

Let's Talk

I AM TALKING to you as one white person to another. I am Jewish, and I will talk about that later in this book. You also have an ethnic identity you are probably proud of. You also have a religious background, a culture, a country of origin and a history. Whatever your other identities, you probably are not used to being addressed as white.

"Other" people are African American, Asian American, Native American, Latino/as or Arab Americans. "Other" people have countries of origin and primary languages which are not English. Rarely in this country do we identify ourselves or each other as white. It is an adjective which is seldom heard explicitly, but is everywhere implied. People are assumed white unless otherwise noted, much as people (and animals) are assumed to be male.

Read the following lines:

"He walked into the room and immediately noticed her."

"This new sitcom is about a middle-aged, middle-class couple and their three teenage children."

"The average American drinks two cups of coffee a day."

"Women today want to catch a man who is strong, but sensitive."

"She didn't know if she would get into the college of her choice."

"My grandmother lived on a farm all her life."

"I have a friend who has AIDS."

"He won a medal on the Special Olympics basketball team."

Are all these people white? Read the sentences again and imagine the people referred to are Chinese Americans. Does that change the meanings? Try

making them Native American. How does that change the meaning? If you are of Christian background what happens when you make them Jewish?

In reality, we would have to specify they are Chinese American or Native American or Jewish because we would not automatically assume they were. Similarly with you and me. We assume we are white. It can seem like we're

stating the obvious. Yet there is something about stating the obvious that makes us feel uneasy, marked. Why notice? What's the point of saying I'm white?

We have been led to believe that racism is a question of particular acts of discrimination or violence. Calling someone a name, denying someone a job, excluding someone from a neighborhood—that is racism. These certainly are acts of racism. But what about living in a white suburb where people of color are excluded or harassed? What about working in an organization where people of color are paid less, have more menial work or fewer opportunities for advancement? Racism affects each and every aspect of our lives, *all the time*, whether people of color are present or not.

People of color know this intimately. They know that where they live, work and walk, who they talk with and how, what they read, listen to or watch on TV, their past experiences and future possibilities are all influenced by racism. As white people we also know this, but do not talk about it. We will discuss why we don't talk about it later. Because we don't talk about it, naming whiteness can seem scary, foolish, unnecessary, pointless or illegitimate.

Of course there are times when we talk with the unspoken assumption that we are white. When the subject is desegregation, or integration, or immigration, or affirmative action we are clear about being white and speaking about "them," i.e., people of color.

For the next few days notice how rarely you see or hear the words white, Caucasian, or Euro-American. Where is it implied but not stated specifically? Where is African American or Latino/a specified so you can infer who is white without it being named?

Carry your whiteness with you. During the day, in each new situation, remind yourself that you are white. What difference has it made/does it make? Who is around you, what are they doing, are they white or people of color? What difference do you notice that it makes? Write down what you notice. Discuss it with a friend.

Particularly notice whenever you are somewhere where there are only white people. How did it come to be that there are no people of color there? Are they really not there, or only invisible? Did they grow some of the food, originally own the land, build the buildings, or clean and maintain the place where you are?

“I’m Not White”

RECENTLY I WAS doing a workshop on racism and we wanted to divide the group into a caucus of people of color and a caucus of white people, so that each group could have more in-depth discussion. Immediately some of the white people said, “But I’m not white.”

I was somewhat taken aback because although these people looked white they were clearly distressed about being labeled white. A white, Christian woman stood up and said, “I’m not really white because I’m not part of the white male power structure that perpetuates racism.” Next a white gay man stood up and said, “You have to be straight to have the privileges of being white.” A white, straight, working class man from a poor family then said, “I’ve got it just as hard as any person of color.” Finally, a straight, white middle class man said, “I’m not white, I’m Italian.”

My African-American co-worker turned to me and asked, “Where are all the white people who were here just a minute ago?” Of course I replied, “Don’t ask me, I’m not white, I’m Jewish!”

