

CONCLUSION  
White People's Burden

THE UNITED STATES is a white country. By that I don't just mean that the majority of its citizens are white, though they are (again, for now but not forever). What makes the United States white is not the fact that most Americans are white but the assumption—especially by people with power—that American equals white. Those people don't say it outright. It comes out in subtle ways. Or, sometimes, in ways not so subtle.

Here's an example: I'm in line at a store, unavoidably eavesdropping on two white men in front of me, as one tells the other about a construction job he was on. He says: "There was this guy and three Mexicans standing next to the truck." From other things he said, it was clear that "this guy" was Anglo, white, American. It also was clear from the conversation that this man had not spoken to the "three Mexicans" and had no way of knowing whether they were Mexicans or U.S. citizens of Mexican heritage. It didn't matter. The "guy" was the default setting for American: Anglo, white. The "three Mexicans" were not Anglo, not white, and therefore not American. It wasn't "four guys standing by a truck." It was "a guy and three

Mexicans.” The race and/or ethnicity of the four men were irrelevant to the story he was telling. But the storyteller had to mark it. It was important that “the guy” not be confused with “the three Mexicans.”

Here’s another example, from the Rose Garden. At a 2004 news conference outside the White House, President George W. Bush explained that he believed democracy would come to Iraq over time:

There’s a lot of people in the world who don’t believe that people whose skin color may not be the same as ours can be free and self-govern. I reject that. I reject that strongly. I believe that people who practice the Muslim faith can self-govern. I believe that people whose skins aren’t necessarily—are a different color than white can self-govern.<sup>54</sup>

It appears the president intended the phrase “people whose skin color may not be the same as ours” to mean people who are not from the United States. That skin color he refers to that is “ours,” he makes it clear, is white. Those people not from the United States are “a different color than white.” So, white is the skin color of the United States. That means those whose skin is not white but are citizens of the United States are . . . ? What are they? Are they members in good standing in the nation, even if “their skin color may not be the same as ours”?

This is not simply making fun of a president who sometimes mangles the English language. This time he didn’t misspeak, and there’s nothing funny about it. He did seem to get confused when he moved from talking about skin color to religion (Does he

<sup>54</sup> George W. Bush, remarks at White House, April 30, 2004. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/04/20040430-2.html>

think there are no white Muslims?), but it seems clear that he intended to say that brown people—Iraqis, Arabs, Muslims, people from the Middle East, whatever the category in his mind—can govern themselves, even though they don’t look like us. And “us” is clearly white. In making this magnanimous proclamation of faith in the capacities of people in other parts of the world, in proclaiming his belief in their ability to govern themselves, he made one thing clear: The United States is white. Or, more specifically, being a real “American” is being white. So, what do we do with citizens of the United States who aren’t white?

That’s the question for which this country has never quite found an answer: What do white “Americans” do with those who share the country but aren’t white? What do we do with peoples we once tried to exterminate? People we once enslaved? People we imported for labor and used like animals to build railroads? People we still systematically exploit as low-wage labor? All those people—indigenous, African, Asian, Latino—can obtain the legal rights of citizenship. That’s a significant political achievement in some respects, and that popular movements that forced the powerful to give people those rights give us the most inspiring stories in U.S. history. The degree to which many white people in one generation dramatically shifted their worldview to see people they once considered to be subhuman as political equals is not trivial, no matter how deep the problems of white supremacy we still live with. In many comparable societies, problems of racism are as ugly, if not uglier, than in the United States. If you doubt that, ask a Turk what it is like to live in Germany, an Algerian what it’s like to live in France, a black person what it’s like to live in Japan. We can acknowledge the gains made in the United States—always understanding

those gains came because non-white people, with some white allies, forced society to change—while still acknowledging the severity of the problem that remains.

But it doesn't answer the question: What do white "Americans" do with those who share the country but aren't white?

We can pretend that we have reached "the end of racism" and continue to ignore the question. But that's just plain stupid. We can acknowledge that racism still exists and celebrate diversity, but avoid the political, economic, and social consequences of white supremacy. But, frankly, that's just as stupid. The fact is that most of the white population of the United States has never really known what to do with those who aren't white. Let me suggest a different approach.

Let's go back to the question that W. E. B. DuBois said he knew was on the minds of white people. In the opening of his 1903 classic, *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois wrote that the real question whites wanted to ask him, but were afraid to, was: "How does it feel to be a problem?"<sup>55</sup> DuBois was identifying a burden that blacks carried—being seen by the dominant society not as people but as a problem people, as a people who posed a problem for the rest of society. DuBois was right to identify "the color line" as the problem of the twentieth century. Now, in the twenty-first century, it is time for whites to self-consciously reverse the direction of that question at heart of color. It's time for white people to fully acknowledge that in the racial arena, we are the problem. We have to ask ourselves: How does it feel to be the problem?

<sup>55</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Vintage, 1990), p. 7.

That is the new White People's Burden, to understand that we are the problem, come to terms with what that really means, and act based on that understanding. Our burden is to do something that doesn't seem to come naturally to people in positions of unearned power and privilege: Look in the mirror honestly and concede that we live in an unjust society and have no right to some of what we have. We should not affirm ourselves. We should negate our whiteness. Strip ourselves of the illusion that we are special because we are white. Steel ourselves so that we can walk in the world fully conscious and try to see what is usually invisible to us white people. We should learn to ask ourselves, "How does it feel to be the problem?"

