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White

'Although all words have that destructive potential, some are more powerful than others, and *white* belongs to the category of "Keywords" … Williams does not include the word *white*'. (Taylor 2005, 8)

It is the ongoing malleability of *white* in reference to a category of human beings – and its propensity to be shiftingly employed for inclusion or exclusion, with deadly results – that renders it a keyword. *White* as a category of human beings has, over the centuries, been defined in practice in multiple, ever-changing ways, including a wide range of physical attributes well beyond (skin) colour; geography; (mythical or biological) lineage; simple habit or custom; or genetics. Often, these definitions have been at odds with each other.

White has cognates across Indo-European languages, referring to light colour or brightness. *White* in this sense could be used absolutely – referring strictly to the colour of snow, for example – and as an absolute term did not have synonyms in OE.

From OE, *white* could describe light-coloured skin as a mark of illness or cowardice, alternating with *wan*, *blake*, *pale*, *dead*, and *bloodless* from ME (with no synonyms in OE). *White* alternated with *fair* from OE to indicate light-coloured skin as a mark of femininity and beauty; *white* could, in this sense, signify an unfavourable femininity in men. To describe a typical, healthy skin colour, *white* was uncommon: instead, *red* and *bright* were common from OE; *ruddy* from C13. Crucially, *red* in OE subsumed what we might now call purple, pink, red, orange, and brown.

From OE, *white* could also be used relatively, referring to a comparatively light-coloured example of a given thing, such as 'white wine'. It would seem to be this relative meaning that became an ever more common descriptor for skin colour in EModE, with no indication of illness, cowardice, femininity, or beauty.

Under the same line lies a part of Peru, and of the new kingdome of
Grenado, which are very temperate Countries, and the inhabitants
are white (Grimeston 1604)

Descriptions of relatively light-coloured skin in relation to geography
go back to the ancient Greeks. Trevisa's 1398 translation into English of
De proprietatibus rerum translates *albi* as *white*, with its relative
meaning.

And so in hote londes comeþ forþ blake men and browne, as among
þe Moores, in coolde lond white men, as among þe Sclaues.

When precisely *white* comes to be used as a category of human being –
rather than as a relative descriptor – is contentious. The process cer-
tainly begins in EModE, and it is firmly in place by LModE in the
pseudo-science of race. Today, the entrenchment of this meaning is
reflected in corpus data insofar as descriptions of population demo-
graphics – by category – produce some of the most common collocations
with *white*: *predominately white*, *overwhelmingly white*, *mostly white*,
disproportionately white. In this sense, *white* no longer refers exclusively
– or indeed, sometimes, at all – to colour. Blumenbach's 1795 disserta-
tion, foundational to racial pseudo-science, introduces *Caucasian* –
now a common synonym for *white* – but Blumenbach seemed less preoc-
cupied with skin colour than with facial structure, geography, lineage,
and ranked degrees of beauty. In C19 and C20 American writing, facial
structure, hair texture, and lineage are commonly referenced as defini-
tive characteristics of a category of *white* people – by that point, *white*
has moved well beyond relative lightness of skin.

Just as in Blumenbach's writing, notions of (real or imagined) geogra-
phy overlap with definitions of (real or imagined) lineage, in defining
white. It is still common to read *of European descent* as an alternative
term for *white* (including in the OED), even if *European* itself is more
likely to evoke ever-shifting internal and external borders and centuries
of complex histories related to – among other things – colonialism and
war, status and privilege, praise or blame, rather than physical geogra-
phy. *White* has been used to symbolise purity or innocence from OE to
the present day.

Wash us, we than the Snow shall be more white; Our Souls and
Bodies Temple shall be sure A holy house. (*Peace with her four
garders*, 1622)

This element of the semantic development of *white* parallels – in reverse – that of *black*. *Black*'s negative senses and uses in OE were expanded and intensified in the early modern era, alongside Atlantic slavery. Similarly, *white*'s positive senses and uses seem to multiply and intensify from the seventeenth century, and it would be impossible to separate this semantic development from the invention and development of *race*. Among many other examples, *white-hearted* evolves from meaning 'cowardly' to meaning 'saintly' during this time. The increasingly positive semantics became so essential to many white-identifying writers that by early C20, there were numerous attempts to explain a purportedly universal human psychological association of *white* with good, *black* with bad. These are easily countered not only in theory – as Richard Dyer writes, 'one might well argue about the safety of the cover of darkness, and the danger of exposure to the light' – but by the history of English itself: *white*, for centuries, was largely an indicator of illness, cowardice, and death. In studying English worldwide, we also find impressive evidence that *white* is not a universal human symbol for good. Recently, in Hong Kong's grassroots pro-democracy demonstrations, the English phrase *white terror* has referred to political persecution.

By insisting on associating *white* so unequivocally with 'good', *white*-identifying people have used it to grant or withhold – or to exercise – in-group power. In South Africa, British- and Dutch-identifying people were viewed – and viewed themselves – as separate 'races', until in C20 they moved to shore up power by identifying as one *white* – and superior – group, with devastating consequences.

Focusing on lineage, to enforce exclusive power, the 'one drop rule' was incorporated into legislation across the United States's southern states from 1910 to 1930. The law defined as *white* a person whose ancestry did not include anyone who might be identified as not *white*. In this case, (notional) ancestry became more important than physical attributes (and the phrase *of European descent* as a synonym for *white* is scuppered completely). Schuyler (1927) plays on the conflict between *white* as relative lightness of skin and *white* as a category based on descent or lineage, when he writes:

> The darkest brother … whoops with glee over the recent incident in Virginia, where the workings of the Racial Integrity Law caused fifty white children to be barred from the white schools and ordered to attend Negro schools on the ground that they were Negroes … he is eager to see racial integrity laws passed in all of the States, as has been done in Georgia and Virginia, so that the

genealogists may get busy on a national scale and thus increase the "Negro" population to at least four times its present number.

