

WHEN GOD BECAME

**DISMANTLING WHITENESS FOR
A MORE JUST CHRISTIANITY**

WHITE

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ENCOUNTERING WHITENESS

We have been using the classification of race to benefit those with power in this country since its inception. It has become an essential tool for lawmakers, leaders, church ministers, and others in the privileged class to maintain the status quo. The only way we will understand just how effective racial categorization is for those who hold power is to look at its origin—the history of racialization and the troubles it has caused people of color. The concept of race emerged and was sustained for European plantation owners to justify the existing power dynamic, and through this lens we can begin to understand the problem of whiteness.

IMMIGRATING TO WHITENESS

It was my dad's idea to leave Korea in 1975 and take his young family with him. Korea had suffered the devastating destruction from the Korean War, yielding a climate that was economically and politically difficult and frighteningly unstable. The Korean economy was struggling, and my dad felt it was in the best interest of his two young girls, ages six and five, for him to take his family and immigrate to America. In the 1970s it was easier to gain access to Canada than to the United States, as fewer Koreans

wanted to live in Canada. Thus, my dad chose this easier route with the intention of moving to the States soon thereafter.

We immigrated in January 1975. We landed in Toronto, and within weeks, we moved to London, Ontario, a small city two hours west of Toronto. We moved to a run-down apartment, which was bug infested and dirty. I remember January being icy cold. London is located in a snow belt area, and so much snow fell in 1975 that there was snow up to my waist. Often, as I walked to school, I would lose my shoes in the deep snow and have to retrace my steps to retrieve them. I hated the cold, and my small, frail body could not take the harsh winter winds and freezing cold temperatures. We didn't have any family or relatives besides the four of us, which left me feeling terribly alienated and alone.

Starting kindergarten in the middle of the year caused anguish, dread, and deep pain. What should have been the best school experience with days full of games, singing, making new friends, and no homework was neither easy nor enjoyable for me.

I went through two profound challenges in the first two weeks of kindergarten. The first was a deep culture shock, which shook me to the core of my being. Everything was new to me; I couldn't adjust to the cold, the language, the city, and our new apartment. As a society, we believe that children are able to adjust quickly to new situations, cultures, and contexts, but that was not the case for me. I didn't know any English and felt deeply ashamed, miserable, and frustrated for not being able to understand or speak this new language during my first few months of school. Before we immigrated, my sister and I pretended to speak English and played wild make-believe games with each other. We had no idea it would be so difficult to learn the language and adapt to the new environment.

My second challenge was encounters with racism. I looked very different from all the white kids in my class, and my looks and

my Koreanness were an easy target for their ridicule. It didn't matter whether I understood English or not; I felt their hatred and ridicule without comprehending a word they said. Kids would place their fingers on their eyes and pull them out or sideways and laugh and make fun of my small Asian eyes. They would also mimic Chinese intonations and phonology and yell out "ching chong" or "ching chang chong." These hateful ethnic slurs and pejorative terms were used to mock me and make me feel small and unworthy. The taunts and eye pulls were not a one-time event either; they occurred almost daily during recess and lunch break. Teachers saw what the other kids were doing to me, but they ignored it. It was racism, and it seemed to be sanctioned by the adults.

I wanted to get rid of my Koreanness, but I couldn't. I could not remove the yellow skin I was born in. I could not change my smaller and thinner eyelids to look like the white girls in class. I knew that I could not single-handedly stop the racism that I was experiencing daily.

My dad used to tell me all throughout my childhood and even into my adulthood how lucky we were to have immigrated to North America. But I couldn't see how it was better. Our family lived in a run-down apartment building ironically named Frontenac Apartments. In Montreal, one of the most upscale hotels is called Château Frontenac, but our two-bedroom apartment was nothing like the elite, beautiful, and romantic hotel. It was a dirty, run-down building known for being a place where immigrants lived for a short while until they found somewhere better. There were probably around ten Korean immigrant families living in these Frontenac apartments during the seventies and eighties. One by one, they all moved away, and we were one of the last families to leave because my parents didn't have the money to find to a better place.

