

INTRODUCTION

The discovery of a personal whiteness is a very modern thing . . .

W. E. B. Du Bois

When we use the term white supremacy, it doesn't just evoke white people. It evokes a political world that we all can frame ourselves in relationship to.

bell hooks

White supremacy is the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today.

Charles W. Mills

If a white man wants to lynch me, that's his problem. If he's got the power to lynch me, that's my problem. Racism is not a question of attitude; it's a question of power.

Kwame Ture

White supremacy is a total world, deep with history. It's both a vast pattern of perpetuating white dominance and the belief that that's justified. "Racism," as Robin Diangelo wrote, "can be thought of as the systemic outcome of white supremacist ideology."¹ Or, we might say, white supremacy is racism in action, racism built into a society, in addition to racism as an ideology or belief.² And while it certainly does, white supremacy doesn't have to look like or manifest itself as racist *hate*. If it snarls, white supremacy can also smile. It can soothe, or patronize, or promise. White supremacy creates: it invents definitions for things like intelligence, civility, or

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normalcy. And white supremacy is nothing without the *power* to invent and then enforce those.

Yet white supremacy can also embody *inaction*; that is, historically white supremacy has also been about “waiting for the right time,” about “not doing anything rash,” about “looking for consensus,” while nonwhite people suffer or die. Martin Luther King, Jr. put it this way: “I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: ‘I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action’; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a ‘more convenient season.’”³ White supremacy can even look like inclusion – admitting the Irish into whiteness, for example, to block the economic advancement of African Americans; or admitting some people of Latin American descent into a white identity movement to expand political power.

This book could have been titled simply “the origins of whiteness.” That’s because the superiority, the “supremacy” part, is baked into the “whiteness” part. Without one, you don’t have the other. (Note that, since it’s about whiteness, it’s mainly not about how nonwhite people experience race-hate. I’m not qualified to do that. There are many good books about that, with a small but prime selection named in the suggestions for further reading.⁴)

Any important history deserves to be told briefly. That means this book is far from comprehensive. And its extreme pace might make my professional colleagues shake their spinning heads: every page races through – sometimes even past – vast reading lists, vast fields of history. For example, I give the histories of minorities across the globe short shrift in favor of telling the story of whiteness. In other words, it focuses on the power of whiteness rather than resistance to whiteness. Scholars delve deep, deep into issues I raise in a mere sentence. But presenting the fine-grained details is not what’s best for our shared particular goals in this book. My hope is that

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readers will find a helpful guide to more fine-grained history in my endnotes.

My aim is to offer a brief, readable synthesis of the best scholarship on the roots, growth, changes, and persistence of whiteness and white supremacy. I honor those many, many who've dedicated their professional scholarly lives, and often paid many costs, to doing this demanding work.

And why am I telling the history of the “English-speaking world” – to use an awkward phrase? Not only is it awkward, but also it can leave the utterly false impression that only English is spoken in the lands subject to English and British colonization or informal empire. Obviously, that’s not true: Cherokee, Māori, Punjabi, and a wondrous variety of other languages are spoken there. This only highlights how whiteness is the primary focus of this book, which comes at a cost. (I could have used the phrase “English diaspora,” but that’s strange and awkward, too.)

Most importantly, the British Empire was the largest, longest-enduring force for creating, spreading, and sustaining white supremacy. The settler colonies and nations they spawned identified themselves as “white men’s countries,” and clung violently to the concept. And, as you’ll read, they eventually imagined they were in an Anglo-Saxon union, defending the white race against racial challengers. You might already sense something like this in the world around you. Most readers of this book will have watched the near-simultaneous rise of Trumpism and Brexit (not to mention nativist movements and anti-immigrant violence in Australia and Canada). That’s not a coincidence, but a clue about the global nature of whiteness. I hope, even as I write in a USA where this book will be banned in many states’ classrooms, that my world-spanning approach might help readers think in new, comparative ways.

Would a history of individual global whitenesses be different? That is, would it change things if this were a story about the rise of white supremacy in the French Empire, or the Dutch or Spanish? They would share similarities: these empires inculcated a sense of superiority in the colonizers, they practiced ethnic cleansing, and they justified themselves with race science. Yet they’d be slightly different simply because of slightly varied histories. The Spanish Empire had its particularities: the role of the Catholic Church in race supremacy, for example. The French Empire had its own differences: say, the fiction common in the French Empire that colonized

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subjects were actually *citizens* of France. And the Dutch had a far smaller settler colony presence than these others. Meanwhile, there are things particular to the British case: they were the world's biggest-ever human traffickers; they also had far larger settler colonies than their European rivals. And the West Indies and their offshoot USA comprised the largest-ever slave society, where the very ideas of "white" and "black" were born. Perhaps my writing about a global whiteness particular to the British Empire and its antecedents will encourage scholars of other empires to think about different shades of whiteness.

