

Why whiteness is harming America

*“Whatever white people do not know about Negroes reveals precisely and inexorably what they do not know about themselves.” [James Baldwin, “Letter From A Region In My Mind”](#)*

The following ideas come from the perspective of a Black woman. I am not white and I do not claim to know what all white people are thinking. I do, however, want to address white people to discuss “whiteness.”

I’ll start out by saying that the majority of my friends and acquaintances are white. So, amid all the recent discussions about race and the heightened tensions in the U.S. today, I can’t help but think about white people. When I think about white people, I think about racism and some really ugly people (particularly those who have committed disgusting acts of violence against people of color). Yet, I also think about my best friends and former classmates and coworkers. I’ve been on the receiving end of comments like “I don’t see color” and “You don’t seem Black to me,” and I’ve listened to logic that would signify a lack of understanding about what race really is.

Now that we’ve addressed my perspective: we need to talk about whiteness with white people. And, when I say “we,” I am including Black people.

*“We, the black and the white, deeply need each other here if we are really to become a nation, if we are really, that is, to achieve our identity, our maturity, as men and women.” Baldwin, [The Fire Next Time](#)*

Black people have spent many years, and many generations, in this country working to figure out and define what it means to be Black. I use the [capitalized “Black” rather than “black”](#) because Blackness is not simply a racial identifier. A Black person is a member of a vast and entrenched cultural identity. Blackness is a combination of the culture established in the U.S. by Europeans and the numerous cultures that were brought over by enslaved Africans centuries ago. Blackness is a product of hundreds of years of slavery, oppression and rediscovery of self which Black people have collectively endured since our ancestors came to this continent.

For Black people, defining what it means to be Black and claiming that identity to the world has been a matter of survival. Enslaved peoples had no rights and no ability to learn about their ancestors’ history or traditions, so they were forced to forge their own. Great authors, poets, philosophers, activists and teachers have all played a role in identifying and defining Black culture so that future generations of Black people can understand it and learn from it.

It’s long past time that white people do the same for themselves.

*“The removal of legal barriers that once separated the races has done little to change the distorted belief system that lives on in the hearts and minds of millions of individuals. At this*

*point, the only thing needed for racism to continue is for good people to do nothing.” Debby Irving, “Waking Up White: And Finding Myself in the Story of Race”*

I remember one adult during my childhood once told me that she didn't like to use the terms “white” or “black” because they are colors and not literal descriptors of people. Having been raised in mostly white communities, I was used to hearing that sort of stuff and always thought people had good intentions behind such arguments. It wasn't until I went to college and studied politics, gender and race that I began to understand the importance of learning the true history of these terms and the lasting impacts of that history. For example, I learned about the mass, and deliberate, miseducation and racial classification of American people (not to mention people colonized by Europeans all over the globe).

Sadly, some of the most important facts of history that I learned in college and personal studies are facts that most Americans, especially white Americans, are never required to learn. You have to be interested in what people like James Baldwin, bell hooks or Malcolm X had to say [in order to learn](#) much of what they've said. So, it's not surprising that most white Americans' understanding of the terms “white” and “black” is tied to color, not social, political or economic classifications.

Whiteness [has long been a problem](#) in this country and around the world. Today, the white supremacist ideology remains the root cause of many hardships for people of color in the U.S. But what's truly interesting about whiteness is its deceptive nature. By existing, whiteness itself creates space for racism to flourish. This is not because white people are inherently racist, but rather because of the value placed on being “white”.

Whiteness is not an ethnic origin, like French or Irish, but a category in a class system. This fantasy is so embedded in American life that we do not often see it fully. Claiming whiteness as a personal identity perpetuates systems of race-based oppression.

*“The politics of whiteness transcends the colour of anyone's skin. It is an occupying force in the mind. It is a political ideology that is concerned with maintaining power through domination and exclusion. Anyone can buy into it, just like anyone can choose to challenge it. [...] Those who perceive every critique of white-dominated politics to be an attack of them as a white person are probably part of the problem.” Reni Eddo-Lodge, “Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race”*

Whiteness was created to separate those who had the most rights from those who had the least, those who were the most human from those who were less than human. What makes a person truly “white” is their ability to move through the world under the assumption that the world exists to serve them, with the expectation that the world will comply.

Our whole system of “races” was [established to justify the enslavement and abuse](#) of certain people over others. At one time, Christianity served as the main identifier to separate the “civilized” from the “savages.” Over time, as more Black people converted to Christianity — mostly due to European persuasion — a new system was devised to distinguish between people who could be full citizens and those who could not. This system was never based on anything biological, but science didn’t stop people from believing in it. In fact, some “scientists” [of the time attempted to](#) develop biological justification for race.

The fact is, race determines a person’s place in society but says nothing at all about the person as an individual.