Most of the time we don’t notice or question our whiteness. However, when the subject is racism many of us don’t want to be white, because it opens us to charges of being racist and brings up feelings of guilt, shame, embarrassment and hopelessness. There are others who proudly claim whiteness under any circumstances and simply deny or ignore the violence that white people have done to people of color.

Those of us who are middle class are more likely to assume we are white without having to emphasize the point, and to feel guilty when it is noticed or brought up. Those of us who are poor or working class are more likely to have had to assert our whiteness against the effects of economic discrimination and the presence of other racial groups. Although we share the benefits of being white, we don’t share the economic privileges of being middle class and so we

are more likely to feel angry and less likely to feel guilty than middle class counterparts.

Whatever our economic status, most of us become paralyzed with some measure of fear, guilt, anger, defensiveness or confusion if we are named as white when racism is being addressed.

In this country it has always been dangerous even to talk about racism. “Nigger lover,” “Indian lover,” and “race traitor” are labels which have carried severe consequences. You probably know the names of white civil rights workers who were killed for their actions against racism, such as Goodman, Schwerner, and Luizzo. Many of us have been isolated from friends or family because of disagreements over racism. A lot of us have been called “racist.”

Saying “I am white” may make us feel either guilty of being racist, or traitorous toward other whites. We don’t want to be labeled or stereotyped. Talking about racism has often occurred in the context of angry words, hostility, accusations and divisiveness. We also may have fears about people of color separating from us if we are clearly identified as white.

In any case, some of us are quick to disavow our whiteness, or to claim some other identity which will give us legitimate victim status. We certainly don’t want to be seen as somehow responsible for or complicit with racism.

We must begin here—with this denial of our whiteness—because racism keeps people of color in the limelight and makes whiteness invisible. To change this we must take whiteness itself and hold it up to the light and see that it is a color too. Whiteness is a concept, an ideology which holds tremendous power over our lives and, in turn, over the lives of people of color.

Our challenge in this discussion will be to keep whiteness center stage. Every time our attention begins to wander off toward people of color or other issues, we will have to notice and refocus. We must notice when we try to slip into another identity and escape being white. We each have many other factors that influence our lives, such as our ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, personality, mental and physical abilities. Even when we’re talking about these elements of our lives we must keep whiteness on stage with us because it influences each of the other factors.

What parts of your identity does it feel like you lose when you say aloud the phrase “I’m white”?

Part of our discomfort may come from the complex relationship our own family’s ethnic and class background had to whiteness. Was your ethnic or cultural group ever considered not white? When they arrived in the United States, what did members of your family have to do to be accepted as white? What did they have to give up?

How has pride in being white (or becoming American) sustained you or your family? Has that identification or pride ever allowed you or your family

to tolerate poverty, economic exploitation or poor living conditions because "at least we're not colored?"

If, when you move down the streets of major U.S. cities, other people assume, based on skin color, dress, physical appearance or total impression, that you are white, then in American society that counts for being white. This is where we are going to start talking about what it means to say, "I am white." I realize that there are differences between the streets of New York and Minneapolis, and between different neighborhoods within each city. But in American society there is a broad and pervasive division between white people and people of color, and most of us know from a very early age which side we are on. If we are white we are told or learn in early childhood who to stay away from, who not to play with, who not to associate with, who isn't one of our kind.* This is true even if our parents are liberal or progressive. The training is too pervasive within our society for anyone to escape.

Whiteness is about more than skin color, although that is a major factor in this country. People of color and Jewish people are also marked as different by dress, food, the smells of cooking, religious ceremonies, celebratory rituals and mannerisms. These features are all labeled racial differences, even though they may be related to culture, religion, class or country of origin. I'm sure you know whether you are treated as "white" or as a person of color by most of the people you meet.