So, the question isn't what should be done about those in the United States who aren't white, but what should be done about those who are white. Maybe we should all be shipped back to Europe where we (or our ancestors) came from. Maybe we should be subject to a little tough love—no more unearned benefits from society until we clean up our act. Or maybe we should start by openly telling the truth: Whiteness—the whole constellation of practices, beliefs, attitudes, emotions that are mixed up with being white—is the problem. Whiteness is degraded and depraved, an insane belief that one can find meaning in life simply by virtue of being on top of a racial hierarchy. To the degree that we accept any of the meaning that the dominant society gives to whiteness, we white people are degraded and depraved. To the degree those illusions of superiority linger in me, I am degraded and depraved.

Don't confuse this book with some feel-good, self-help project. When I face these things about myself and about the world in which I live, I usually don't feel better. As I have already said, it

makes me incredibly sad. Such feelings are inevitable; if we take seriously the project of racial justice, how could we not be sad? There is a process we white people have to go through, and it isn't always fun. It starts with recognizing the reality of white supremacy, which should lead us toward serious attempts to change our own lives and join with others to change society. To make those changes possible, we have to go through a process that will be painful if it is undertaken seriously. If we are serious about asking ourselves what it feels like to be the problem, it will hurt. That hurt will be nothing like what non-white people endure because of white supremacy, but if white people struggle to be fully human there is a cost. If we let ourselves see and feel the human costs of white supremacy, can we expect to be happy all the time?

This is the only way out of the trap. If any white person wants to take seriously an honest struggle with whiteness, it doesn't lead directly to some land of love and harmony. In my experience, it is a long, difficult road. Walking that road is painful, with no guarantees about the rewards at the end. All we know is that there are rewards along the way, as one gains a better sense of one's own humanity. We should consider James Baldwin's observation in 1962: "White Americans know very little about pleasure because they are so afraid of pain."<sup>56</sup> Baldwin is one of the best commentators I have read on the experience of being white. In a 1965 essay he pointed out that blacks learn to live with racism, but whites remain deformed by it:

[W]hat happens to the poor white man's, the poor white woman's mind? It is this: they have been raised to believe,

<sup>56</sup> James Baldwin, *Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998), p. 677. This essay "Color" was first published in *Esquire* in 1962.

and by now they helplessly believe, that no matter how terrible some of their lives may be and no matter what disaster overtakes them, there is one consolation like a heavenly revelation—at least they are not black. I suggest that of all the terrible things that could happen to a human being that is one of the worst. I suggest that what has happened to the white Southerner is in some ways much worse than what has happened to the Negroes there.<sup>57</sup>

Later that same year he wrote more about white people's struggles, pointing out how white people's fear of an honest dialogue confronting racism also constrains black people's freedom to speak:

Moreover, the history of white people has led them to a fearful, baffling place where they have begun to lose touch with reality—to lose touch, that is, with themselves—and where they certainly are not truly happy, for they know they are not truly safe. They do not know how this came about; they do not dare examine how this came about. On the other hand, they can scarcely dare to open a dialogue which must, if it is honest, become a personal confession—a cry for help and healing, which is, really, I think, the basis of all dialogues—and, on the other hand, the black man can scarcely dare to open a dialogue which must, if it is honest, become a personal confession which, fatally, contains an accusation. And yet, if neither of us cannot do this, each of us will perish in those traps in which we have been struggling for so long.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 716. This essay, "The American Dream and the American Negro," was first published in the *New York Times Magazine* in 1965.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 724–725. This essay, "The White Man's Guilt," was first published in *Ebony* in 1965.

If we white people can fashion a personal confession in which we ask ourselves how it feels to be a problem, then perhaps we can face the accusations that will come our way in the personal confessions of non-white people. For white people, that is our task, our burden. Our "White People's Burden."

The old version of the "White Man's Burden" was a call to bring civilization to the darker people of the world. The first lines of Rudyard Kipling's poem set the tone for his ode to empire, to the false nobility of white supremacy:

Take up the White Man's burden—  
Send forth the best ye breed—  
Go bind your sons to exile  
To serve your captives' need.

We long have known that what the "captives" need is to be spared the alleged generosity and benevolent tutelage of white people. The "captives" of white supremacy do not need the best that we white people breed; they don't need our sons to run their lives. What they need from white people is for us to realize we are the problem. They need us to commit to dismantling white supremacy as an ideology and a lived reality.

The world does not need white people to civilize others. The real White People's Burden is to civilize ourselves.

## RECOMMENDED READINGS ON RACE AND ETHNICITY

- Baldwin, James. *Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998).
- Black Commentator. <http://blackcommentator.com/>.
- Crow Dog, Mary. *Lakota Woman* (New York: Grove, 1990).
- Deloria Jr., Vine. *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988).
- DuBois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Vintage, 1990/1903).
- Dyson, Michael Eric. *I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: Free Press, 2000).
- Feagin, Joe R. *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, and Future Reparations* (New York: Routledge, 2000).
- Gonzalez, Juan. *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America* (New York: Penguin, 2000).
- Kelley, Robin D. G. *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon, 1997).