

Seeing White

"Who invented the notion of being 'white,' or 'black?' And why did they do so?"

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Seriously, what is up with us white people?

I've been thinking about that a lot the last few years, and I know I have company.

Look, I get it. People of color have been asking that question for centuries. But I think a growing number of white folks are too, given what's been going on out there in our country. And notice I said what's up with **us** white people because right now I'm not talking about those white people, the ones with the swastikas and the hoods and the tiki torches.

They are a problem and a threat. They perpetrate most of the terrorism in our country, as you all in Charlottesville know better than most. But I'm talking about something bigger, more pervasive. I'm talking about all of us white folks writ large, and maybe especially people sort of like me, self-described progressives, who don't want to be racist. Good white people. Any good white people in the room?

I was raised to be that sort of person. I was a little kid in the 60s and 70s. To give you some sense of my parents, actual public opinion polls at the time showed that only a small minority, about 20%, of White Americans approved and supported Martin Luther King and his work with the Civil Rights Movement while Dr. King was still alive.

I'm proud to say my parents were in that group. Race got talked about in our house, and when the shows about that dealt with race would come on the television, they would sit us kids down and make sure we watched. Like the movie *Roots*. The message was loud and clear, and I got it: Racism is wrong. Racists are bad people.

At the same time, we lived in a very white place in Minnesota, and I'll just speak for myself. I think that allowed me to believe that those white racists on the TV screen were being beamed in from some other place wasn't about us, really. I did not feel implicated. Now, I would say I'm still in recovery from that early impression.

I got into journalism in part because I cared about things like equality, justice, and for a long time, racism was just such a puzzle to me. Why is it still with us when it's so clearly wrong? Why such a persistent force? Maybe I was puzzled because I wasn't yet looking in the right place or asking the right questions. Have you noticed that?

When people in our mostly white media report on what they consider to be racial issues, what we consider to be racial issues, what that usually means is that we're pointing our cameras and our microphones and our gaze at people of color. Asking questions like, how are Black folks or

Native Americans, Latino, or Asian Americans, how are they doing in a given community or with respect to some issue, the economy, education. I've done my share of that kind of journalism over many years. But then George Zimmerman killed Trayvon Martin followed by this unending string of high-profile police shootings of unarmed Black people, the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, Dylan Roof and the Charleston massacre, OscarSoWhite, all the incidents from the day to day of American life. These are overtly racist incidents that we now get to see because they're captured on smartphones and sent across the internet. And beneath those visible events, the stubborn data studies showing systemic racism in every institution. We have housing segregation, job discrimination, the deeply racialized inequities in our schools and criminal justice system, and what really did it for me (and I know I'm not alone in this, either): The rise of Donald Trump and the discovery that a solid majority of White Americans would embrace or at least accept such a raw, bitter kind of white identity politics.

This was all disturbing to me as a human being. As a journalist, I found myself turning the lens around thinking, "Wow! White folks are the story. Whiteness is a story," and also thinking can I do that? What would a podcast series about whiteness sound like and oh, by the way, this could get uncomfortable.

I had seen almost no journalism that looked deeply at whiteness, but of course, people of color and especially Black intellectuals have made sharp critiques of white supremacist culture for centuries. And I knew that in the last two or three decades, scholars had done interesting work looking at race through the frame of whiteness: What it is, how we got it, how it works in the world. I started reading and I reached out to some leading experts on race, in the history of race. One of the first questions I asked was, "where did this idea of being a white person come from in the first place?"

Science is clear we are one human race; we're all related, all descended from a common ancestor in Africa. Some people walked out of Africa into colder, darker places and lost a lot of their melanin, some of us more than others, but genetically we are all 99.9 percent the same. There's more genetic diversity **within** what we call racial groups than there is **between** racial groups. There is no gene for whiteness or blackness or Asian-ness or what-have-you. So how did this happen? How did we get this thing? How did racism start?

I think if you had asked me to speculate on that, in my ignorance some years ago I probably would have said well, I guess somewhere back in deep history people encountered one another and they found each other strange. Your skin is a different color, your hair is different, you dress funny. I guess I'll just go ahead and jump to the conclusion that since you're different that you're somehow less than me, and maybe that makes it okay for me to mistreat you. Right. Is that something like what we imagined or assumed? And under that kind of scenario, it's sort of it's all a big tragic misunderstanding. But it seems that's wrong.

First of all, race is a recent invention, it's just a few hundred years old.

Before that, yes, people divided themselves by religion, tribal group, language, things like that. But for most of human history, people had no notion of race.

In ancient Greece, for example (and I learned this from the historian Nell Irvin Painter), the Greeks thought they were better than the other people they knew about not because of some idea that they were innately superior -- they just thought they'd developed the most advanced culture, so they looked around at, you know, the Ethiopians but also the Persians and the Celts and said they're all kind of barbaric compared to us. Culturally, they're just not Greek. And yes, in the ancient world there was lots of slavery -- but people enslaved people who didn't look like them and they often enslaved people who did.

