



The Racial Script¹

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Maybe now a broader portion of the population can understand what James Baldwin meant when he said, “To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time.”² The rage is helpful to the degree that it is part of generating new knowledge about the world in our efforts toward change for the good of all. The fact that black people bleed and die in a country with a history of slavery and the lynch law isn’t new. What may be new to many is just how prevalent and persistent white supremacy is in this country. To see that prevalence more clearly, we’ll need to understand what Baldwin meant when he said that white people remain trapped within a history that they do not understand, one from which they need release, but they must act—and be committed. But to act in response to this history is terrifying. For whites—indeed for anyone—to be freed, we must engage a complete recalibration of identity. Short of that, there is no exit.

Reality has been hijacked, and the result is a history of carnage. The place where I am writing this, Illinois’s Cook County, is populated by the two

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² James Baldwin in a 1961 Radio Address, “The Negro in American Culture,” a group conversation with James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, Lorraine Hansberry, Emile Capouya, Alfred Kazin, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jNpitdJSXWY>.

In order to be dismantled, white supremacy must be understood as distinct from attitudes or practices like prejudice and xenophobia. White supremacy is historically constructed and deeply embedded in the political ecosystem of the Western world, trapping white and black people in a repeating script that can only be ended by a complete recalibration of identity.

demographics hardest hit by COVID-19: black and brown people. And in the midst of so much death and uncertainty caused by the pandemic, we are, yet again, forced to behold the spectacle of the state killing unarmed black people. When forty-six-year-old George Floyd pleaded with the officers, “I can’t breathe!” while calling out for his mother as he lay dying in handcuffs, face down on the street with a white officer choking him to death, the world was shaken from its precautionary shelter-in-place. The horrifying images of his murder proliferated through social media, but some of the most appalling aspects of the crime are easy to miss. Officer Chauvin knelt on George Floyd’s neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds, before a watching public, as indifferently as one might wait in a checkout line at the grocery store. His left hand was casually in his pocket, sunglasses securely resting on the top of his head, and the weight of his body secured his knee firmly on the back of Floyd’s neck. He was serene as he dismissed pleas from onlookers, and from Floyd himself, even as Floyd cried for his mother. The casual, callous disregard for George Floyd’s life—and the indifference about the deaths of many other unarmed black people within the last few weeks, months, and years—is hard to fathom if we fail to recognize what is happening in all of them. They are not isolated incidents. Western history has devised a premise that merges them all.

The premise is white supremacy. Current events have opened more eyes to the reality of its widespread presence, but most people still struggle with language to name it. In common conversation about racial oppression, words like *xenophobia*, *prejudice*, and *white supremacy* are often used interchangeably, which doesn’t help. We’re not likely to prescribe the right treatment without an accurate diagnosis. Misdiagnosing the problem makes it difficult to understand how profoundly insidious white supremacy is, and how embedded it is within the story this nation believes itself to be living. It’s so much greater than “a few bad apples.” White supremacy sits deep inside the way we’ve been made to understand the world after centuries of reality-bending cruelty. If there is any possible way to address the problem, we must recognize what it is, and what it is not.

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First, although white supremacy often includes affect, it is not about your feelings—which is to say, it is not a matter of liking or disliking different races. History is replete with white supremacists who love black people, sexually and/or otherwise. It’s also not xenophobia, nor is it prejudice. But it often includes both of those ideological gangsters, and others (e.g., sexism, heterosexism, antisemitism, ableism, classism).

Some scholars help to clarify the meaning of xenophobia by contrasting it with xenophilia: an attraction to or affection for strangers or foreigners or anything strange. The xenophile likes foreigners; the xenophobe does not. Xenophobia is the opposite of hospitality; it is an attitude of unwelcome for strangers, or foreigners, or anything strange. It is not selective about which foreigners or strangers to dislike. Most importantly, it is not white supremacy. But white supremacy may include xenophobia in the practice of maintaining exclusively white space.

White supremacy is also not prejudice. We practice prejudice when we produce or embrace knowledge about people we don't know that is not based on actual experience with them. Prejudice is bias against or contempt toward others resulting from unsubstantiated information about them. In his book *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Howard Thurman describes the ingredients of hatred, which are a good primer on prejudice. According to Thurman, hatred includes (1) contact without fellowship, which leads to (2) unsympathetic understanding, which generates (3) ill will, finally giving rise to (4) hatred walking.³ One might say that prejudice is a matter of the heart. But prejudice alone is not white supremacy. It is vital to understand the difference at this point: any individual may harbor unfounded bias or contempt toward a person or group of people. And while an individual's affect toward others can change, that is not the kind of transformation that will end white supremacy. No amount of hugging will eliminate it because white supremacy is not about affect; it's about anthropology. How do we understand what it means to be human? White supremacy is the historical answer to that question, with a definition that is hegemonic. It includes prejudice, but baseless contempt or bias alone is not white supremacy.