Similar issues played out in William Wells Brown's 1853 novel *Clotel*, whose heroine is seen by all as *white* due to physical characteristics but held and sold as a black slave based on her lineage. A more recent example is the residents of Waverley, Ohio, who have received international attention after years of being defined in their local communities as *black*, based on understood lineage, despite being seen by outsiders as apparently *white*, based on physical characteristics. A comparable case is that of Happy Sindane in South Africa, whom white-identifying families embraced (and sought to adopt and 'rescue') as an apparently white orphan purportedly abducted into a black community – until a DNA test 'proved' that he was not white at all. Each of these examples reflects a notion of *white* as quite apart from physical attributes.

Sindane's circumstances also relate to a genetic definition of *white*, demonstrably apart from – and potentially at odds with – other definitions. Genetic definitions have proven untenable, in part, precisely because *white* is so shifting and malleable – a mirage of a goalpost for correlative statistics and measurements of genetic material. If *white* is defined as a combination of physical attributes (or not), lineage (often imaginary), geography (in no stable way), power, and social norms, we can hardly expect it to be consistently reflected in bodily proteins.

Other definitions of *white* have explicitly placed habit or custom above physical attributes. South Africa's Population Registration Act No 30 of 1950 defined as *white* 'a person who in appearance obviously is, or who is generally accepted as a white person … [This] does not include a person who, although in appearance obviously a white person, is generally accepted as a coloured person'. In another example of the law reflecting custom in South Africa, legal honorary *white* status was offered to groups including people *of Chinese descent* and Maori rugby players, and individuals including Arthur Ashe and E. R. Braithwaite.

Alongside *white*, *Caucasian*, and *of European descent*, we find a wide range of semantic alternates. Schuyler (1927) is scathing and satirical, and particularly inventive with his lexis, within one short essay: 'white folks', of course, but also 'Nordic Americans', 'Caucasians', 'Anglo-Saxons', 'pale neighbours', 'crackers', 'peckerwoods', 'townsfolk of the paler hue', 'the white rabble', 'the white mob', 'white Lilliputians', 'ofays', 'pork-skinned friends', and 'pinks'. It is worth noting that these terms relate to relative colour, geography, lineage, and power.

Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* exemplifies the conflicting meanings of *white*. Jefferson equivocates between potentially

three senses of *white* in a single paragraph, although it is fair to guess that his readers (then and now) would have little trouble disambiguating:

> I will add a short account of an anomaly of nature, taking place sometimes in the race of negroes brought from Africa, who, though black themselves, have in rare instances, white children, called Albinos … They are of a pallid cadaverous white, untinged with red, without any coloured spots or seams … all of them well formed, strong, healthy, perfect in their senses, except that of sight, and born of parents who had no mixture of white blood.

In the first instance, *white children* refers to 'a lighter example' rather than an essential category. The second example, alongside *pallid* and *cadaverous*, and in contrast to *red*, evokes OE and ME sense of illness. The final example, *white blood*, refers to an essential category of human being, defined by lineage.

White today is often seen as a construct, not essential or absolute, but continuously performed and re-formed in relation to social and cultural norms and needs, and in relation to power. This parallels notions of *race* as a construct. Regarding these constructs, Morrison writes:

> For three hundred years black Americans insisted that "race" was no usefully distinguishing factor in human relationships. During those same three centuries every academic discipline, including theology, history, and natural science, insisted "race" was the determining factor in human development. When blacks discovered they had shaped or become a culturally formed race, and that it had specific and revered difference, suddenly they were told there is no such thing as "race," biological or cultural, that matters and that genuinely intellectual exchange cannot accommodate it.

Morrison's description reflects a necessary, but apparently difficult, rhetorical navigation for English users today between *white* as non-essential – an invention, a construct – and the very real, lived consequences of that construct.

As a consequence of the construct, we see, among many other compounds, *white supremacy*, *white privilege*, and *white terror* (quite apart from the *white terror* in Hong Kong English today), which have been defined at length over the decades:

We refuse to disconnect white supremacy from the realities of class, empire, and other forms of domination – be it ecological, sexual, or others. (Cornel West, 2017)

White in America has always signified who is entitled to privilege. In this sense, the phrase "white privilege" is a redundancy [since] Whiteness has always signified worthiness, inclusion and acceptance. (John A. Powell, 1997)

In contemporary society, white and black people alike believe that racism no longer exists. This erasure, however mythic, diffuses the representation of whiteness as terror in the black imagination. (bell hooks, 1992)

Other compounds from C20 and C21, which reflect both the construct and its consequences, include *white fragility*, *white backlash*, *white Negro*, *white trash*, and *white nationalism*; as well as the derivation *whiteliness*. *White working class* became a central term in discourses surrounding C21 right-wing populism in the United States.

Frederick Douglass, in 1847, wrote that in America, 'it was the colour of the skin that was the mark of distinction or the brand of degradation'. We might say that it was the invention of *white* – rather than the colour of the skin – that served to mark power. In this way, there are no practical synonyms for all that *white* entails. It will always be inadequate – and often duplicitous – to substitute it with *of European descent* or *Caucasian*, or *Anglo* or *Nordic*, or *pale* or *bright*, because *white* seems uniquely to encapsulate the conflicting confluence of colour, geography, lineage, custom, pseudo-science, and power in ways inconsistent, arbitrary, and lethal.

Author Biography

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