Say "I am white" to yourself a couple of times. What are the "but's" that immediately come to mind? Do you quickly add on another identity, perhaps one where you might claim a victim status such as female, poor, lesbian or gay, Jewish or Italian? Do you defend yourself with statements such as, "I have friends who are people of color," or "My family didn't own slaves"? Do you try to separate yourself from other white people? ("I don't feel white." "I'm not like other white people.") Do you try to minimize the importance of whiteness? ("We're all part of the human race.")

We are understandably uncomfortable with the label "white." We feel boxed in and want to escape, just as people of color want to escape from the confines of their racial categories. Being white is an arbitrary category which overrides our individual personalities, devalues us, deprives us of the richness of our other identities, stereotypes us and yet has no scientific basis. However, in our society being white is also just as real, and governs our day-to-day lives just as much as being a person of color. To acknowledge this reality is not to create it nor to perpetuate it. In fact, it is the first step to uprooting racism.

* Several studies have shown that young children between the ages of two and four notice differences of skin color, eye color, hair, dress and speech and the significance that adults give to those differences. See McGinnis, Oehlberg, and Derman-Sparks.

Whiteness is problematic. All the fear, anger, frustration, helplessness and confusion we experience about admitting that we are white is the result of racism. Many of these feelings are what keep us from recognizing and talking about the effects of racism in our own lives and the devastation that racism wreaks in our society.

We may claim that we aren't white because we simply don't (or refuse to) notice race. I sometimes like to think that I don't. But when I'm in an all white setting and a person of color walks in I notice. I am slightly surprised to see a person of color and I look again to confirm who they are and wonder to myself why they're there. I try to do this as naturally and smoothly as possible because I wouldn't want anyone to think that I wasn't tolerant. Actually what I'm surprised at is not that they are there, but that they are there as an equal. All of my opening explanations for their presence will assume they are not equal. "They must be a server or delivery person," I tell myself. It is usually not until another white person introduces me, or gives me an explanation, that my uneasiness is laid to rest. (And even then I may inwardly qualify my acceptance). We notice skin color all the time but we don't "notice" race unless our sense of the proper racial hierarchy is upset.

When I first meet someone, and I think this is true for most of us, I identify their gender (and get anxious when I can't), I identify as much about their class as I can figure out, and I identify what their racial identity is. I have two categories, white and other. I'm interested in the other. In fact, because of my assumptions about the commonness of whiteness, I often assume a person of color will be more interesting than another white person. But whether we value it positively or negatively, the difference counts and we notice it.

Since I've been taught to relate differently to people who are African American, or Latino/a, or Asian American, I may need more information than appearance gives me about what "kind" of person of color I am with. I have some standard questions to fish for more information, such as: "That's an interesting name. I've never heard it before. Where's it from?" "Your accent sounds familiar but I can't place it." "You don't look American, where are you from?"

Sometimes we ask these questions of white Americans who have unusual names or unfamiliar accents. Most often we use them to clarify who is white and who isn't, and secondarily, what kind of person of color we are dealing with.

Many of us were taught that it is not polite to notice racial difference. We may have learned that racial difference is an artificial basis used to discriminate against and exploit people of color, and therefore we may over-compensate by pretending to ignore it. White people often say, "I don't care whether a person is black, brown, orange or green." Human beings don't come in orange or green. Those whose skin color is darker are treated differently in general and

we, in particular, respond differently to them. As part of growing up white and learning racial stereotypes, we have been trained to stiffen up, be more cautious, fearful and hesitant around people of color. These are physiological and psychological responses that we can notice in ourselves and see in other white people. These responses belie our verbal assurances that we don't notice racial differences.

There's absolutely nothing wrong with being white or with noticing the difference that color makes. We were born without choice into our families. We did not choose our skin color, native language or culture. We are not responsible for being white or for being raised in a white-dominated, racist society in which we have been trained to have particular responses to people of color. We are responsible for how we respond to racism (which is what this book is about) and we can only do that consciously and effectively if we start by realizing that it makes a crucial difference that we are white.

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“I’m Not Racist”

WHETHER IT IS easy or difficult to say that we're white, the phrase we often want to say next is "...but I'm not racist." There are lots of ways that we have learned to phrase this denial.