I was afraid the cockroaches would crawl up my legs while I slept. I was afraid of stepping on them in the dark if I went to the bathroom during the night. I was afraid they roamed over our plates, bowls, and cutlery. I was afraid I'd never get away from them, and that was a difficult thing to get over as I grew up.

We had no new furniture except for the twin beds my mom bought for my sister and me. Everything else was hand-me-down furniture or came from Goodwill or the dumpster. My dad would bring trashy furniture into our apartment to salvage, so when my mom bought the two cheap beds, there was a firestorm in our household and my parents fought for days about her spending the money. Ultimately, my sister and I were allowed to keep our beds, which was a treat as we had been sleeping on the floor on top of blankets for years.

Nothing in this place that was supposed to be the land of opportunity was easy, and some things were really painful. I told my dad that I wished I had grown up in my homeland. I wished I didn't have to explain myself to everyone: that I was born in Korea, ate different foods, and spoke a different language in our home. I didn't want to keep explaining why I looked different and why I had a *Konglish* (Korean/English) accent. I could not understand why he felt we were better off with this kind of life than what we would have had back home.

RACE

Words are vital. Words convey our thoughts and ideas to the outside world. Words also form our thoughts and concepts *about* the world and ourselves. Those who hold power have the capability to change minds, ideas, and processes of thinking through words. This is the power of words.

The study of race reveals how those who hold power have such enormous ability to change worldviews, affect laws, change

behaviors, and even change our understanding of God. This is the impact of words, and powerful people must be mindful of their power as we discuss race and race making (how race is created), and the consequences of both. The notion of race is based not on biology but on social meanings that are created and re-created due to changing contexts. The concept of race was created mainly by Europeans in the sixteenth century and is based on socially constructed beliefs about the inherent superiority and inferiority of groups of people. Studies on race critique the notion as lacking any scientific clarity and specificity, as it is informed by historical, social, cultural, and political values and not any biological terms.¹ However, white people have tried to argue that race is based on biology as some have tried to measure brain size and prove that their brains are larger and hence they are superior to others.

No person of any race or ethnicity has a biological or spiritual claim to being better than anyone else. Race has served to separate society into different levels for the benefit of a few people who have been defined as white, to the misfortune of anyone considered nonwhite or of color. “Although race is something imagined (or constructed), its effects are real. From lifespans to salary to where you live, race has a measurable impact on a person’s quality of life.”² We need to recognize the problem of this concept of race and bring it into our mainstream conversation and thought.

We have socially constructed the category of race based on perceptions of different skin color. We have created an inequitable social and economic relationship that is structured and reproduced through skin color, class, gender, and nation.³ Race was created by and for white people and in service of white supremacists. As a social construct, it has huge ramifications on American society, economics, politics, and religion. Race is not a benign category; it is an oppressive structure and understanding. For

people in positions of power, *race* became an important term as it played a role in the construction of law or rules for social interaction between white people and people of color.

ENSLAVEMENT HISTORY AND RACIAL IDENTITY

American race relations emerged from the intersection of three significant events in history: the conquest of Native Americans, the forced importation of Africans, and the coming together of Europeans, Asians, and Latinos.⁴ The intersection of these significant events led to the need to divide and distinguish people according to race. This was carefully accomplished by those in power to serve themselves and maintain their power.

We can get a clearer understanding of how racism, white supremacy, and discrimination are maintained in our society by looking into the changing dynamics of racial identity. Racism is part of the daily lives of people of color, and I experience it all too often. We can see how racism is used to subordinate people of color as we begin to comprehend how white identity emerged in our society.

Before the seventeenth century, Europeans did not think of themselves as belonging to a white race. Instead, they viewed themselves as belonging to different parts or regions in Europe and had a very different perception of race and racialization. But once this concept of white race was shown to be advantageous to Europeans and enslavers, it began to reshape and redefine their world. The impact of this is still felt today. Europeans have only recently started to think of themselves as belonging to a white race,⁵ and it has only come as they realized they could profit financially, socially, politically, and religiously. White race and white identity have not been constant but have changed over time to accommodate the variances of social change and context.

