

Get Whitey!

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Race doesn't exist. Race is a construct, a creation of theory and practice. Yet race is real. Money is also a construct, but instead of paying your rent send in a note explaining that money doesn't exist and you refuse to pretend it does. Call me from the homeless shelter and tell me how that went.

Race doesn't exist, but race is real. Welcome to the United States.

The race that doesn't exist is the biological race. There is no scientific basis for Black, white, Latino, etc. The race that is real is the race of power relationships. The race of power relationships is the history of land-owning, European men deciding who will be oppressed (as in owned or exterminated). The race of power relationships is about the creation of whiteness and white supremacy.

I use the term white supremacy rather than racism. Racism has become so watered down it's difficult to know what it actually means. In mainstream parlance, racism is synonymous with prejudice. In anti-racism circles racism is ostensibly about a system of subjugation in which prejudice plus power equals oppression. The problem here is that even though racism is about a system not about individual feelings, the definition is based on prejudice, or how a group thinks and feels about others. An even greater problem is that the definition is race neutral, any one group that has social power could be racist. I have other problems with the definition (like that it incorrectly denotes racism as operating independently from other systems of oppression), but the race neutrality of it bothers me most. It is not a historical accident that white people benefit from white supremacy. **The creation and ongoing reinforcement of the existence of whiteness is the reason for white supremacy. It's the glue that holds the United States together.**

Race, specifically whiteness, took centuries of work by financial and political elites to solve a problem. Their problem was, is, and always has been that they are few while those they take from are many. How do they continue the taking without being killed by the many? In other countries, under other economic systems, the elites have used religion and other tactics to insure a working system, but at the end of the day they have usually relied on an army of some kind. In North America in the 1600s there wasn't an army, the king of England refused requests to send British troops to quell dissent and restore order. In fact, the rich were surrounded by enslaved Africans, guerrilla groups of Native Americans, and indentured Europeans all with a clear idea of who was benefiting from this "new world" and who wasn't. The rich were outnumbered, as

usual, but didn't have an army to step in. Their answer was to recruit from those they were taking from, to create an army of white people.

The purpose of race, specifically of whiteness, is to pull one segment of the working class into the camp of the rich. These workers have never been duped, they are bought off. In return for material and psychological privileges, what W.E.B. Du Bois called the "wages of whiteness," white workers chose then and continuously choose to separate from other workers. No matter how poor a white man got, he could never be property. No matter how incompetent or stupid a white person may be, in a segregated society they don't have to face competition for certain jobs. The bribe of white privilege, forcibly given and willingly accepted, pulls groups of people into whiteness. The English, the Irish, the German, the Italian all became white, and they stay so. And they did it at the expense of the Cherokee, the Mexican, and, most definitely, the African. True, some whites have it better than others, but the point of whiteness is that no white has it too bad. Joel Olson, in his book *The Abolition of White Democracy*, describes it thusly: "[Whiteness] does not make all whites absolute equals, but that was never the intent of white citizenship. It just ensures that no white ever need find himself or herself at the absolute bottom of the social and political barrel, because that position is already taken."

So I ask, "Is it possible to end white supremacy in the United States?" I absolutely think so. **The key is not to change the perceptions one group has about another. The key is to abolish whiteness, to end a political category that gives privilege to one group at the expense of others.** I believe this is the only strategy that has ever worked. From the 1930s through the modern civil rights movement there were groups of whites and Blacks coming together to get to know each other and tear down walls. These groups always ended with Black people hurrying to get home on the other side of town before sundown. Only when Black people forcefully disrupted life in the South did social change come. That disruption of the wages of whiteness, of what it meant to be white in the U.S., led to change. To end white supremacy, however, change isn't enough. Racial equality, the right for us all to be treated equally bad by rich people, will not suffice. True justice is achieved by ending the concept of whiteness and this is done by ending the privileges of whiteness.

With the end of legal segregation are the privileges of whiteness harder to see? This assumes that under Jim Crow everyone agreed the privileges were clear. The Montgomery Bus Boycott initially began with a demand for an equal number of seats for both Blacks and whites. Within 20 years the popular call was self-determination and liberation (i.e. Black power). When the Montgomery Bus Boycott was first called, who could have imagined what would be in two decades? A social movement didn't exist, and without one such far-reaching change didn't seem possible. We face a similar situation today. Our course is to think of a strategy that builds from a local front of struggle into a national social movement capable of making the impossible inevitable. Charting this course has always involved careful power analysis, and today is no different. **Whiteness was created as an adaptable, evolving political tool, capable of expanding and shifting to meet the needs of the time. We must always be asking how the color line is drawn today?**

I believe we should focus on local struggle, particularly on fighting systems of social control such as the prisons, police, courts, immigration, education, and others. Grassroots organizing aimed at forcing these local institutions to treat all with justice, I think, have the best chance of growing from a local ripple to a national wave. Our worst mistake would be to take local energy away from the community. **Even worse would be to inadvertently support the system**

of white privilege through demands based on poor analysis. Jena, Louisiana is a good example.

In 2006, two Black high school students in the small, rural town sat under a tree historically considered a “white area.” White students responded by hanging nooses from that tree and were suspended. When Black youth protested what they saw as a light sentence, the District Attorney, addressing a school assembly, told them he could “take [their] lives away with a stroke of [his] pen.” As the tension rose the state did nothing when Black students were victims of violence. Yet when a white student was attacked, after allegedly taunting the Black students, the bomb was dropped.

The September 20th march on Jena attended by tens of thousands across the country was an amazing example of bringing national attention to local situations. Blogs and text messaging were the main mobilization tools used by Black youth throughout the country. These efforts were so successful they caught the attention of radio DJ Tom Joyner as well as Rev. Jesse Jackson and Rev. Al Sharpton. This mobilization swarm is probably typical for the 21st century. The follow up, however, is typical for the 1960s. Rev. Al Sharpton’s National Action Network organized a march on Washington calling for greater federal prosecution of hate crimes. **Bringing the Jena families to D.C. for a rally doesn’t make as much sense as the creation of an organization run by Jena families. Fighting to give prosecutors more power to prosecute makes no sense in any context.**

Part of the reason I believe so many people responded to the Jena call is because every county in the US has a District Attorney ready to destroy the lives of people of color with the stroke of a pen. It is part of the structure of white supremacy to have local institutions reinforcing the privileges of whiteness. Nationally networked, local campaigns rooted in a present-day analysis have the best chance of taking on those institutions. **Defeating the institutions that support racial hierarchy will end whiteness.**

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