic	stiff
devious	straightforward
promiscuous	committed
cloudy	clear
disease carrying	healthy
present time oriented	future oriented
un-American	American
dark	fair, blond

Which words in each pair do you associate with white people? Which words on the left do you use to discount people of color's demands for fair and equal treatment ("they are too..."), or to blame them for how they are treated in our society ("If they weren't so...")?

Qualities not associated with whiteness have been given negative meanings. They have become associated not only with people of color but also with children, workers, lesbians, gays and bi-sexuals, Jews and heterosexual white women; just those groups excluded from the political and scientific institutions that defined what normal should be.

In reality, individual character traits don't have anything to do with skin color, cultural background, age, gender, class or sexual orientation. The personalities and character of members of any cultural group are highly variable. Each of these polarities, however, encodes part of the historical meaning of whiteness to white people. The confirmation of our moral superiority allows us to justify a racial hierarchy with white people on top.

Not all white people had an equal voice in defining racial differences. Those with most power—who had the most to gain or preserve—set the terms. White landowners, church leaders—the educated and successful—systematically, though not collusively, defined whiteness in ways that extolled and legitimized their actions and denigrated others'.

These meanings are now many hundreds of years old. Today, none of us escapes the traps, lies and emotional resonances of these dichotomies. They are passed on to us from parents, school, literature, TV and the movies. It is difficult for any of us, powerful or less powerful, to dissociate "positive" qualities from white people and "negative" ones from people of color no matter how "color blind" we would like to be.

White people who have challenged racism and the false dichotomies upon which it is based have been labeled in various ways to show that they don't really belong to the white group. Labels such as "nigger lover," "race traitor," "un-American," "feminist," "liberal," "Communist," "unchristian," "Jew," "fag," "lesbian," "crazy," "terrorist" and "thought police" have all been used to isolate and discredit people and to imply that they are somehow outside the territory of whiteness and therefore justifiably attacked. We can see from the moral virtues attached to whiteness that only those who are white will be able to speak with authority. A powerful way to discredit any critique of whiteness or racism is to discredit the speaker by showing that they are not really white. This is a neat, circular convention which stifles any serious discussion of what whiteness means and what effect it has on people.

This leaves most of us who are white on pretty shaky ground. If we even point attention to whiteness and racism we risk being labeled not really white or a traitor to our "race." These accusations discredit our testimony and potentially lose us some of the benefits of being white such as better jobs and police protection from violence. Behind the names lies the threat of physical and sexual violence such as ostracization, firing, silencing, condemnation to hell, institutionalization, incarceration, deportation, rape, lynching and other forms of mob violence that have been used to protect white power and privilege.

We could usefully spend some time exploring the history and meaning of any particular pair of words on the list above. I encourage you to do so. Each one reveals some vital aspect of whiteness and racism. Here I want to point out four concepts that many of these words cluster around: purity, Christian, American and gender.

Appeals to group solidarity, particularly in the last two hundred and fifty years during which political concepts of the nation-state have developed, have often focused on the "racial" purity of some particular group of people. In different European countries, in the United States, in Australia and South Africa, white people have attempted to claim a purity of racial stock and a genetic superiority which entitled them to control the land and other people around them in a particular geographical area. (Other groups of people have done the same thing; racism is by no means exclusive to white people.) They have then set up economic and psychological boundaries to participation in that society for people defined as "other." People of color, Jews, Romany (often misnamed Gypsies), people with physical or mental disabilities, homosexuals, Irish, southern Europeans, Slavic peoples, the poor—each group has been defined as outsiders who could contaminate white racial purity and the strength of the nation-state through corruption, contagion and disease, dirt and uncleanness, and intermarriage. Segregation, anti-miscegenation laws, medical experimentation, concentration camps and extermination have all been used at times to "cleanse" and "protect" whiteness and national identity. White people have considered anyone with even 1 percent African-American, Native, or Latino/a "blood" to be impure, not white, alien. The Nazis considered people to be Jewish if they had even one great-grandparent who was Jewish. Many of our fears today about intermarriage and mixed heritage children stem from these old misconceptions about racial difference and racial purity.

Another cluster of concepts and practices of whiteness centers around Christianity. Whiteness has often been equated with being a Christian in juxtaposition to being a pagan, infidel, witch, heathen, Jew, Moslem, Native American, Buddhist or atheist. Racial violence has been justified by a stated need to protect Christian families and homes. Pogroms, crusades, holy wars and colonial conquests have been justified by the need to save the souls of "uncivilized" and "godless" peoples (often at the expense of their lives).