I'm not racist.

I don't belong to the Klan.

I have friends who are people of color.

I don't see color, I'm color blind.

I do anti-racism work.

I went to an unlearning racism workshop.

This book is not about whether you are racist or not, or whether all white people are racist or not. We are not conducting a moral inventory of ourselves, nor creating a moral standard to divide other white people from us.

To avoid being called racist we may claim that we don't notice color and don't treat people differently based on color. However, we all notice color in just about every situation we're in. It's not useful or honest for any of us to claim that we don't. It is too pervasive a construct of our society to avoid. When we say things like, "I don't see color," we are trying to maintain a self-image of impartiality and fairness (and whiteness). Some of the motivation behind the claim that we are color neutral is to establish that we don't mistreat people or discriminate against them because of their race. Ultimately, this disclaimer prevents us from taking responsibility for challenging racism because we believe that people who see color are the problem.

The only way to treat people with dignity and justice is to recognize that racism has a profound negative effect upon our lives, and therefore noticing

color helps to counteract that effect. Instead of being color neutral we need to notice much more acutely and insightfully exactly the difference that color makes in the way people are treated.

Just as it's not useful to label ourselves racist or not, it is not useful to label each other. White people, individually and collectively, have done and continue to do some very brutal things in the name of whiteness. We may want to separate ourselves from the white people who commit these acts by claiming that they are racist and we are not. But because racism operates institutionally, to the benefit of all white people, we are connected to the acts of other white people.

Of course we're not members of the Klan or other extremist groups. Of course we watch what we say and don't make rude racial comments. But dissociating from white people who do is not the answer. We need to dissociate from their actions and challenge their beliefs. We can't challenge them, or even speak to them if we have separated ourselves from them, creating some magical line with the racists on that side and ourselves over here. This division leads to an ineffective strategy of trying to pull as many people as possible over to our (non-racist and therefore superior) side. Other white people will listen to us better, and be more influenced by our actions when we identify with them. Then we can explore how to work from the inside out together.

Perhaps most importantly, the people who are more visibly saying or doing things that are racist are usually more scared, more confused and less powerful than we are. (Or they are trying to increase their own power by manipulating racial fears.) It is often amazing how, when we get scared, confused or powerless, we do and say the very same things. Since racism leads to scapegoating people of color for social and personal problems, we are all susceptible to resorting to racial scapegoating in times of trouble. Visible acts of racism are, at least in part, an indication of the lack of power that a white person or group of people have to camouflage their actions. More powerful and well off people can simply move to segregated neighborhoods, or make corporate decisions that are harder to see and analyze as contributing to racism. Since the racism of the wealthy is less visible to us, those of us who are middle class can inadvertently scapegoat poor and working class white people for being more overtly racist.

We do need to confront words and actions which are racist when we encounter them because they create an atmosphere of violence in which all of us are unsafe. We also need to understand that most white people are doing the best they can to survive. Overtly racist people are scared, and lack the information and skills to be more tolerant. We need to challenge their behavior, not their moral integrity. We also need to be careful that we don't end up carrying out an upper class agenda by blaming poor and working people for being racist when people with wealth control the media, the textbooks, the housing and job markets and the police. We need to stay focused on the institutions themselves.

What is Whiteness?

RACISM IS BASED on the concept of whiteness—a powerful fiction enforced by power and violence. Whiteness is a constantly shifting boundary separating those who are entitled to have certain privileges from those whose exploitation and vulnerability to violence is justified by their not being white.

Racism itself is a long standing characteristic of many human societies. Justifying exploitation and violence against other peoples because they are “inferior” or different has a long history within Greek, Roman and European Christian traditions.

