

Whiteness

from [Encyclopedia of American Studies](#)

View article on [Credo](#)

One of the most influential ideologies in the history of America is also one of the least discussed. Whiteness, the bastion of unmarked power and privilege, is so intertwined with America that the two cannot as yet be separated.

In the earliest years of the English colonies, the idea of whiteness had yet to develop. Europeans tended to think of “races” as the bloodlines of nations. But in Europeans' contacts with Native Americans (and Africans and Asians), the concept of race began to mutate into the idea of continental bloodlines, divinely segregating the “civilized” from the “savages.” This idea developed as many indigenous peoples began to embrace Christianity: when their “heathenism” no longer explained away their rights, what would? The idea of whiteness, biological supremacy, made ethical the subordination and slaughter of Indians.

In their relationship to aboriginal peoples, European Americans or “whites” behaved similarly to Europeans who colonized other parts of the globe: they fashioned racial, religious, and cultural justifications for their conquests. But America played a unique and powerful role in the emergence of whites, and in few places is the idea so developed. In addition to serving as an attempt to explain the difference between European settlers and aboriginal peoples, the idea of a white race was inseparable from the ideology of slavery, a method by which white and nonwhite working classes were kept at odds, and a cartel was created to share and consolidate power among a diversity of wealthy European Americans.

In the earliest decades of the colonies, Africans were among those who freely immigrated to the New World. But as the colonies expanded, so too did the practice of slavery. The population of Africans in America swelled. However, the presence of free blacks—those who had purchased their freedom, completed their indentured servitude, or immigrated on their own—implicitly challenged the institution of slavery: their near-citizenship and Christianity stood in awkward juxtaposition. It was a troubling question: why were some people free while others were not, and why were some African Americans slaves while others were free? And what to make of the children born to the raped black slaves of white men?

The arbitrariness of enslavement left its practitioners and accomplices uneasy. In order for slavery and its enormous profits to persist, a more cogent ideological system was required. For the wealthy landowners who owned slaves, it made sense to argue that Africans were uniquely, inherently, and racially suited to be owned as property. According to this logic, even the mixed-race “mulattos,” who were born with the infamous “one drop” of African blood, were legally defined as Negroes: nonpersons excluded from the U.S. Constitution and categorizable as property.

Thus evolved the idea of blacks as innately depraved savages. Slavery, racism, and whiteness achieved moral and intellectual fortitude. The idea of race was instrumental to the practice of slavery, and so race became institutionalized in the American economy, culture, and Constitution.

Even with the abolition of slavery, whiteness steadily grew as an idea and as an identity. Vast numbers of working-class European Americans, especially those who were not purely English in origin, laid claim to the idea that they were part of a body of common racial identity, that their birth and skin color entitled them to rights equal to English immigrants, that this “white” inheritance entitled them also to wages and

<https://libproxy.library.unt.edu/login?>

<url=http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/jhueas/whiteness/0>

rights better than those of free blacks, Mexican Americans, and Asian Americans. W. E. B. Du Bois referred to these privileges as “the wages of whiteness.”

Following Du Bois, many historians, including David Roediger, Noel Ignatiev, and Alexander Saxon, argued that the wages of whiteness were a means by which American ruling classes suppressed overall wages. With the idea of whiteness, those who received slightly better wages and those who received less tended to accept their racialized economic places. White privilege helped to secure the capitalist loyalties of millions of working-class and middle-class Americans.

America's territorial expansions into Indian lands, Mexico, Latin America, and the Pacific Islands were also dependent on racist notions. The ideology of whiteness gave Americans moral justification for a sphere of control. Only with postcolonial independence movements (from 1945 on) and the civil rights movement (1950s and 1960s) was American whiteness truly threatened. By the end of the twentieth century, whiteness was increasingly understood to be a malignant ideology created to subordinate others and accumulate power. Yet it remained among the most potent discourses in American society.

Bibliography

- Butler, Anne M., *Across God's Frontiers: Catholic Sisters in the American West, 1850-920* (Univ. of N.C. Press 2012).
- Carter, Julian, *The Heart of Whiteness: Normal Sexuality and Race in America, 1880-1940* (Duke Univ. Press 2007).
- Frankenberg, Ruth, ed., *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism* (Duke Univ. Press 1997).
- Garner, Steve, *Whiteness: An Introduction* (Routledge 2007).
- Goldstein, Eric L., *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton Univ. Press 2007).
- Hill, Mike, ed., *Whiteness: A Critical Reader* (N.Y. Univ. Press 1997).
- Hughey, Matthew, *White Bound: Nationalists, Antiracists, and the Shared Meanings of Race* (Stanford Univ. Press 2012).
- Ignatiev, Noel, *How the Irish Became White* (Routledge 1995).
- Jacobson, Matthew Frye, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Harvard Univ. Press 1999).
- Lipsitz, George, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Temple Univ. Press 1998).
- Painter, Nell Irvin, *The History of White People* (Norton 2010).
- Rasmussen, Birgit, Brander, et al., eds., *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness* (Duke Univ. Press 2001).
- Roediger, David R., ed., *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White* (Schocken 1998).

Dylan Clark



Copyright 2016 The American Studies Association

APA

Clark, D. (2016). Whiteness. In S. Bronner (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of American studies*. MD: Johns Hopkins University Press. Retrieved from <https://libproxy.library.unt.edu/login?url=http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/jhueas/whiteness/0>

Chicago

Clark, Dylan. "Whiteness." In *Encyclopedia of American Studies*, edited by Simon Bronner. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016. <https://libproxy.library.unt.edu/login?url=http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/jhueas/whiteness/0>

Harvard

Clark, D. (2016). Whiteness. In S. Bronner (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of American studies*. [Online]. Johns Hopkins University Press. Available from: <https://libproxy.library.unt.edu/login?url=http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/jhueas/whiteness/0> [Accessed 31 January 2017].

MLA

Clark, Dylan. "Whiteness." *Encyclopedia of American Studies*, edited by Simon Bronner, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016. *Credo Reference*, <https://libproxy.library.unt.edu/login?url=http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/jhueas/whiteness/0>. Accessed 31 Jan 2017.