

Introduction

Are you white? (Or, do you have a friend who is?) If so, how do you know? Is race real—or is it constructed, an “as-if” concept, something we all agree to bestow on each other? Is it a relational concept, existing only in binary fashion (e.g., black/white), so that if all the people on a tropical island, say, looked pretty much the same, there would be no race or races? Modern-day scientists tell us that whites and blacks have more genes in common than the ones that distinguish them—the variability between the average white and the average black, in genetic makeup and physical appearance, is less than the variability within each group. What then, does it mean to be white—or of any other race, for that matter?

This book, a sequel to *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge* (Temple University Press, 1995), examines these and related questions, putting whiteness under the lens. It presents the best of an emerging body of scholarship that analyzes what it means to be white, as well as a number of classic works dealing with the white race and its legacy. You will read about upward (and downward) mobility of white and near-white immigrant groups. (The Irish, for example, were at first not considered white, but given a status similar to that of Negroes.) You will also learn about white privilege, the invisible bundle of expectations and courtesies that go along with membership in the dominant race. You will encounter an astonishing argument that law plays a large part in defining who is white, and even in changing the physical features of the American population.

You will read about the experience of Judy Scales-Trent, a light-skinned black woman who identifies with the black race but is treated in most daily encounters as a white person, and of a white-looking law school dean who was raised first as a white, then as a black. You will read a deliciously satirical description by Calvin Trillin of racial complainers and “wannabes” who *kvetch* because others of different hue seem to be getting all the advantages in life. You will encounter the rich, textured analysis of Supreme Court—and public—rhetoric of Thomas Ross, a white Southern writer who shows how such narratives and “stories” as *innocence* and *advantage-taking* help us understand the relations between blacks and whites in this country. You will learn about the race-conscious (and the racist) mind, as seen by writers of vastly different persuasions, such as Dinesh D’Souza on the right and Raphael S. Ezekiel on the left. You will come across the “one drop” rule, according to which anyone with any trace of black heritage is considered black. Why is there no “one drop” rule for whites, and what does this say about the reality (or lack of it) of race as a concept? What does it say about power?

Nobel laureate Toni Morrison tells how whites and blacks systematically misperceive each other. Luther Wright, Jr., asks how we should see multiracial people—those with a black mother and a white father, for example. David Roediger and Noel Ignatiev argue that whiteness has no useful meaning (and sometimes a bad one) and should be abolished. Other writers argue that white consciousness, even white power, is not to be deplored, any more than is consciousness raising and solidarity among women and blacks.

Can we get beyond race, and would that be a good idea? A number of our authors imply that it would. One, James W. Gordon, argues that close friendships and even intermarriage may be the way. He suggests that John Marshall Harlan, associate justice of the Supreme

Court and author of the famous dissent in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, may have had a black brother, and that their close relationship while growing up in the antebellum South may have influenced the young justice-to-be to become the passionate race reformer he was in later life.

What have science and pseudoscience had to say about race and racial hierarchy? Debates about the supposed superiority of a particular race, prominent in earlier periods of our history, are now being revived. How has the authority of science shaped social and legal attitudes toward whites and nonwhites? Contributors to this book who are both lawyers and social scientists address these questions. Others examine how cultural imagery, language, children's tales (e.g., "Snow White"), songs, and even classical literature construct whiteness and blackness so that they are not neutral descriptors but concepts freighted with meaning, value, and status.

Is white power dangerous? Any more so than, say, black power? Can one take pride in one's whiteness (blackness, etc.) without becoming a narrow nationalist who puts down members of other races? The reader will find these and other issues treated in the eleven parts of this book. Each part is preceded by a brief introduction and is followed by questions and issues for discussion and by a suggested reading list. We were not able to include a small number of significant authors who have written about race and whiteness. In such cases, we have paraphrased their thoughts and have indicated where the original works may be found.

Critical race theory emerged in the late 1970s with the work of Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and others. For the most part progressive scholars committed to racial and social transformation, critical race theorists found themselves discontented with standard liberal approaches to racial justice. Seeing the gains of the civil rights era of the 1960s slip away, they believed that new, more searching theories were necessary to understand the phenomena of race and racism. Drawing on critical sociology, neo-Marxism, postmodern philosophy, and shrewd observation, they set out to develop a more hard-headed assessment of our society's racial predicament and ways of dealing with it. Critical race theory, itself the child of critical legal studies (a leftist movement in the law that arose in the 1970s), has in turn spawned two additional movements, critical race feminism and critical white studies. Other parallel movements, such as gay-legal narratives and Latino critical studies, are just now springing up.