In more recent historical times in western Europe those with English heritage were perceived to be pure white. The Irish, Russians and Spanish were considered darker races, sometimes black, and certainly non-white. The white category was slowly extended to include northern and middle European people but still even fifty years ago definitely excluded eastern or southern European peoples, such as Italians, Poles, Russians and Greeks. In the last few decades, although there is still prejudice against people from these geographical backgrounds, they have become generally accepted as white in the United States.*

The important distinction in the United States has always been binary—between those who counted as white and those who did not. Drawing on already established “popular” classifications, whiteness was delineated more clearly in the United States in the 18th Century as slavery was introduced and distinguished from various forms of shorter term servitude.

Although a racial hierarchy was in place from the time of the earliest European settlers, racism was only defined “scientifically” as a

* In some northern and western European countries there are still strong and abusive patterns of racism against southern and eastern Europeans.

biological/genetic characteristic about one hundred and fifty years ago with the publication of Darwin's theory of species modification and Linnaeus' system of classification. These ideas were combined by others into a pseudo-scientific theory, eventually called Social Darwinism, which attempted to classify the human population into distinct categories or races and put them on an evolutionary scale with whites on top.

The original classification consisted of three categories—Caucasoid, Negroid and Mongoloid. These were not based on genetic differences, but on differences that Europeans and European Americans perceived to be important. They were in fact based on stereotypes of cultural differences and (mis)measures of physiological characteristics such as skull size (Gould 1981).

From the beginning the attempt to classify people by race was fraught with contradictions. Latin Americans, Native Americans, and Jewish people did not fit easily into these categories so the categories were variously stretched, redefined or adapted to meet the agenda of the Europeans and Americans who were using them.

For example, in the last century Finns were doing most of the lowest paid, unsafe mining and lumbering work in the upper mid-west. Although logically they were white, in terms of political, cultural and economic "common sense" they were black because they were the poorest and least respected group in the area besides Native Americans. The courts consistently ruled that they were not white, despite their skin color, because of their cultural and economic standing.

On the west coast, during the Constitutional debates in California in 1848–9, there was discussion about the status of Mexicans and Chinese. There were still Mexicans who were wealthy landowners and business partners with whites, while the Chinese were exclusively heavily exploited railroad and agricultural workers. It was eventually decided that Mexicans would be considered white and Chinese would be considered the same as blacks and Indians. This decision established which group could become citizens, own land, marry whites and have other basic rights (Almaguer, pps. 9–10, 54).

Today people of Finnish background are considered white, Latino/as are considered not white and Chinese Americans are conditionally white at times, not white at others, but clearly different from Blacks and Native Americans.

There was a complex and dynamic interplay between the popular conception of race and the scientific categories, neither of which was grounded in physiological or biological reality, but both of which carried great emotional import to "white" people and devastating consequences to "people of color," regardless of how they were being defined.

Although a few scientists still try to prove the existence of races, most scientists have long ago abandoned the use of race as a valid category at all. Human variability is so large and so widely dispersed that no particular racial groupings or distinctions are useful or justified. There is tremendous genetic difference or

variation within "racial" groupings and huge overlap between them, making the categories themselves useless (Harding, section 2 "Science Construct Race").

Genetic differences among humans can be explained by the distribution of genetic variables and don't correspond with any useful category of race defined genetically, by skin color or any other physical characteristic. That hasn't stopped many people from believing that distinct races exist and from trying to use scientific language to buttress their arguments. (For cogent refutations see Gould, Lewin, et al., and Goldberg.)

There is likewise no scientific (i.e. biological or genetic) basis to the concept of whiteness. There is nothing scientifically distinctive about it except skin color, and that is highly variable. All common wisdom notwithstanding, the skin color of a person tells you nothing about their culture, country of origin, character or personal habits. Because there is nothing biological about whiteness, it ends up being defined by contrast to other groups, becoming confused with ideas of nationality, religion and ethnicity.

For example, Jewish people are not a "racial" grouping. Jewish people share cultural and religious beliefs and practices but come from every continent and many different cultural backgrounds. Jews range in skin color from "white" to dark brown. Because race was falsely assumed to be a scientific category, being Jewish has often been assumed to mean that a Jew is genetically different than non-Jewish people.