As we proceed through the centuries in this book, we'll observe whiteness emerge, grow, mutate, and survive by burrowing into various niches. But this history doesn't mean evolution *had to* work out this way. It wasn't inevitable. Choices were made by people, not inalterable forces of nature. And, while people worked to reinforce the power of whiteness, people also resisted. So, as we observe white supremacy change, we'll see it attacked, suffer losses, regroup in new forms. It had to – *has to* – fight to survive.

White supremacy, then, has history: it's not a timeless force of nature. Nor is it some inborn (imagined) human nature like "hate" or "distrust of the 'other.'" As the first two chapters show, it had a beginning in relatively recent times; that means, unlike things outside time, it *can* have an end. That's heartening, at least. Yes, white supremacy is stubborn and old like a granite monument of the Jim Crow era; but it's *not* a mountain, incapable of being moved. There are people, institutions, trends, wealth – an ugly, tangled mass of chains – that every day cling onto it for dear life, anchoring it in place. And the second half of the book, in particular, shows the forging of these chains that barely hold, creaking and moaning.

White supremacists always had to invent and re-invent white supremacy because, everywhere and always, there were people of all flesh tones calling it out as wrong, stupid, or monstrous. Today, people with an interest in doing so argue that, if you look into the past, you'll only find racists; thus, their racism was excusable or even justified. White supremacy, then, is supposed to have been the sole option available to white people in the past. That's ridiculous at best, and clearly serves a present-day political agenda.

So, this book will highlight plenty of non-racist, anti-white-supremacists. It's far from true that they didn't exist or weren't vocal; it's rather that white supremacists consistently ignored, silenced,

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outspent, or brutally suppressed anti-white-supremacists. What's true about the past is true about our present.

In the end, there probably was no better observer of whiteness than James Baldwin. So there's no better voice with which to end these introductory remarks. Baldwin, fighting despair to do so, pled with his fellow citizens for decades to abandon whiteness and white supremacy for *their* own good in 1968. And he might as well have been speaking to the people of Australia or Britain or Canada. And he might as well have been speaking today.

I'm not trying to accuse you, you know. That's not the point. But . . . all that can save you now is your confrontation with your own history . . . which is not your past, but your present. . . . Your history has led you to this moment, and you can only begin to change yourself and save yourself by looking at what you are doing in the name of your history.⁵

Part I

The Long Evolution of a “Master Race” and “Slave Races”

1 BEFORE WHITENESS, 400S BCE-1600

We know that white supremacy isn't timeless or a force of nature because we can point to its beginnings and a time before it. In the words of some leaders in this field, whatever the race, "it came into existence at a discernible historical moment for rationally understandable historical reasons and is subject to change for similar reasons."¹ Scholars, in fact, can show us long millennia before the very categories of "white" and "black" existed as we know them. And you can't have white supremacy without an idea of "whiteness" itself.

Like I've said, the superiority, the "supremacy" part of white supremacy, is baked into the "whiteness" part. Without one, you don't have the other. You can have xenophobia, you can have religious predominance, you can have hatred between groups. But none of these are the same – or, I would argue, as pervasive and enduring – as whiteness and white supremacy.

Did the Ancients Hand Down an Idea of Race to the English-Speaking World?

Was there such a thing as "race" in the eyes of the ancient peoples of the Mediterranean and European realms? Let's stick to the Romans, since we're going to be talking about Roman Britain in a little while and we're limiting our investigation to (eventual) English-speaking lands. When you imagine Roman Britain, do you see paler-skinned people in your mind's eye? Do you think of it as "white"? Why? Have films suggested that? Or did the books you

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looked at in school tell you so? You wouldn't be alone. And there've been infamous cases of public outrage when scholars have explained that prehistoric and classical "English" were far from all pale-hued.² It's not hard to see that such racial outcries had far more to do with whiteness in the twenty-first century than with genuine findings about the ancient past.

In fact, there's plenty of evidence for varied flesh tones in England's deep history. Yet written sources from the Roman era aren't particularly interested in telling the reader who was dark-skinned and who was not. (That changed after the historical evolution of the categories of whiteness and blackness that you're going to read about in the next chapter. Stay tuned.) In any case, the evidence shows that darker-skinned people lived in the Roman-era British Isles. Setting aside that the ancestors of some of its second-century people were richly brown-skinned like Cheddar Man,³ archaeologists and classicists show us that there were plenty of African immigrants or African-descended families. Rome's empire was vast, cosmopolitan, and interconnected by trade and political administration. People from one end inevitably ended up at the other.⁴ No one should be surprised that northwest African traders might have tried their luck in Londinium or Eboracum (York); just as they shouldn't be surprised that an England-born centurion would die and be buried in Roman Syria.⁵ Garrisoned in a chilly keep on Hadrian's Wall, there was an army unit of what were called "Moors," possibly like today's Amazigh people of northwest Africa.⁶ But there were also poor and middling sorts of Africa-descended or mixed-heritage Roman Londoners.⁷