Jewish people have lived within Christian-dominated societies (when permitted to) for nearly two thousand years. There is substantial Christian teaching and belief that Jewish people are dangerous and evil. These beliefs have been sustained even during periods of hundreds of years when Jews were not living near Christians (Glassman). Jews, along with Moslems, have become symbols to many Christians of the infidel. This anti-Semitism, originally based on religious and cultural differences, has become racialized over the centuries, conjoining Christian values and whiteness. It has exposed Jews to the same harsh reality of Christian violence toward non-Christians that pagans, Romany, witches and Moslems have experienced.

In addition, anti-Semitism has been passed on to Christians of color through Christian teachings. Religious leaders of both Eastern Orthodox and Catholic branches of Christianity, including most Protestant denominations,

have accused the Jews of killing Jesus, using the blood of Christian children for Passover ritual, refusing to recognize the divinity of Jesus and of consorting with the devil. As Christianity was spread by Western colonialism and missionary practice, these teachings were incorporated into the beliefs of many Christians of color, passing on anti-Semitism.

Christianity, particularly its Protestant versions, is variously equated with moral, virtuous, pure, hard-working, saved, civilized, decent, God-fearing, righteous and, of course, white people. Today the majority of Christians in the world are people of color, but racism continues to be justified in Christian terms. Whiteness and Christianity remain inextricably entwined, targeting both people of color and Jews for continued violence.

At the same time there are core Christian values of love, caring, justice and fellowship which have inspired some Christians to work against white racism. For example, many white abolitionists were Christians inspired by religious teachings and values to work against slavery.

Another cluster of meanings centers around the concept of American. In the United States the concept of who is an American is often conflated with who is white. In fact, "All-American" is often used as a thinly disguised code word for white. A third generation Swedish- or German-American child is considered an all-American kid in a way that a third generation Japanese- or Chinese-American child is not.

In the same way, the patriotism of anyone with darker skin color is routinely questioned. Non-European citizens are continually suspected of having dual allegiances. During World War II U.S. citizens of Japanese heritage were interned in concentration camps and U.S. citizens of German heritage were not. Even when they fought in the armed services in wartime the loyalty of Asian American, Latino/a, Native American, Arab American, and African American soldiers has been challenged.

For those of us who are white, immigrating to this country and giving up our native cultures and customs was equated with the process of becoming American. We were told that when we assimilated completely, whether it took two generations or five, we would have made it. As long as we held on to our cultures we were less American, un-American, perhaps even anti-American. On the one hand, the definition of who was white was broadened over time to include virtually all European Americans. At the same time, the boundaries keeping people of color out were firmly maintained. Immigration policies and quotas consistently favored Europeans and much of the time completely excluded people who were not considered white. Even when they have legally arrived here, non-Native American people of color are routinely asked where they came from, and told to go back home.

The final cluster of words centers on gender. Whiteness strongly leans toward "male" virtues and "male" values. While terms of whiteness apply to

men and women, there are also significant differences in which qualities men and women are associated with.

Each of the particular virtues of whiteness also has a gender version for men and women. White women are held to higher standards of chasteness, cleanliness and restraint than white men. The basis of women's rationality, righteousness and authority is supposed to lie with white men.

White women are presumed to carry white authority over men and women of color. Their authority is derived from their association with white men whose backing they are assumed to have. White women hold onto whiteness by the authority and protection of white men, or by their willingness to adapt to male roles and exert authority in traditionally male spheres to protect their white privilege as employers, supervisors or teachers. They can also be cast out of the circle of white male "protection" by being rebellious or by violating racial or gender norms.

White women have been held to be the purest realization of white values. They have been locked up within this symbolism, and tremendous violence has been done in their name for their "protection" and the protection of white civilization. White women have both colluded with and resisted their role and the violence it has justified.

Whiteness is a many faceted phenomenon, slowly and constantly shifting its emphasis, all the time maintaining a racial hierarchy and protecting the power that accrues to white people. It is a powerful fiction with wide ranging effects on our lives and on the lives of people of color. Although there are no natural or essential qualities or characteristics of whiteness, or of white people, it is not an easy fiction to let go of.