I grew up learning that racial categories were scientifically valid and gave us useful information about ourselves and other people. In other words, racism had a scientific stamp of approval. It is difficult for me to let go of the certainty I thought I had gained about what racial difference meant. And, of course, there are always new attempts to prove to us that race means something. (See Fraser, Lewontin, et al., and Gould.)

What residual doubts do you have that there may be something genetic or biological about racial differences? ("But, what about...?") How can you respond to people who say that there are specific differences between "races"?

I began to understand the artificial nature of racial categories more clearly when I examined how moral qualities were attached to racial differences. This confirmed my suspicion that there was a political, not a scientific agenda at work in these distinctions.

The lack of a physical difference attached to whiteness hasn't prevented many people from assuming that they know what whiteness is, or what it is different from. Although some of these associations have changed or have had different prominence over time, they have generally been linked to moral qualities. These moral qualities have, in turn, been used to justify various forms of exploitation.

From the old phrase referring to a good deed, "That's white of you," to the New Age practice of visualizing oneself surrounded by white light, white has signified honor, purity, cleanliness and Godliness in white western European and mainstream U.S. culture. Because concepts of whiteness and race were developed in Christian Europe, references to whiteness are imbued with Christian values. We have ended up with a set of opposing qualities or attributes which are said to define people either as white or as not white.

The tendency to see the world in sets of opposites, either/or categories, is itself a core pattern of thinking developed in elite settings in Western Europe and the United States. Many other cultures do not divide the world into opposing camps. The English phrase "black-and-white" reflects our desire to divide things into opposites even though everyday reality is rarely clearly defined or neatly categorized. Classical Greek either/or logic and a Christian theology of good versus evil were combined to impose a good/bad set of values based on selected categories of racial difference. Some of the most common pairings are listed below.

"Dark" Qualities

superstitious
subhuman
crazy
immoral
animalistic
tainted
abnormal
emotional/angry
primitive/uncivilized/
barbaric/savage
prone to dishonesty
subversive
satanic
pagan
malicious
godless
rude
evil
low class
crude/brutish
demanding
intellectually inferior
impulsive
traitor
fanciful

"White" Qualities

scientific
human
sane
moral
god-like
pure
normal
calm
civilized
well intentioned/decent
upholder of tradition
angelic
Christian
loving
god fearing, wholesome
polite
benign
middle class
refined
restrained
intelligent
thoughtful
patriot
level-headed

weak link
lacking self control
manipulative
irrational
radical
undignified
sinful
out of control
impure/contaminated
tainted/poisonous
dirty
illegal
needing permission
soulless/damned
fringe/marginal
subjective
wild
sexual/wanton
colorful
disorganized
inefficient
rebellious
traditional
impatient
self-righteous
rhythmic
devious
promiscuous
cloudy
disease carrying
present time oriented
un-American
dark

strong specimen
prudent
sincere
rational
conservative
respectable
innocent
in control
pure
innocuous/harmless
clean
legal/law abiding
authorized
saved
center
objective, detached
calm
chaste
bland
orderly
effective
upholder of tradition
modern
patient
righteous
stiff
straightforward
committed
clear
healthy
future oriented
American
fair, blond

Which words in each pair do you associate with white people? Which words on the left do you use to discount people of color's demands for fair and equal treatment ("they are too..."), or to blame them for how they are treated in our society ("If they weren't so...")?

Qualities not associated with whiteness have been given negative meanings. They have become associated not only with people of color but also with children, workers, lesbians, gays and bi-sexuals, Jews and heterosexual white women; just those groups excluded from the political and scientific institutions that defined what normal should be.

In reality, individual character traits don't have anything to do with skin color, cultural background, age, gender, class or sexual orientation. The personalities and character of members of any cultural group are highly variable. Each of these polarities, however, encodes part of the historical meaning of whiteness to white people. The confirmation of our moral superiority allows us to justify a racial hierarchy with white people on top.