What all these approaches have in common is an effort to get beyond received wisdoms and ask basic questions about race, power, and society. It is in the belief that all people can move toward a more decent, humane society by exposing ourselves to the best minds writing about vexing issues of race and by thinking about them critically that we offer this book. If you are white, we hope you will, in the words of our title, look behind the mirror. If you are nonwhite, we hope this book will help you understand what it means to be white in a society whose majority is of that color—and to begin to understand where and how you figure in.

Boulder, Colorado

Part I

How Whites See Themselves

If any theme is characteristic of contemporary thought in the social sciences and in cultural studies, it is "perspectivalism"—the idea that one's viewpoint matters. Indeed, every chapter in this book can be seen as an effort to analyze, defend, criticize, celebrate, or examine one perspective or another about race and whiteness. Some even question, not how, but *do* whites see themselves? Upon looking into and beyond the mirror, whites have found their whiteness both opaque and transparent. Most whites have not thought much about their race. Few, upon being asked to identify themselves by attributes, would name whiteness among their primary characteristics.

Part I offers a variety of ways whites, and some nonwhites, see the white race, ranging from biological and social-construction theory, to economic determinism and advantage and disadvantage, to innocence (feigned or real). Later parts deal with how whites see other races (Part II), how earlier periods saw whites and whiteness (Part III), the role of language and color imagery (Part V), and white consciousness and white power (Part X). As the reader will soon notice, these sections overlap thematically to some extent. The reason is simple: Race seems to be, to a large extent, relational. Whiteness, acknowledged or not, has been a norm against which other races are judged. One cannot get clear about whiteness without also gaining a sense of what it means to be nonwhite—and vice versa.

The examinations of whiteness presented in this book may open a way for whites to talk about race and racial problems acceptably and nondefensively.

Part II

How Whites See Others

Can one see, or even understand the idea of, another race without juxtaposing it immediately against oneself and one's own group? That is, is race inevitably an oppositional concept, so that one can only think of another group in contradistinction to one's own? And need that oppositionality be hostile or adverse, as opposed to friendly? The selections in this part suggest that in this country, at least, the white majority has generally seen members of other races, for want of a better term, as one-down. In few quarters has race seemed not to matter, much less not exist. Several authors assert that racial fairness and equality are either impossible—because of what is embedded in our culture or language—or only achieved through great effort. Some argue that difference is never neutral, but contrived—created and maintained for the advantage of the more powerful majority. Some consider race consciousness a predisposing condition for the disease of racism. One argues that racial differentiation is rational and that it is allied with the scientific impulse.

Is it possible, if one is white, to see persons of other racial groups without the blinders of race and racial categorization? Would this entail having no race at all, and is that possible in our world?

Part III

Whiteness: History's Role

Our current attitudes toward race and our own racial selves did not spring up out of a vacuum. Rather, they have long cultural antecedents. In this part, several writers, most of them well-known in law or social science, reveal how contemporary understandings about race originated. Some show how whiteness-as-superior began during periods of turmoil, competition, or religious self-scrutiny. Others argue that the idea of the white race began with a justificatory purpose—to rationalize exploitation of weaker groups. Several point out earlier excesses of white consciousness and glorification similar to those we see taking place today. And one author argues, essentially, that racial classifications are often malign, scientifically inexact, and useless, and might as well be jettisoned.

Part IV

Whiteness: Law's Role

Everyone knows that the legal system has played a part in enforcing racial separation (e.g., in schooling) and also, from time to time, in requiring racial fairness. But the law played a role in something that is prior to that — namely, in constructing racial categories in the first place. Does law, as some writers believe, have the ability actually to change physical appearance and so reinforce the belief that races are biologically distinct? When the legal system sets out to redress racial discrimination does it just end up hardening lines and reinforcing the idea of racial Otherness? Does color blindness make matters worse?

Did law play a role in constructing the idea of the white race? In the idea of racial superiority and inferiority? In the naturalness of spatial separation, as in housing or public schools? Can it help us in moving toward a color-blind society, and would that be desirable?

Part V

Whiteness: Culture's Role

Many authorities believe that one of the most pervasive ways in which racial ideas are conveyed and reinforced is through language—the narratives, tales, sayings, jokes, movie scripts, songs, children's stories, metaphors, and imagery we use in constructing our common culture. One living in our society finds it almost impossible to think of a Madonna or hero who is not white, or a villain who is not swarthy. Can you imagine a mass murderer or a general of the Huns' army, say, who looks like Robert Redford? Or the infant Jesus as a smiling black baby? The following selections deal with the role of culture and cultural artifacts, especially language, or "gaze," in creating stereotypes about race. One theme running through these materials is that once cultural ideas and expectations are internalized the individual begins to act, at a quite unconscious level, in accord with them. In selecting a residence, friend, movie, book, hero, or role model, one chooses in accord with one's sense of who (or what) is likely to turn out to be nice, valued, trustworthy, intelligent, and esteemed. If, as in our society, these traits are linked up with racial archetypes, it becomes almost impossible to act naturally in cross-race situations.