The Romans, of course, were notorious slavers; but there's no evidence that the darker-skinned or African-heritage people of Roman Britain were more or less likely to be enslaved than others.⁸ Roman slavery wasn't race-based in terms of color. Put another way, as much as the Romans thought they were the greatest, they didn't associate Roman-ness or slavery with flesh tone.⁹

Did they think they were a superior race? They didn't have the idea as we do. There was an idea that was close: *genus*. But we'd be imposing our concepts if we translated that as "race" the way we think of it. Today's expert classicists tell us that *genus* meant something like "tribe." It was a group of people who shared certain lifestyle-patterns and claimed a certain deep identity. They told themselves they were members of a historical group, perhaps united

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by a mythological past. Language could be part of it, but did not have to be. Body features – skin tone and so on – were not important to signifying *genus*. “Blood,” that is, did not determine one’s *genus*. Even the Romans, who were so proud of their Roman citizenship and limited it, did *not* try to limit Roman citizenship by keeping it within limited bloodlines or limited skin tones.¹⁰

European elites’ obsession with categorizing, ordering, and ranking the peoples of the world would have to wait for the centuries of colonialism, as Chapter 3 will show. But, yes, the Romans, and Greeks before them, tried to group the peoples, the “genuses,” of humankind around the Mediterranean center of their world. And we need to understand that because for many, many centuries – until the rise of early modern whiteness – these ancient ideas shaped what people thought of as “race.”

Ancient Greek and Roman observers definitely made observations about the surface features of bodies. In our day and age, these indicate “race,” a deeply meaningful, supposedly biological “reality” that shapes a person’s destiny. (Of course, these things *aren’t* inherently true, but are imposed.) But, for a Greek observer, these surface features did not carry all our modern baggage. For example, when Herodotus (c. 484–c. 425 BCE), a Greek geographer born in today’s southwest Turkey, visited Egypt, he offered plenty of descriptions of the dark-skinned, curly-haired people there whom we’d call “Black.” He definitely had xenophobic things to say about them; he thought Greeks were better, quite simply.¹¹ Herodotus, like Aristotle a century before him, seemed to think the tan skin of the Greeks was better than the skin of paler people and darker people. Tan, in the words of Goldilocks, was “*just right*,” not too light and not too dark.¹²

At roughly the same time, around 400 BCE, Greeks like Hippocrates offered a theory of why different human groups looked and acted differently. It was part of a whole system of explanation based on climate and geography that we call today “Hippocratic theory.” It’s a fascinating subject that ranges from medicine to epidemiology to urban planning to arguments for “human nature” and beyond. But, in the interest of time, let’s limit ourselves to the Hippocratic theory of human groups, what we today would call “race.” Hippocratic theory told people like Herodotus – and later Roman, medieval, and early modern writers who relied on him – that things like the sun and heat shaped human body types through the

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generations. Wet, humid environments would shape them differently. Humans' insides would be changed, too, because the humors – blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm – reflected the outside environment: heat, dryness, wetness, and coldness. The balance or imbalance of the humors would reveal itself in behavior. Too much phlegm made one too dull and impassive, for example. Of course, the Greeks told themselves that *their* cities enjoyed the perfect native environment – mixed and in balance – and thus had the greatest, “just right,” humoral balance, explaining their “civilized” nature, unlike that of the people from wild or extreme environments. Put another way, people who lived far from the Greek (and later Roman) Mediterranean heartland were supposed to live in extreme climates that imbalanced their outward appearance and inward humors.¹³

Aristotle (384–322 BCE) had much to say about slavery, since he thought a lot about the proper ordering of city-state society and governments – rulers, voters, subjects, masters, slaves. For Aristotle, race as we know it had nothing to do with who was inherently worthy of enslavement at the level of blood. What mattered to his thinking was the question of who was civilized; that is, which peoples practiced lawful, republican politics where persuasion was a matter of speeches in the city forum, not the spear. (This, of course, was a rosy, idealized vision.) When Aristotle looked beyond Greece's hinterland at strange, bearded foreigners who couldn't understand Greek, he saw spear-throwing “barbarians” – men who lacked the essence of civilization. These men (and their imagined lessers: women), then, were suitable for enslavement – whatever their flesh tone or gods.¹⁴

Ancient and early medieval people frequently enslaved their prisoners of war (POWs). That was perhaps the biggest driver of slave-making. Or take, for example, the later Vikings' notorious slave raiding and slave markets.¹⁵ It didn't matter what the color of their victims' skin was.

From this, it's easy to see how Hippocratic theory and Aristotle's ideas didn't lend themselves to ideas of race based on something timeless in the blood or what we'd call genetics.¹⁶ The inward and outward nature of the body responded to the environment, and thus those features would change down the generations of people as they moved around the Greek or Roman world. Or, according to Herodotus and his followers, someone born in a “bad” environment – that resulted, say, in laziness or excitability –