Not all white people had an equal voice in defining racial differences. Those with most power—who had the most to gain or preserve—set the terms. White landowners, church leaders—the educated and successful—systematically, though not collusively, defined whiteness in ways that extolled and legitimized their actions and denigrated others.

These meanings are now many hundreds of years old. Today, none of us escapes the traps, lies and emotional resonances of these dichotomies. They are passed on to us from parents, school, literature, TV and the movies. It is difficult for any of us, powerful or less powerful, to dissociate “positive” qualities from white people and “negative” ones from people of color no matter how “color blind” we would like to be.

White people who have challenged racism and the false dichotomies upon which it is based have been labeled in various ways to show that they don't really belong to the white group. Labels such as “nigger lover,” “race traitor,” “un-American,” “feminist,” “liberal,” “Communist,” “un-Christian,” “Jew,” “fag,” “lesbian,” “crazy,” “terrorist” and “thought police” have all been used to isolate and discredit people and to imply that they are somehow outside the territory of whiteness and therefore justifiably attacked. We can see from the moral virtues attached to whiteness that only those who are white will be able to speak with authority. A powerful way to discredit any critique of whiteness or racism is to discredit the speaker by showing that they are not really white. This is a neat, circular convention which stifles any serious discussion of what whiteness means and what effect it has on people.

This leaves most of us who are white on pretty shaky ground. If we even point attention to whiteness and racism we risk being labeled not really white or a traitor to our “race.” These accusations discredit our testimony and potentially lose us some of the benefits of being white such as better jobs and police protection from violence. Behind the names lies the threat of physical and sexual violence such as ostracization, firing, silencing, condemnation to hell, institutionalization, incarceration, deportation, rape, lynching and other forms of mob violence that have been used to protect white power and privilege.

We could usefully spend some time exploring the history and meaning of any particular pair of words on the list above. I encourage you to do so. Each one reveals some vital aspect of whiteness and racism. Here I want to point out four concepts that many of these words cluster around: purity, Christian, American and gender.

Appeals to group solidarity, particularly in the last two hundred and fifty years during which political concepts of the nation-state have developed, have often focused on the “racial” purity of some particular group of people. In different European countries, in the United States, in Australia and South Africa, white people have attempted to claim a purity of racial stock and a genetic superiority which entitled them to control the land and other people around them in a particular geographical area. (Other groups of people have done the same thing; racism is by no means exclusive to white people.) They have then set up economic and psychological boundaries to participation in that society for people defined as “other.” People of color, Jews, Romany (often misnamed Gypsies), people with physical or mental disabilities, homosexuals, Irish, southern Europeans, Slavic peoples, the poor—each group has been defined as outsiders who could contaminate white racial purity and the strength of the nation-state through corruption, contagion and disease, dirt and uncleanness, and intermarriage. Segregation, anti-miscegenation laws, medical experimentation, concentration camps and extermination have all been used at times to “cleanse” and “protect” whiteness and national identity. White people have considered anyone with even 1 percent African-American, Native, or Latino/a “blood” to be impure, not white, alien. The Nazis considered people to be Jewish if they had even one great-grandparent who was Jewish. Many of our fears today about intermarriage and mixed heritage children stem from these old misconceptions about racial difference and racial purity.

Another cluster of concepts and practices of whiteness centers around Christianity. Whiteness has often been equated with being a Christian in juxtaposition to being a pagan, infidel, witch, heathen, Jew, Moslem, Native American, Buddhist or atheist. Racial violence has been justified by a stated need to protect Christian families and homes. Pogroms, crusades, holy wars and colonial conquests have been justified by the need to save the souls of “uncivilized” and “godless” peoples (often at the expense of their lives).

