

When white people are never racist

By [Drew G. I. Hart](#)

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## **White People are Never Racist!**

“We’ll, I’m no racist” they explained. Who is they? To be honest, “they” are the countless white people that have engaged me in conversation over the years, mostly after hearing me give a talk about racism. Though they wanted to assure me of how much they appreciated what I had to say, a compulsive need within needed to inform me that they were not like that. And so I have been delivered that phrase time and time again. Yet, I always find it a strange response to my talks and workshops, because I don’t spend time and effort trying to isolate the “bad racists” from the rest of society in my talks. Such efforts normally seem counterproductive to actual antiracism work. I am much more interested in helping people recognize the racialized character of society as a whole, so they can imagine how their daily lives operate within such worlds. The insistence and near anxiety being expressed in the phrase “I’m no racist” not only demonstrates that people are not ready to comprehend what I am articulating, but that these very white frameworks for discussing racism are deep and core foundational aspects of themselves. These are the categorical building blocks upon which many white people make sense of our world through. More specifically, the innocence of white identity is always to be protected in dialogue on racism. And clearly, considering oneself to be racist (even if poorly defined, and ultimately misdirecting) is considered to be the absolute worst thing. No white person ever wants to think of themselves as racist. And that is precisely part of the problem, no white person ever thinks of themselves as racist. Each white person is the innocent exception to the rule, even when confronted with the realities that our society is thoroughly racialized.

## **We All Participate in a Racialized Society.**

Of course, such individualistic comprehension of one's identity in relation to the larger society leaves many in deep denial of our racialized society. The starting point for racial conversation shouldn't first be about your identity as a racist (which in white ears means "bad person"). We must come to grips with how deeply our lives are shaped by the society that we maneuver daily. Without realizing it, each and every American life has adjusted to our racialized society much more than they can even imagine. Sociologist and anti-racist theorist, Joe Feagin, articulates a fraction of the depths of racialized influence on our lives:

In the United States, racist thought, emotion, and action are structured into the rhythms of everyday life. They are lived, concrete, advantageous for whites, and painful for those who are not white. Each major part of the life of a white person or person of color is shaped directly or indirectly by this country's systemic racism. Even a person's birth and parents are often shaped by racism, since mate selection is limited by racist pressure against intimate interracial relationships and intermarriage. Where one lives is frequently determined by the racist practices of landlords, bankers, and others in the real-estate profession. The clothes one wears and what one has to eat are affected by access to resources that varies by position in the U.S. racial hierarchy. When one goes off to school, one's education is shaped by contemporary racism—from the composition of the student body to the character of the curriculum. Where one goes to church is often shaped by racism, and it is likely that racism effects who one's political representatives are. Even getting sick, dying, and being buried may be influenced by systemic racism. Every part of the life cycle, and most aspects of one's life, are shaped by the racism that is integral to the foundation and continuing operation of the United States. [\[i\]](#)

## **Beyond Hunting for Racists and Towards Transformed Lives**

I have frequently claimed that white denial of the racialized character of society is in fact nothing more than willful ignorance. Even when people can admit racism is indeed prevalent in society, the obsessive need to situate oneself as an exception to

society, within white minds and white identity, results in an unwillingness to truly accept the obvious fact that we are all participating in a 400 year old white supremacist story that is still unfolding today. None of us live in a social vacuum. None of us are outside of this story. A much more faithful response, especially for those that desire to follow Jesus and want to be formed by God's spirit, is to spend more time consumed with repentance and transformation than denial and dismissal. It is the possibility of change and ever-increasing new life that ought to motivate us. And it is that possibility that ought to keep us hopeful rather than in despair. We acknowledge the unjust character of this old age and also live into the hope we have that God is making all things new. To do so, we need to acknowledge and then resist the ways that our daily lives are complicit to this larger story of Lording over others and dehumanizing people made in the image of God through widespread social oppression. Our lives, the structures of our society, and the ways our communities are organized, have all been shaped by white supremacy, anti-black ideology, and settler colonialism. The task for disciples of Christ is to not fall into personal and social denial, but to unveil not only the societal oppression but also we must unveil our own lives before God, then yielding ourselves to the Holy Spirit that gives us courage to resist, and empowers us to take on the form of Christ for today.

[i] Joe R. Feagin, *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, and Future Reparations*, Third edition (New York: Routledge, 2014), x.