

# Whiteness: An Explainer for Dummies

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Examining whiteness is of utmost importance if Americans truly wish to live in a just and peaceful society. To realize this possibility, self-identified ‘whites’ – and their collaborators from among the racially oppressed – must reckon with their attachment to whiteness. Whiteness was the central concern of sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois in his book *Black Reconstruction in America* published in 1935. Du Bois argued that whiteness serves as a “public and psychological wage,” delivering to poor self-identified ‘whites’ in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries higher social status than people socially defined as black. He further claimed that: 1) the whiteness idea provided meaningful “compensation” for economically oppressed ‘whites’ who were otherwise subjected to the ravages of capitalism; 2) the value of their whiteness was dependent on the devaluation of black existence; and 3) the benefits of their mythical status as ‘whites’ were not strictly monetary – rather whiteness engendered in them a sense of superiority. The academic field of Whiteness Studies is built on the foundation of Du Bois’s thesis. Whiteness Studies is concerned with how one can self-identify as ‘white’ and not be complicit in white supremacy? How can one accept the ideologies of ‘race’ and whiteness as ordinary, and *not* be racial oppressors or systemic white racism collaborators? My much-maligned tweet, “Whiteness is Terrorism,” emerges from this scholarly interrogation of whiteness as an *idea*, not as a person.

‘Race’ and whiteness are historically constructed ideologies that emerged, solidified, and evolved as fundamental

organizing concepts during the enslavement of African people. There is no ‘white race’; there are only people who imagine themselves to be ‘white’ for the purpose of higher status and material advantage over other human groups that are excluded from being ‘white.’ The willingness of self-identified ‘whites’ to accept the fictitious belief that a ‘white race’ exists is dependent on their readiness to place their racial interests above those of class, gender, or any other social positions and interests. Critical systemic white racism scholars, like myself, recognize the centrality of ‘race’ as myth and whiteness as an ideological component in facilitating racial capitalism. This focus unnerves white supremacy advocates because they consider the prospect of racial justice and equality to lessen their social ranking decreed by whiteness. Consequently, white supremacy proponents misrepresent contentions regarding ‘race’ and whiteness in an effort to terrorize scholars into ceasing critical deconstruction of systemic white racism and its associated ideologies (‘race,’ whiteness, colorblindness, etc.) in sustaining racial capitalism. This distortion is used to derail meaningful discussion about self-identified ‘whites’ and their collaborators among the racially oppressed by portraying self-identified ‘whites’ as victims rather than as perpetrators of systemic racial terror. Furthermore, emotion-filled *ad hominem* attacks are publicly directed at critical systemic white racism scholars in attempts to suppress and silence critical discussion and consciousness-raising about the sociopolitical dynamics of white supremacy and its system of legitimating ideas.

Systemic white racism is an all-pervasive social system of power relations and racial talk organized around the concept of ‘race.’

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‘Race’ does not exist in any objective sense in reality; it is created by/through the practice of white supremacy. ‘Race’ is simply meaning ‘whites’ attach to superficial human differences in order to legitimate the hierarchal rank ordering of social groups. The concept of whiteness – a fiction enforced by power and violence – also aids in this exploitive racial process.

White supremacy as a social system of predictable racial practices conditions people to believe ‘races’ exist in hierarchal arrangement that legitimate the domination and terrorizing of “inferior” racial groups. Though systemic white racism is omnipresent in the sense that everyone in a white supremacist society is immersed in the cultural air of white supremacy, most self-identified ‘whites’ self-righteously claim they are not racial bigots. Their identities as ‘whites’ in a white supremacist society makes their assertions absurd. Self-identified ‘whites’ hold their non-racist position to be true because they are socialized to be averse to questioning the ordinariness of whiteness and systemic white racism— how right it is. Systemic white racism is not merely grounded in each individual ‘white’ person’s attempt to do harm, but also on their mythical racial group’s collective effort to secure and preserve what they falsely believe is rightly theirs. Explicit in this work is securing ‘white’ power and wealth through the social mechanism of systemic white racism – ‘race’ and whiteness. Because this systemic effort disregards concern for human decency and the common good, it is structurally bound to undermine, terrorize, or kill anyone and any group that stands in the way of self-identified ‘whites’ achieving their ends.