Jewish people have lived within Christian-dominated societies (when permitted to) for nearly two thousand years. There is substantial Christian teaching and belief that Jewish people are dangerous and evil. These beliefs have been sustained even during periods of hundreds of years when Jews were not living near Christians (Glasman). Jews, along with Moslems, have become symbols to many Christians of the infidel. This anti-Semitism, originally based on religious and cultural differences, has become racialized over the centuries, conjoining Christian values and whiteness. It has exposed Jews to the same harsh reality of Christian violence toward non-Christians that pagans, Romany, witches and Moslems have experienced.

In addition, anti-Semitism has been passed on to Christians of color through Christian teachings. Religious leaders of both Eastern Orthodox and Catholic branches of Christianity, including most Protestant denominations,

have accused the Jews of killing Jesus, using the blood of Christian children for Passover ritual, refusing to recognize the divinity of Jesus and of consorting with the devil. As Christianity was spread by Western colonialism and missionary practice, these teachings were incorporated into the beliefs of many Christians of color, passing on anti-Semitism.

Christianity, particularly its Protestant versions, is variously equated with moral, virtuous, pure, hard-working, saved, civilized, decent, God-fearing, righteous and, of course, white people. Today the majority of Christians in the world are people of color, but racism continues to be justified in Christian terms. Whiteness and Christianity remain inextricably entwined, targeting both people of color and Jews for continued violence.

At the same time there are core Christian values of love, caring, justice and fellowship which have inspired some Christians to work against white racism. For example, many white abolitionists were Christians inspired by religious teachings and values to work against slavery.

Another cluster of meanings centers around the concept of American. In the United States the concept of who is an American is often conflated with who is white. In fact, "All-American" is often used as a thinly disguised code word for white. A third generation Swedish- or German-American child is considered an all-American kid in a way that a third generation Japanese- or Chinese-American child is not.

In the same way, the patriotism of anyone with darker skin color is routinely questioned. Non-European citizens are continually suspected of having dual allegiances. During World War II U.S. citizens of Japanese heritage were interned in concentration camps and U.S. citizens of German heritage were not. Even when they fought in the armed services in wartime the loyalty of Asian American, Latino/a, Native American, Arab American, and African American soldiers has been challenged.

For those of us who are white, immigrating to this country and giving up our native cultures and customs was equated with the process of becoming American. We were told that when we assimilated completely, whether it took two generations or five, we would have made it. As long as we held on to our cultures we were less American, un-American, perhaps even anti-American. On the one hand, the definition of who was white was broadened over time to include virtually all European Americans. At the same time, the boundaries keeping people of color out were firmly maintained. Immigration policies and quotas consistently favored Europeans and much of the time completely excluded people who were not considered white. Even when they have legally arrived here, non-Native American people of color are routinely asked where they came from, and told to go back home.

The final cluster of words centers on gender. Whiteness strongly leans toward "male" virtues and "male" values. While terms of whiteness apply to

men and women, there are also significant differences in which qualities men and women are associated with.

Each of the particular virtues of whiteness also has a gender version for men and women. White women are held to higher standards of chasteness, cleanliness and restraint than white men. The basis of women's rationality, righteousness and authority is supposed to lie with white men.

White women are presumed to carry white authority over men and women of color. Their authority is derived from their association with white men whose backing they are assumed to have. White women hold onto whiteness by the authority and protection of white men, or by their willingness to adapt to male roles and exert authority in traditionally male spheres to protect their white privilege as employers, supervisors or teachers. They can also be cast out of the circle of white male "protection" by being rebellious or by violating racial or gender norms.

White women have been held to be the purest realization of white values. They have been locked up within this symbolism, and tremendous violence has been done in their name for their "protection" and the protection of white civilization. White women have both colluded with and resisted their role and the violence it has justified.

Whiteness is a many faceted phenomenon, slowly and constantly shifting its emphasis, all the time maintaining a racial hierarchy and protecting the power that accrues to white people. It is a powerful fiction with wide ranging effects on our lives and on the lives of people of color. Although there are no natural or essential qualities or characteristics of whiteness, or of white people, it is not an easy fiction to let go of.