Race and *ethnicity* are sometimes used interchangeably by the general public, but we must note that they are two different terms. *Race* is a categorization of people into groups based on shared physical or social characteristics. Races are often viewed as distinct and different within a society. The term *race* became more common during the sixteenth century when it was used to refer to groups of various kinds. *Ethnicity*, on the other hand, encompasses a larger group of categories, such as heritage, language, nationality, culture, customs, and religion. Both terms are used to describe and categorize people.

White identity was solidified in the seventeenth century by justifying African enslavement. Robert Baird notes,

The invention of a white racial identity was motivated by plantation owners in the West Indies and in the American colonies who depended on European indentured servants for labor who were forced to work for long periods in the plantations but were made ‘free’ when they paid off their debt to the plantation owners. These servants were considered chattel and were often treated brutally. But, since many of them became Christian, they could not be held in lifetime captivity unless they were criminals or prisoners of war.⁶

The expiration date on indentured servitude and not a lifetime captivity created problems for the plantation owners who needed a constant supply of laborers so that they could continue to make huge profits and live their comfortable and lavish lifestyle. They needed more laborers, and the transatlantic enslavement of Africans proved to be a good alternative to European indentured servants.

An increase in worldwide demand for tobacco, cotton, and sugar led seventeenth-century colonials to seek a large labor force

to meet market demands from Europe and America. Native Americans proved difficult to subjugate, and European Christians were becoming more and more reluctant to enslave other Christians.⁷ Around 1640, the working and living conditions of indentured servants began to affect the numbers of those willing to enter the arrangement. The loss of this source of labor drove landowners to seek new forms of labor that would be cost efficient and profitable. With the loss of European indentured workers and the need for a high volume of cheap labor, the colonialists turned to Africans, which became advantageous and profitable.

Colonial Europeans found that Africans were knowledgeable about tropical agriculture, skilled in iron working, and immune to Old World diseases. They believed them to be docile and already conditioned to subjugation by African tribal chiefs. During a 110-year period (1700–1810), approximately six million Africans were transported to the New World. In order to legitimize the status differences, laws were enacted to enslave them for life. White European indentured servants were afforded an end to their servitude; however, it wasn't until 1863 when the Emancipation Proclamation was signed into law⁸ that Africans and their descendants were released from captivity. Enslaved Africans were without freedom in America for more than 244 years.

The enslaved people lived under harsh environments and strict laws. Due to some uprisings, plantation owners were afraid that a violent rebellion might occur. In order to preempt that, each colony passed a series of laws governing the behaviors of enslaved Africans, which were known as slave codes.⁹ They were strict laws that covered movements, marriage, gatherings, trade, punishment, and education. Essentially, every aspect of their daily lives was restricted. Enslavement was violent, cruel, degrading, and inhumane. Violence was committed against people's bodies

and minds to keep them in line with fear. This was a daily war carried out against Africans to ensure they lacked power and freedom, and to maintain the economic, political, cultural, and religious power held by the European colonists.¹⁰

Christian religious identity was at first very important for the development of the English slave trade as it was a way to make one group “evil” and another group “good.” Africans were perceived as infidels and enemies of Christian nations, which helped justify their enslavement and the violence committed against them. But by the 1670s, Christian missionaries, including Quaker George Fox, insisted that enslaved Africans convert to Christianity. This posed a problem for the plantation owners. If enslaved Africans became Christians, they were no longer enemies of Christendom, and it would be difficult to enslave them. Some tried to block enslaved Africans from converting to Christianity, but when this didn’t work, they passed laws disqualifying baptism as grounds for freedom. Since baptism seals the Christian with the spiritual mark of belonging to Christ and makes everyone equal in the sight of God, slave owners were afraid they would lose the upper hand. This presented the need for another category to prevent the enslaved Africans from becoming free. It was a pivotal moment, and a new category of identity was created: white people.