Racism and *white supremacy* are terms that can be used interchangeably as they both describe the same phenomenon resulting from a uniquely Western world conversation. It is the manufacture and the maintenance of systems and structures for whites only. Hatred and harm are always secondary effects of a primary longing for idealized community populated by a fetishized, white ideal. That is racism, and racism is white supremacy. In what follows, I will explain what I mean by that definition of white supremacy. It is not my intent to offer a comprehensive history of race in this brief space; I aim to help clarify terms in order to provide us with better tools to diagnose the problem. As the saying goes, diagnosis determines treatment.

THE SCRIPT

To live in the United States is to be the default recipient of an old and appalling political ecosystem. The political, economic, and social systems of this nation are historically synchronized to work like a theatrical production that is played out, at every level of social discourse, in scripted encounters. Even when it seems that we are making free-will decisions, we are inevitably engaging the script. We've

³ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon, 1976).

seen it all before, just as we have seen it recently: police and vigilante whites killing unarmed black people; white people making petty police calls on black people as if the police are their personal enforcement service, or a lynch mob on speed-dial; a biased legal system with disproportionate, race-based prison sentencing . . . the list is long. These racial conditions for the US populace are not random or disconnected. They are part of a script that informs the common understanding of human difference in the United States, and our corresponding mode of social interaction. We are handed this script at birth, and we all learn our obligatory lines and roles from multiple life teachers. We learn that we are protagonists or antagonists in the story, not by choice, but because we cannot avoid it. The script is written in our flesh, interpreted through foundational social platforms, and rehearsed throughout history. It is the story of race. This long-running performance is as old as the United States and as recent as the trans-Atlantic slave trade. It is not entertaining, and it has no grounding in reality, other than the alternate reality it has caused.

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It is vital to see its plotline in the symmetry of events that tirelessly result in black death, and in what follows those deaths. This is the plight of the antagonist that loosely follows a pattern: a blatant murder of an unarmed black person by a state official (or a vigilante), or lethal, disproportionate response to a baseless fear. This is followed by the corresponding hashtag moment with the black victim's name trending in social media. Defense for the killer(s) inevitably discovers some form of disparaging information about the character or behavior of the deceased, prior to their murder. The newfound info aims to justify the killer and implicate the dead. The black victim is subsequently tried in the court of public opinion using the racial script as evidence against them in their own murder since to be white is, by default, to be the protagonist, regardless. Somehow, the black dead deserved to die; they were destined for this kind of death. That is the plight of the antagonist. And to be the protagonist also means to be given the benefit of sympathy, even if one is caught in the act of murder. This is an evil loop that happens so often that it quickly commingles with the next evil loop in a pattern; wash, rinse, repeat.

That's all in the script. The plotline may not always end with the white killer being acquitted, but that is not the point. What matters is the reality-bending rationality of race that makes it logical to blame the dead for their murder. Ahmaud Arbery visited a home under construction and failed to follow the simple commands of the armed white vigilantes who stalked him as he jogged; Trayvon

Martin weaponized a sidewalk; Walter Scott owed child support when he was shot more than five times in his back at a distance of nearly twenty feet from a uniformed officer, while he was running away.

WRITING THE SCRIPT

The opposing characters in this script are not individuals; they're demographics. But unlike most narratives, the main characters in this script don't share comparable power. This story reached its maturity during the slave trade, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was then that theorists and laypeople made sense of their quickly changing world by assembling what are now common beliefs about human difference. Limited theories were combined with economic interests to become toxic ideology, organizing societies around the notion of human being as a hegemonic identifier for whites only.

The science of human taxonomies gave foundational relevance to the ideology of race, and two prominent theorists are important in that endeavor. In the early eighteenth century, the Swedish naturalist Carl Von Linnaeus coined the term *Homo sapiens* when he assembled the first taxonomy of five human types based primarily on geography and qualities. Within his taxonomy, he singularizes one that he names *Europeanus* by his description: in addition to his "blue eyes" and "inventive mind," he is not like the others, who are governed by caprice, customs, or opinions. *Europeanus* is "governed by laws."

In the late eighteenth century, German naturalist Johan Friedrich Blumenbach follows Linnaeus with a taxonomy of his own. Blumenbach largely accepts Linnaeus's findings, yet he introduces a new advancement: aesthetics. The introduction of the philosophy of beauty into the science of taxonomy formalizes a hierarchy based on appearance. Blumenbach connects the origin of the *Europeanus* to the Caucasus, because of the supposed beauty of its white inhabitants. They are the most beautiful, according to Blumenbach, and, as such, they are the template by which to measure human beauty. With Blumenbach, the European becomes beautiful, white, Caucasian.⁴ And with the addition of the language of beauty scientifically linked to white as a racial trait, along with the work of other racial theorists, European racial science gives intellectual support to the burgeoning ideology of white supremacy. But for race to become fully actualized as an argument for the ascendancy of white people in an ideology of human difference, it would need the negro.