Just as I am only Black because of the creation of race, my best friend is only white because of the creation of race. Our racial identities, though, are associated with totally opposite experiences: whiteness was created to allow people like my friend to live a life of luxury in the United States and to justify the dehumanization of people like me. Her ancestors were encouraged to own property while mine were forced to become property. Her ancestors were afforded the highest quality education, living arrangements and health care available. Mine were offered a separate, often sub-par variation of each. These distinctions were sometimes codified by laws, but they were also enforced and perpetuated by people who believed that these distinctions were natural, earned or, in some cases, [handed down by God](#).

Of course, most people today recognize the fallacy of these beliefs. Christians are no more or less human than Muslims, whites are no more or less human than Blacks. People are people, all equally deserving of respect and human rights, according to more modern, progressive attitudes.

Our inclusive perspective, however, is not enough to erase or reverse the generations of miseducation dating back to a time when a Black person couldn’t speak to a white person unless spoken to. More importantly, this modern understanding of “what is right” can not, on its own, undo systems of racial oppression.

To restate my point: in order to be in control of your own life, you must know who and what you are. No one is responsible for your actions other than you, and that includes those actions which directly influence those around you. A restaurant cannot make you eat its food, a religion cannot make you believe in itself. I cannot make a white person see myself as equal, but the white person in question will do so, or not, according to their own perspective on life.

*“If there’s a place for tolerance in racial healing, perhaps it has to do with tolerating my own feelings of discomfort that arise when a person, of any color, expresses emotion not welcome in the culture of niceness [...] For me, tolerance is not about others, it’s about accepting my own uncomfortable emotions as I adjust to a changing view of myself as imperfect and vulnerable.”*  
Irving, “Waking Up White: And Finding Myself in the Story of Race”

Each of us is a participant in something that is bigger than all of us: social conditioning. Like [a bad temper or](#) the habit of using a toilet, racist and prejudiced thoughts and behaviors [can be passed down](#) through generations. Additionally, the environment around us has a major influence on the ways each of us thinks and acts.

The unconscious lessons which each of us has learned and reenacted for years, often without realizing that we are doing so, [continue to perpetuate the patterns](#) of behavior that shape our lives, individually and collectively. Unchecked, these unconscious lessons also dictate the ways in which our political, social and economic systems reinforce pre-established and outdated patterns of oppression.

Of course, I'm sure there are some people who consciously value systems of oppression and seek to uphold those systems. I assert, however, that the majority of Americans [unconsciously participate in the repetition](#) of these harmful patterns of thought and behavior.

Black folks have learned how the experiences of our ancestors have influenced our lives. Scholars have studied the influence of slavery and oppression on Black people in many ways, from [religion](#) to colorism to [wealth inequality](#). Many Black people opt to educate themselves on these concepts because, for us, it is a way of understanding who we are and where we've come from. Understanding our own identities has been a necessary pursuit for a group of people whose humanity was stripped away from them long ago.

White Americans have learned the same history that all young people learn in American public schools. Yet for most white Americans, it is not necessary to challenge the history that they have been taught, nor the social conditioning that goes along with it. In fact, it [may be incredibly uncomfortable](#) to do so. Whiteness itself is rooted in, and dependent upon, that history—a story that uplifts Anglo-Saxon Christian perspectives and establishes the “white savior” as the protagonist.

In the U.S., that “white savior” ideology has become intimately tied to an “American” identity, and modern day nationalism coupled with white supremacy is a direct descendant of this history as well. So long as white people identify with whiteness, they are not personally threatened by a white supremacist system.

Realistically, though, any system that values some people over others ultimately will hurt everyone. As race is a system which designates class, [white supremacy makes it easy for inequality](#) to flourish unchallenged, whether social or economic. So long as white people of diverse economic status continue to value their whiteness above equity for all, any pursuit for racial equality — which would inevitably lead to economic, religious and other equalities as well — will be resisted by white people who feel attacked by that pursuit. Those who think that their whiteness is valuable to them will fight to protect it, and any movement that seeks to dismantle a

white supremacist system — a system based on inequality and oppression — will be [received as a movement to dismantle or somehow attack white people](#) themselves.

*“It is white people’s responsibility to be less fragile; people of color don’t need to twist themselves into knots trying to navigate us as painlessly as possible.” Robin DiAngelo, “White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism”*

In order to combat racism, in order to dismantle the systems of oppression based on a white supremacist society, each and every American, and especially white Americans, must analyze the role of their own ancestors in creating and perpetuating the patterns of behavior that support those systems of oppression. More importantly, each of us, and *especially* white people, must analyze and address the ways in which we *personally* perpetuate the patterns of behavior that support systems of oppression, cultural, political, economic or otherwise.

An attack on white supremacy is not an attack on any individual: it is an attack on white supremacy. If you find yourself feeling personally attacked by any effort to dismantle that system, ask yourself why that is.

If every American on a daily basis would commit to recognizing and challenging the biases that exist within ourselves, we would all be one step closer to dismantling racism and many other tools of oppression. We could all be one step closer to true freedom.

*“The customary way for white people to think about the topic of race—and it is only a topic to white people—is to ask, ‘How would it be if I were black?’..... The way to approach it, I think, is...to seriously consider what it is like to be white.” [Fran Lebowitz, Fran Lebowitz on Race and Racism](#)*