THE CREATION OF WHITE PEOPLE

Toward the end of the seventeenth century, using Christianity as a means of separating the enslaver and the enslaved was no longer useful with Africans being evangelized. The term *white people* emerged to differentiate these groups and to maintain and sustain African enslavement. Laws that regulated enslaved and servant behavior, such as the 1681 Servant Act in Jamaica,

described the privileged class as whites rather than Christians. The establishment of white identity as a legal category created a powerful distinction between indentured Europeans and enslaved Africans. Colonists began to think of themselves as white¹¹ and to believe that their whiteness elevated them in such a way that they could justify the enslavement of Africans.

The creation of white people worked, and plantation owners continued to profit and live lavishly. It was a stroke of genius for those of European descent, and we feel this bifurcation of identity even today, as race is still used as a defining characteristic for value and power.

Before the late 1600s, Europeans did not use the term *Black* to reference any group of people. However, with the racialization of enslavement around 1680, many looked for a term to differentiate between the enslaved and the enslavers. Thus the terms *white* and *Black* were used to represent and differentiate racial categories.¹² European landowners came to understand that whiteness was a powerful weapon that allowed them to continue transatlantic capitalism for securing labor. While plantation owners extended privilege to the white poor to differentiate them from enslaved Africans, the idea of being white wasn't concrete—it was fluid and it meant different things in different parts of America and around the world.¹³ Over time, this meant changes as to who was white and who was not, but through it all it was clear that white people had power over others.

VARIATIONS IN WHITE PEOPLE

Before the mid-nineteenth century, American society accepted that there was more than one white race. Many Americans were viewed as white, but they were not all the same type of white people as there were inferior and superior whites. The Saxons

were viewed as superior while the Celts were understood to be inferior. As such, Saxons were regarded highly as they were viewed as smart, lively, clearheaded, Protestant, and attractive. On the other hand, Celts were viewed as unintelligent, reckless, intoxicated, Catholic, and unattractive. This dichotomy was useful to those in the superior white group as it helped to elevate themselves and present themselves as better. Hence when the Irish participated in the mass immigration due to the 1840s famine, many nativists spread an anti-Catholic bigotry right to the end of the century. This helped reinforce the superior whites and suppressed the inferior whites. This history shows that at first, the Irish were not even considered white and were sometimes referred to as “negroes turned inside out.”¹⁴ But perceptions have changed and today the Irish are viewed as white people and superior over Blacks and other people of color. This example of the change of perception of the Irish shows that there is fluidity in the concept of whiteness.

Other events in history produced new forms of racial classification and identity. When waves of poor Eastern and Southern European immigrants arrived, new racial classifications were birthed. What followed was the “northern Italian” race and the “southern Italian” race to help differentiate between the superior north from the inferior south. Even though they were all technically white, the Irish, Italians, Jews, and Greeks were classified as inferior and, at times, not even classified as whites. It was not until the 1970s that these groups were considered white. With the rise in interracial marriages, the idea of fluidity in racial identity was employed more and more to reveal the fluidity of racial categorizations and identities. As a result, by the early twentieth century, the descendants of Irish immigrants decided to elevate inferior Celts into superior northern Europeans. This

helped them to be separate from Blacks and other people of color. However, World War I lowered Americans' affection for the Saxons due to their association with Germans and Nazism but then increased the popularity and likability of a new term—*Nordic*—which was free from any Germanic associations. Therefore, white identity changed throughout history according to the context, different situations, and world affairs.

By the 1940s, anthropologists decided to simplify all these different categorizations of people and announced that there are only three classifications: Caucasoid (White), Mongoloid (Asian), and Negroid (Black).¹⁵ With these three classifications, everyone of European descent was now considered white, and there were no longer any distinctions for Saxons, Celts, Southern Italians, or Eastern European Jews. They all just became one large group and were viewed as white. In addition, there were no longer any divisions of superior or inferior whites, and all whites became superior to people of color. Since the 1940s, there have only been very minor modifications to these classifications.