THE DOOR OF NO RETURN

Africa's west coast is the location of various ports where Europeans once loaded ambushed and kidnapped Africans into cargo ships headed for the "New World."

⁴ Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W. W. Norton).

The Africans had names, they came from families, and the families belonged to peoples like the Yoruba, Ewe, Mende, and Mandinka. They had traditions connected to places with cultures and histories, all of which composed an identity that was decimated by the slave trade. When they encountered Europeans, they entered a different reality. Their identity was placed on their skin, and race became how they were recognized. The Ewe, Mende, and Mandinka became “negro.” Some scholars describe the slaving ports as wombs out of which the slave was born. Aime Cesaire described the ports as sources for the creation of walking compost, a product that would be essential to the production of sugar cane, tobacco, and the very lucrative cotton. The British called them factories.⁵ It was there that something new was let loose on the world. Ideology accompanied black bodies as they left the African continent, in order to legitimize seeing them as livestock. By 1790, European colonists in the United States were using *white* as a legal identifier for themselves, aided in that description by the logic of the sciences and the practice of trading in African flesh. Whites became fully human, and synonymous with *free citizen* in a new land for whites only, as distinguished from the partly human, non-citizen, black slave. The logic of race was important; it was a financially incentivized anthropology to formally authenticate the ascendant status of white people and the natural, moral, even Christian practice of white domination of everything related to heaven and earth.

CONJURING BLACK

Slavery endured for nearly two hundred and fifty years in the US, during which time the logic of race contrived a being who had never existed. It was a type of conjuring—which is to say, invoking the presence of a being by magic or ritual. The “negro” was an invoked, non-natural caricature of black people that served to stabilize the slave industry as a moral good. In 1933, Sterling Brown’s “Negro Character as Seen by White Authors” was another type of taxonomy, although not the pseudo-scientific European sort that classified human life hierarchically. Brown’s taxonomy takes account of several ways white people read people of African ancestry through the lenses of white supremacy. The contented slave represents white ideals of the negro under the complete authority of whites. Accordingly, black people were satisfied, as it suited their inferior constitution. The wretched freeman is the negro outside of his God-ordained state of slavery. This was the condition of the negro upon escape to the North, longing for the South and slavery. “Dixie,” the theme song of the Confederacy, is the voice of the wretched freeman. The comic negro depicts how distant negroes are from whites in capacities for civilized, intellectual, and moral living. The comic negro is trying to be civilized, and it’s funny; his use of white people’s fancy clothes and big words is all just comical. The brute negro is the regressed condition of black people after slavery. Once

⁵ See Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007).

black people are no longer under the parentage of the benevolent white sovereign ones, they regress to savages. The tragic mulatto is regarded with pity due to her likeness to whites, and concurrently torn apart by warring biological dissimilarities. Race-mixing crosses a tragic boundary, creating a pitiful creature simultaneously beastly and ill at ease with sub-humanity. Thus, the mulatto is vindictive and rebellious. This is a type without a race, worshipping the whites yet despised by them; despising and despised by negroes who are perplexed by the mulatto's struggle to unite intellect with black sensuousness.⁶

There are also tropes not mentioned by Brown that specifically target black women, namely the mammy, jezebel, and sapphire. The racial script required inventing these movable character markups of the negro to manufacture the absence of key humanizing features that white supremacy wants to be found in whites only. This is anti-black fiction. Black caricatures help to identify the humanity of whites by manufacturing negro sub-humanity. But the emphasis on the sub-humanity of the negro is actually the ongoing defense of the protagonist in the story of race. The constantly evolving lapses highlighted within the negro help to protect the imagined ascendancy of whites. Yet, hidden within it all is another conjuring: the continued invocation of the human template that is simultaneously white and nonexistent. Thus, white supremacy disfigures all embodied human life by preserving the template. Conjuring the negro kept violent, overt, anti-black laws as part of the normal political and legal machinery of this nation for another century after the end of chattel slavery, well into the 1960s. Today, this figure haunts us as the afterlife of slavery and Jim Crow, in an overtly racist USA.

HOW SHOULD WE TALK ABOUT IT?

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The late historian of racism George Fredrickson tells us that the logic of race finally developed into three overtly racist regimes in the twentieth century: the Jim Crow South, Nazi Germany, and Apartheid South Africa. Today, those regimes are in the past. But the reality that gave them life is not. The longing for

⁶ Sterling Brown, "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors," *The Journal of Negro Education* 2, no. 2 (April 1933): 179–203.

ideal community populated with the ideal human is what maintains the systems and structures that have been historically manufactured for whites only. It is this longing that makes possible the indifference toward the lives of black and brown people that is now being captured on cellphone cameras, sparking protests. If we are to make any headway toward a reality more representative of actual human life, we need to (1) put down the script, and inquire about the way this history of white supremacy has shaped our own understanding of ourselves as raced beings; (2) encourage others to do the same; and (3) work to dismantle hegemonic systems and structures that are assembled for whites only. There is no making America great again. There is only moving forward, out of the alternate reality that race has made. ⊕

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