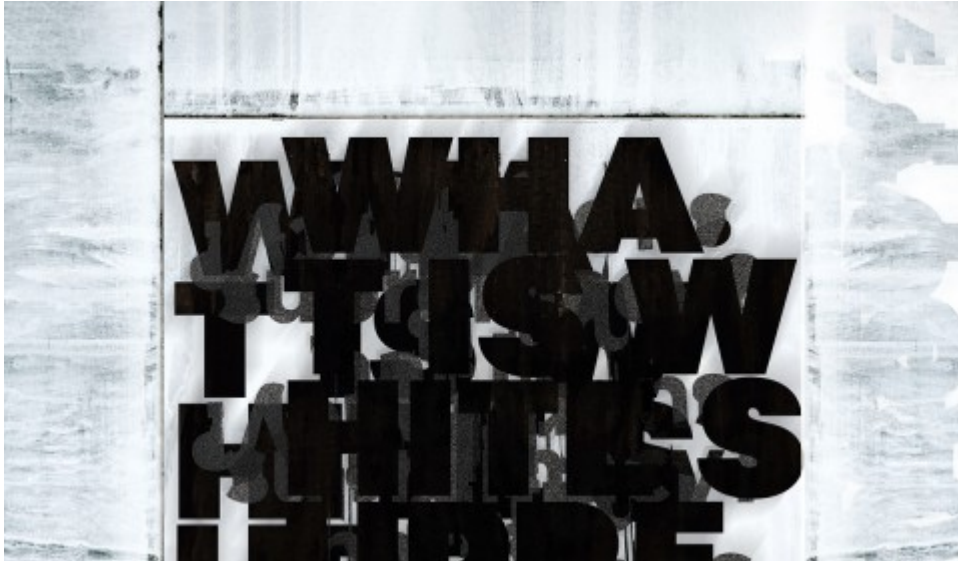


White supremacy is a script we're given at birth

It's written in our flesh and rehearsed throughout history.

by [Reggie Williams](#) in the [September 23, 2020](#) issue



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Maybe, after the last few months, a broader portion of the US population can now 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.” The rage is useful to the extent that it helps generate new knowledge about the world that can help our efforts toward change for the good of all. In a nation with a history of slavery and lynching, the fact that Black people bleed and die isn’t new information. What may be new to many people, however, is just how prevalent and persistent White supremacy is in this country.

According to Baldwin, White people remain trapped within a history that they do not understand, one from which they need release—but they must act, must be committed. To act in response to this history, however, is terrifying. It requires engaging 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—Cook County, Illinois—is populated by the two 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 have been forced, yet again, to behold the spectacle of the state killing unarmed Black people. When 46-year-old George Floyd pleaded with police 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 officer who killed Floyd knelt on his neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, before a watching public, as indifferently as one might wait in a checkout line. His left hand was casually in his pocket. He was serene as he dismissed pleas from onlookers and from Floyd himself. This casual, callous disregard for Floyd’s life is hard to fathom, as are the opposition to Black Lives Matter and the wider indifference toward the deaths of many other unarmed Black people in recent weeks, months, and years—unless we recognize what is happening. These are not isolated incidents. Western history has devised a premise that merges them all.

The premise is White supremacy. Recent events have opened more eyes to its reality, but most people still struggle with language to name it. In everyday conversation about racial oppression, terms like *xenophobia*, *prejudice*, and *White supremacy* are often used interchangeably. This 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 more than a few bad apples. White supremacy sits deep inside of 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.

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 people of different races. History is replete with White supremacists who love Black people, sexually or otherwise.

Hatred and harm are secondary. The primary thing is a longing for an idealized community.

Nor is White supremacy the same as xenophobia or prejudice, though it often includes these ideological gangsters and others. Xenophobia is essentially the opposite of hospitality: it is an attitude of unwelcome for strangers, foreigners, or anything unknown. It is not selective about which foreigners or strangers to dislike. By itself, it is not White supremacy—though it may play a part in White supremacy by working to maintain exclusively White space.

As for prejudice, we practice it when we produce or embrace knowledge about people that is not based on actual experience with them. It is bias or contempt that results from unsubstantiated information about others. Howard Thurman's description of hatred, in *Jesus and the Disinherited*, is a good primer on prejudice: hatred includes (1) contact without fellowship, which leads to (2) unsympathetic understanding, which generates (3) ill will, finally giving rise to (4) hatred walking. 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: 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? The historical answer to that question has been a hegemonic one: White supremacy.

White supremacy is the manufacture and maintenance of systems and structures for Whites only. Hatred and harm are always secondary effects of this primary thing: a longing for an idealized community populated by a fetishized, White ideal. The term can be used interchangeably with *racism*; they describe the same phenomenon.

In what follows, I will explain what I mean by this definition of White supremacy. It is not my intent to offer a comprehensive history of race in this brief space. Instead, I aim to help clarify terms in order to provide us with better tools to diagnose the problem—because diagnosis determines treatment.

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 seen it

all before, just as we have seen it recently: Police and White vigilantes killing unarmed Black people. White people making petty police calls on Black people, as if the police were 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. It is not entertaining, and it has no grounding in reality—other than the alternate reality it has created.

The racial script says that the Black dead—the antagonists—must have deserved to die.