In this racial identity, whites do not carry the burden of race in America as white people perceive whiteness as a neutral racial identity.¹⁶ White people are viewed as the norm, and everyone else is one or more steps away from the normative in society. This neutral racial stance is beneficial and powerful as it pits other racialized groups as inferior and deficient. The view of whiteness as neutral only reinforced white people's superior status over everyone else.

WHITENESS

Racial identity is fluid and changes over time because *white* is a relational term, and it is present only in opposition to other classifications in the racial pyramid, which is ordered and created by whiteness. By defining “others” as inferior, subordinate, and less

than, whiteness is able to define itself. Whiteness is a socially and politically constructed idea that is distinct but not separate from ideas of class, country, gender, and sexuality.

White is a created category of race that has no biological/scientific foundation. *Whiteness*, on the other hand, is a compelling and convincing powerful social construct with tangible, destructive, and violent effects. Whiteness is a cultural space with political power and privilege with a goal and an agenda to keep people of color marginalized, oppressed, and subordinated. Whiteness is a learned behavior that is multidimensional, complex, extensive, and systemic, which becomes a powerful tool for white people.¹⁷ Whiteness is not just skin color but goes beyond it as an idea based on beliefs, values, and attitudes with an unequal distribution of power, influence, and privilege based on skin color. It is about how the powerful determine who has the privilege of being white and who does not and hence push them down the ladder of hierarchy. Whiteness becomes a construct created by those in power to maintain their own power, dominance, and the status quo. It keeps whites at the top of the hierarchy, possessing power, supremacy, status, privilege, wealth, and domination.

Whiteness groups all people in the United States of different ethnicities (Irish, English, French, German, Italian, and so forth) with fair skin as one people. The purpose is not to find a common ethnic name for these people, but rather, whiteness is a term of “ethnic erasure.” Consequently, the distinct histories and ethnicities of people in this group are erased by being made “white.” This term *white* creates privileged groups in relation to all “nonwhite” people on the basis of whiteness.¹⁸ Whiteness patterns social interaction and social organization between whites and people of color. It builds barriers between groups of people as either privileged or marginalized and unfavorable.

Since whiteness is constructed and maintained by powerful leaders to maintain their own place in society, Lisa Sharon Harper calls whiteness a “phantom.” Whiteness is elusive because white people do not have a common struggle, similar story, or common people¹⁹ as their identities get melted together. No one can challenge whiteness for fear of retaliation for opposing whiteness. Whiteness holds its power tightly and maintains its power with fierceness, which in turn continues to hurt communities of color.

The construct of color is a means of maintaining power by whites. Africans do not think of themselves as Black, but when Africans come to the United States, they begin to be labeled and identified as Black. Similarly, we Asians do not think of ourselves as yellow when we are born. We do not see our skin color as yellow until we leave Asia and white people begin to label us as yellow. White people disliked Asians and created the racial metaphor “yellow peril” to keep us subordinate and subservient. Yellow peril suggests Asians are an existential danger to the West. There is no proof of any danger, but the fear arises from a baseless misconception and erroneous belief of Asians as yellow people, which is just another form of xenophobia. It was a narrative used by west-erners to invade, conquer, and colonize the East.

Black, yellow, red, brown, and white are constructs used and created by white people to retain their power and authority over people of color. Whiteness is a social paradigm fabricated to maintain the status quo. Hence, one is not born white; rather, one becomes white. In the same way, one is not born red but becomes red. These are labels placed on people by white society as a form of control, restraint, and domination.

Whiteness is an unconscious state as it is often invisible to white people, who have no recognition for how it participates in oppressing communities of color. It shapes how white people

view themselves and others and gives advantage to white people as white cultural norms and practices go unnamed and unchallenged. However, whiteness is not invisible nor inconsequential to those oppressed by it.²⁰ People of color who are on the receiving end of whiteness and white privilege experience subjugation in all aspects and arenas of life. It was present during the building of a nation and prevails strongly today as it affects politics, laws, religion, education, and daily life.

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