Part VI

White Privilege

Does being white bring prerogatives — or detriments and liabilities? Black entertainers and athletes get all the attention, and affirmative action certainly benefits persons of minority race (and women) and not white men, at least in individual cases. But few passersby on a dark sidewalk would cross the street to avoid coming face to face with an average-looking, presentably dressed white. Whites are hassled by the police less than blacks, given the benefit of the doubt in commercial transactions, and favored in many other ways as well. The readings in this part explore whether there is such a thing as white privilege and what its content might be. Is it hard to see, and if so why? Do minority communities themselves dispense a privilege based on color, preferring members of their own groups who are light skinned? How much of a boost, an advantage, an entrée is it to be white?

Part VII

The Ladder of Whiteness

Our society prides itself on the way it holds out the promise of upward mobility to all groups, including immigrants. The lines etched on the base of the Statue of Liberty ("Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free") imply that all are welcome and that anyone who works hard can enter the mainstream of society and achieve the American dream. Yet many immigrant groups have found the going tough. Some, such as the Irish, were surprised to find that they were considered nonwhite; others were puzzled that working hard and attaining high occupational prestige did not enable them to cast off working-class origins and worries after all. And what of merit? Can a white with extremely high test scores, for example, make his or her way in the world if he or she lacks a mentor and is excluded, by reason of lower-class origins, from networks of influence and information? Can he or she cast off blue-collar or "ethnic" origins and fit easily into upper-class society? What of those bastions of white privilege and Anglo-Saxon supremacy, Ivy League schools? Can one get as good an education at a state university, and rise as far in the world?

Part VIII

The Color Line: Multiracial People and “Passing for White”

If you were black and could become white by taking a magic pill, would you do so? If you were of mixed race, your skin a medium color of brown so that you could identify either as white or as a person of color, which would you do? Who gives you the choice? Is it a liberatory act of defiance to chart one's own course, or is it a sign of deep role confusion? What should we make of minority communities who favor light-skinned members—or who display enmity and distrust toward other groups of color? In this part, you will read about all these scenarios, and about the life experience of white blacks, black whites, and light-skinned Latinas who lived to tell the tale.

Part IX

Biology and Pseudoscience

Are races real, innate, the product of physical and genetic differences? Are they arrayed in a hierarchy of intelligence and ability by race—with one's own race, presumably, at the top? Is complex behavior, such as criminality, genetically determined? Most scientists say emphatically no to these questions. Yet one of the most persistent strains of thought holds that races are distinct, with whites at the top in intelligence, morals, and other desirable attributes. The recent publication of *The Bell Curve*, by Richard Merrnstein and Charles Murray, has focused attention on all these issues. And what of the question of selective breeding? Minority families often have several children, elite whites only one or two. Does that mean that a precious gene pool will inevitably decline?

Part X

White Consciousness, White Power

Nothing is wrong — one might think — with focusing critically on one's own race and racial background and makeup. At times, however, this effort becomes distorted. The student of race decides that his or her own race is superior, or the bearer of a unique destiny. Then, all other races become irrelevant, drags, or outright threats. The rise of paramilitary "patriot" groups and others espousing white supremacy illustrate how this can happen. But what of more moderate views holding that WASPs simply are the possessors of certain admirable traits — caution, saving, law-abidingness, and so on. Is this a matter of taking pride in one's heritage — or does it verge on attitudes of supremacy and hate?

Are race-baiting messages or ones of racial supremacy to be deplored — or do they serve as useful pressure valves for feelings that, if suppressed, might emerge in even more injurious form? Do organized hate groups have a constitutional right to exist?

Part XI

What Then Shall We Do? A Role for Whites

Whites may—and should—study race, including their own. That is the whole premise of this book. But suppose a white person wants to do more—wants to be an agent for change, wants to challenge and blast the systems of racial privilege and exclusion that bring so much misery to all those on the other side of the color line? What can a white person do? Is there a role for him or her in improving the fortunes of people of color? One author dyed his skin black and traveled in the South, acquiring a sense of empathy for the plight of black people. [See Chapter 70. Ed.] Another urges that whites take on the radical role of race traitor, under the banner "Treason to Whiteness Is Loyalty to Humanity." Others urge that whites reflect carefully on their own privilege and begin the difficult process of giving it up, or that they study their own "dysconscious racism" with a view toward unlearning the systems and habits of racial treatment that condition so much of our inner and outer lives. One author urges white people to give up being white and to destroy the idea of the white race. Would this be suicide?