It is vital to see its plotline in the symmetry of events that tirelessly result in Black death and what follows. This is the plight of the antagonist, which loosely follows a pattern. First there is a blatant killing of an unarmed Black person by a state official or vigilante or a lethal, disproportionate response to a baseless fear. This is followed by the corresponding hashtag moment for the Black victim's name. The killer's defenders inevitably discover some form of disparaging information about the character or behavior of the deceased. This newfound info is used to justify the killer and implicate the dead. The Black victim is subsequently tried in the court of public opinion, using the evidence of the racial script as evidence against them in their own killing.

To be White, after all, is by default to be the protagonist. 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 when caught in the act of murder. This is an evil loop that happens so often that each instance quickly commingles with the next evil loop in the pattern; wash, rinse, and 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 own killing. 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 in the back several times, at a distance of nearly 20 feet from a uniformed officer, while running away.

The opposing characters in this script are not individuals, they're demographics. And unlike many narratives, in this one the main characters don't have comparable power. This story reached its maturity during the slave trade, in the 18th and 19th centuries. People made sense of their quickly changing world by assembling what are now common beliefs about human difference. Theories joined 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 18th century, Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus assembled the first taxonomy of five human types, based primarily on their geography and physical qualities. Linnaeus singularizes one type he names *Europeanus*, who has, among other traits, blue eyes and an "inventive mind." What's more, *Europeanus* is not like the others, who are governed by caprice, customs, or opinions. *Europeanus* is "governed by laws."

In the late 18th century, German naturalist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach followed Linnaeus with a taxonomy of his own. Blumenbach largely accepts Linnaeus's findings and 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 *Europeanus* to the Caucasus region, because of the supposed beauty of its white inhabitants. They are the most beautiful and, as such, the template by which to measure human beauty. As Nell Irvin Painter details in *The History of White People*, with Blumenbach the European becomes beautiful, White, Caucasian.

This addition of the language of beauty scientifically linked to white as a racial trait helped enable European racial science to give 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.

On Africa's west coast there are various ports where Europeans once loaded, ambushed and kidnapped Africans into cargo ships headed for the Americas. 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 formed 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. Poet Aimé Césaire described them 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. In her book, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*, Saidiya Hartman tells us that the British called them factories. It was at the ports, with their infamous "door of no return," that something new was let loose into 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, synonymous with *free citizens* in a new land for Whites only, as distinguished from the partly human, noncitizen, 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.

Slavery endured for nearly 250 years in the US, during which time the logic of race contrived a being who has 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 a conjured caricature of Black people that served to stabilize the slave industry as a moral good.

Sterling Brown's 1933 essay "The Negro Character as Seen by White Authors" offers a taxonomy, but not the pseudoscientific European sort that classified human life hierarchically. Instead, Brown's taxonomy takes account of several ways that White

people stabilize a contrived racial hierarchy by reading people of African ancestry through the lenses of White supremacy.

The “contented slave” represents White ideals of the Negro under the complete authority of White people. 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 for slavery. “Dixie,” the theme song of the Confederacy, is the voice of the wretched freeman.

The “comic Negro” depicts the supposed distance between Black and White people when it comes to their 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 big words and fancy clothes is all just comical. The “brute Negro” is the regressed condition of Black people after slavery. Once Black people are no longer under the parentage of the benevolent White sovereign ones, they regress to savagery.

The “tragic mulatto” is regarded with pity due to her likeness to White people and is concurrently torn apart by warring biological dissimilarities. Race mixing crosses a tragic boundary, creating a pitiful creature, simultaneously beastly and ill at ease with subhumanity. Thus, the mulatto is vindictive and rebellious. This is a type without a race, worshiping 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. There are other tropes not mentioned by Brown, tropes that specifically target Black women: the mammy, the jezebel, the sapphire.

The racial script required inventing these movable character markups of the Negro in order to manufacture the absence of key humanizing features that White supremacy wants to be found in Whites only. This is anti-Black fiction. By manufacturing Negro subhumanity, Black caricatures help to identify the humanity of Whites—to defend, in an ongoing way, 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 all of this is another conjuring: the continued invocation of a human template that is simultaneously White and nonexistent. In preserving this template, White supremacy disfigures all embodied human life.

Conjuring the Negro is what maintained violent, overt, anti-Black laws as part of the normal political and legal machinery of the US for another century after the end of chattel slavery. Today this figure haunts us as the afterlife of slavery and Jim Crow in an overtly racist nation.

To resist White supremacy is to encounter centuries of embedded ideology masquerading as reality. It is difficult, and frightening, to change someone's reality. To reveal this reality as the fiction it is requires the right tools—and courage.

Historian George Fredrickson tells us that the logic of race finally developed into three overtly racist regimes in the 20th century: the Jim Crow South, Nazi Germany, and apartheid South Africa. Today, those regimes are in the past. But the twisted reality that gave them life is not. The longing for an ideal community populated with the ideal human is what maintains the systems and structures that historically have been 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 cell phone cameras, sparking protests.

If we are to make any headway toward a reality more representative of actual human life, we need to put down the script and ask how this history of White supremacy has shaped our understanding of ourselves as raced beings. We need to encourage others to do the same. And we need to 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.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "The racial script."