Did you know that the English word "slave" is derived from the word "Slav" because Slavic people were enslaved by all kinds of folks, including Western Europeans, for centuries?

Right, slavery wasn't about race either, because no one had thought up race yet. So who did?

I put that question to another leading historian, Ibram Kendi. I didn't expect he would answer the question in the form of one person's name and a date as if we were talking about the light bulb, but he did! He said, in his exhaustive research he found what he believed to be the first articulation of racist ideas, and he named the culprit. This guy should be more famous or infamous.

His name is Gomes de Zurara, a Portuguese man wrote a book in the 1450s in which he did something that no one had ever done before, according to Dr. Kendi. He lumped together all of the people of Africa, a vast diverse continent, and he described them as a distinct group inferior and beastly. Never mind that in pre-colonial time some of the most sophisticated cultures in the world were in Africa.

Why would this guy make this claim? It turns out it helps to follow the money.

First of all, Zurara was hired to write that book by Portuguese King Alfonso V. Just a few years before, slave traders tied to the Portuguese crown had effectively pioneered the Atlantic slave trade. They were the first Europeans to sail directly to sub-Saharan Africa to kidnap and enslave African people, so it was suddenly really helpful to have a story about the inferiority of African people to justify this new trade to other people, to the church, and to themselves. With the stroke of a pen, de Zurara invented both blackness and whiteness, because he basically created the notion of blackness through this description of Africans, and as Dr. Kendi says blackness has no meaning without whiteness. Other European countries followed the Portuguese lead in looking to Africa for human property and free labor, and in adopting this fiction about the inferiority of African people.

I found this clarifying. Racism didn't start with a misunderstanding, it started with a lie.

Meanwhile, over here in colonial America, the people now calling themselves White got busy taking these racist ideas and turning them into law -- laws that stripped all human rights from the people they were calling Black and locking them into our particularly vicious brand of chattel slavery, and laws that gave even the poorest White people benefits, including the right to not be enslaved for life, the right to not have your loved ones torn from your arms and sold, and sometimes other real goodies. The handouts of free land to Whites in places like Virginia (and to White people only) started long before the American Revolution and continued long after. Now I can imagine there would be people listening to me who might be thinking, come on, this is all ancient history. Why does this matter -- things have changed. Can't we just get over it and move on? Still, I would argue for me certainly learning this history has brought a real shift in the way that I understand racism today.

To review two quick takeaways from what I've said so far ...

One: Race is not a thing biologically. It's a story some people decided to tell.

And two: People told that story to justify the brutal exploitation of other human beings for profit.

I didn't learn those two facts in school,

I suspect most of us didn't. If you did, you had a special teacher.

But once they sink in, for one thing, it becomes clear that racism is not mainly a problem of attitudes of individual bigotry. Now, it's a tool -- a tool to divide us and to prop up economic, political, and social systems that advantage some people and disadvantage others. And it's a tool to convince a lot of white folks who may or may not be getting a great deal out of our highly stratified society to support the status quo: It could be worse, at least I'm White.

Once I grasped the origins of racism, I stopped being mystified by the fact that it's still with us. I guess you know, looking back I thought about racism as being sort of like the Flat Earth: Bad outdated thinking that would fade away on its own before long. But now this tool of whiteness is still doing the job it was invented to do. Powerful people go to work every day leveraging and reinforcing this old weapon in the halls of power. We don't need a fuss over whether these people believe what they're saying; whether they're really racist. That's not what it's about. ***It's about pocketbooks and power.***

Finally, I think the biggest lesson of all, and we talk in particular to the white folks for a minute: Once we understand that people who look like us invented the very notion of race in order to advantage themselves and us, isn't it easier to see that it's our problem to solve?

It's a white people problem. I'm embarrassed to say that for a long time, I thought of racism as being mainly a struggle for people of color to fight. Sort of like the people on the TV screen when I was a kid, or as if I were on the sidelines at a sports contest. On one side, people of

color. On the other, those real racists, the southern sheriff, the people in hoods, and I was sincerely rooting for people of color to win the struggle.

But now there are no sidelines, we're all in it. We are implicated, and if I'm not joining the struggle to dismantle the system that advantages me I am complicit. This isn't about shame or guilt. White guilt doesn't get anything done and, honestly, I don't feel a lot of guilt. History isn't my fault or yours. What I do feel is a stronger sense of responsibility to do something.

All of this has altered the way that I think about and approach my work, as a documentary storyteller, and as a teacher. But beyond that, besides that, what does it mean? What does it mean for any of us? Does it mean that we support leaders who want to push ahead with a conversation about reparations? In our communities, are we finding people who are working to transform unjust institutions and supporting that work in my job? At my job, am I the white person who shows up grudgingly for the diversity and equity meeting, or am I trying to figure out how to be a real accomplice to my colleagues of color?

Seems to me, wherever we show up, we need to show up with humility and vulnerability, and a willingness to put down this power that we did not earn.

I believe we also stand to benefit if we could create a society that's not built on the exploitation or oppression of anyone but, in the end, we should do this.

We should show up, figure out how to take action -- because it's right.