Whiteness constantly shifts its boundaries to segregate those who are entitled to have

certain advantages from those whose exploitation and vulnerability to violence is justified by their non- whiteness. Whiteness is not about physical features; it is an ideology that justifies the unequal distribution of power and advantage between ‘races.’ As a socializing tool of power, whiteness requires both racial oppressors and the dominated to accept the *lies* that ‘race’ and whiteness are real, and to act accordingly. Socially defined black folks who accept whiteness as their own are usually called respectable Negroes (kneegrows) in the black community because they have no interest in going toe-to-toe with white supremacy. They would rather accommodate and survive systemic white racism, even if this means subjugating not only their humanity but also the humanity of others for the approval of self-identified ‘whites’ and tenuous benefits of whiteness. These folks “go along to get along,” in white supremacist institutions and groups.

Though the individual respectable Negro strategy is understandable, it fails to deal with the complex realities of surviving in a society that relentlessly wages a violent, nonstop campaign against socially defined black people’s collective well-being. Respectable Negroes believe they can stave off the daily terror and brutality dispensed by self-identified whites and their system of racial oppression by making their behavior congruent with whiteness. These respectable types become enraged when other socially defined black folk refuse to contort their humanity to meet the needs of self-identified white people as they do. Their approach mandates that anti-black racism be dealt with in a civil, emotionally detached, and dehumanized way that comforts ‘whites’ rather than challenges their anti-black racism. Clearly, skin folks aren’t necessary kinfolks.

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Though we are grouped together with respectable Negroes as socially defined black people who share sociopolitical penalties for being designated as such, this fact and experience alone does not necessarily lead to group consciousness or self-consciousness.

In particular, whiteness as an ideology is instrumental in sustaining the narrative of white supremacy as an individual problem. Whiteness ensures that systemic white racism's power structures are invisible not only to people who imagine themselves to be 'white' and benefit from them, but also to those racially oppressed by them. Whiteness often goes unnoticed by self-identified 'whites' in ways that divert them from considering the root cause of racial oppression – their racialized behavior and attitudes within institutions. This is a consequence of the fact that whiteness is normative and thus hard to detect, given that it's power resides in policies and everyday social interactions rather than in individuals. Because most Americans buy into the reductionist notion that we are individuals rather than creations of social groups – which we most certainly are not – individualism plays a major role in driving 'whites' and racial collaborators' refusals to accept the social and systemic character of white racism. Individualism holds that individual bigots are causes of systemic white racism, not consequences of it. It denies the very existence of systemic white racism and reduces it to *individual* hate and discrimination leading to absurd claims of black racism. People immersed in individualism refuse to consider how the cultural environment of white supremacy that we inhabit shapes our racial identities and worldviews, delimiting the parameters for how we perceive and interact with others within a hierarchical racial order. Because

people immersed in individualism see individuals as the causal source of systemic white racism rather than a system of oppression, their attention is diverted away from considering how their everyday interactions, beliefs, and values play an integral role in the sustaining of systemic white racism. Whiteness is not about the color of your skin, it's about a mental and behavior state that disposes folks to prop up white supremacy for their material and psychological benefit.

To reiterate: whiteness shapes how self-identified 'white' people view themselves and others, and seats them in a place of structural advantage where 'white' cultural norms and practices go unnamed and unquestioned. Whiteness's culture, norms, and values manifest in societal institutions as natural and are used as the standard by which all other cultures, groups, and individuals are measured and consigned as inferior. No human being in the context of white supremacy in the United States is immune from the negative mental and material outcomes of the ideologies of 'race' and whiteness.

For self-identified 'whites' and their racially oppressed collaborators to begin to rid themselves of their whiteness problem, it is imperative they untangle the contradictions of whiteness. They must come to terms with the centrality of 'race' in the United States so that they can collectively mobilize to upend their deeply entrenched systemic white racism. To arrive here, they must first be willing to confront the illusory nature of 'race' and whiteness.

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